

From Chaos to Success: A Proposal

In all territories there are schools that are not performing and there seems to be a total breakdown of discipline. Teachers are visibly under stress and there is usually high absenteeism. Students seem not to have a focus and most of the teachers' time is spent on trying to solve disciplinary matters. When students are in this kind of environment violence and vandalism of school property is usually the order of the day. The administrators are usually in a state of confusion and in most cases don't want to admit their confusion. The community, especially the media is usually not sympathetic and even the simplest matter is blown out of proportion.

I have been researching some of these schools with the view of advancing proposals for transformation. It must be noted that change in this environment cannot occur overnight and requires sustained effort with clearly set goals. I read with great interest a study done in 1999 on nine high-performing, high-poverty schools. Those were schools, which were previously underperforming and were in chaos. I identify with the methods of transformation used by those schools. I have drawn from my experience as an educator for over thirty years in addition to knowledge gained from perusing available literature on the topic.

The first phase in the effort to redress the chaos would be to bring some form of order through attempts to improve student discipline. This will be difficult if the students have no respect for the teachers at the school that is trying to create the change. Depending on the situation there may be the need to bring in some new faces on the team. I submit that the team should first go through some aspect of counseling and workshops to understand the new effort before any attempt is made to bring about change. Commencing prematurely can make the situation worst and create more frustration for students and teachers.

The next aspect is to devote more time to teaching and learning. With increased meaningful engagement there will be fewer disciplinary problems. Teachers should be involved in a continued process of professional development which will empower them to be innovative with the relevant technology and make the teaching/learning process more interesting and exciting. The principals at the schools identified in the study mentioned earlier, encouraged their teachers to refocus energies on service to the students. One principal challenged the staff to move from a teacher-focused to a more student-focused school.

Student-centered learning is the basis of the constructivist philosophy. I am sold on the principles of constructivism as I find that when students are involved and the teacher takes on the role of facilitator, there is usually positive change and successful outcomes in both teaching and learning. I have discovered that project work usually involves all students in spite of their challenges. There are some students that have difficulty in core subject areas like Mathematics and Language Arts but they are excellent artists. Students with artistic skills can contribute meaningfully to any project and if made to feel part of

the team their self-esteem will soar. Eventually they will gradually improve their scores in core areas.

In one of our schools in Barbados there was a form of boys who were disruptive and were constantly being suspended for varying infractions. They simply seemed uninterested in what the teachers were presenting during normal class sessions. Consequently, their teachers were surprised at the transformation of these boys when they became involved in a project on 'Water: A Natural Resource'. The boys found that they could apply areas of their interests with that project. Some of them prepared excellent diagrams. The computer savvy assisted in preparing relevant power point presentations while others worked on building a model pumping station. During the period of this project the discipline problem seemed to have disappeared. The boys who had been skipping school prior to the project were now so committed to meeting the deadline that they stayed at school late on evenings.

On further investigation it was discovered that these low achievers were required to sit in a class while being taught in the traditional manner. Learning therefore became a boring exercise. I submit that most of the chaos in our schools can be addressed if teachers embark on a policy to have profiles of their students and structure their lessons to meet the needs of all students. Students who are challenged mentally, physically or academically have to be exposed to visual and audio stimulation if their scores are to improve. Even though the behavior of under-achieving students can be repulsive, teachers have to realize that this form of behavior is usually a cry for help. The teacher as a professional must respond positively.

Teachers in a transforming situation must work together in groups as they plan the process of reorienting the present ethos of the school. The main focus should be to build the self-esteem of the students and create an atmosphere of caring. It is my view that students who are disadvantaged either by lack of parental interest or financial constraints usually require more affirmation and usually respond to teachers who exhibit care and look out for their general interest. In the study, it was found that the refocusing not only decreased tension but also resulted in students feeling respected, valued and appreciated.

Teamwork is vital to the success of any attempt to shift from chaos to success. Mike Schmoker (2000) writing in the book *Results: The Key to Continuous School Improvement*, focused on the work of Fullan who indicated that, "Collegiality among teachers, as measured by the frequency of communication, mutual support, help, etc., was a strong indicator of implementation success. Virtually every research study on the topic has found this to be the case." Personally I have found that the best success I have had in the classroom was as a result of sharing with other teachers, which was beneficial for my students.

It was found that in all nine schools in the study, there was a dramatic positive change in behavior, and discipline problems were rare. I have always been of the view that several of our disciplinary problems have been as a result of ignorance on the part of some teachers or care givers and with appropriate training can be addressed. Parents can play a

vital role in the transformation process. While there are cases where parents are uncooperative, if they recognize that the school has a genuine interest in their children and can visually see the change taking place then parents will respond positively. Moving from chaos to an effective school requires the setting of measurable goals. Mike Schmoker (1999) has noted, "One of the greatest dangers to successful improvement effort is losing focus." Goal setting and evaluation help to keep all parties on track. I believe every stage in a transformation should be evaluated as a gauge to determine if there is a need to adjust strategies. In my experience I have recognized that teachers generally avoid data. There is the fear according to Schmoker (1999), "...of data's capacity to reveal strengths and weaknesses, failure and success." This fear can be eliminated when teachers understand their role in the process of executing change especially when moving from chaos to success.

The importance of the role of parents was underscored in the study of the nine schools mentioned earlier. In order to effect change in a chaotic situation parents have to be included. At the Burgess School in the study parents participated in the *Saturday School* program while at Centerville parents participated in *Family Science Nights* and *Family Math Nights*. In addition PTA meetings at Centerville were used to teach parents strategies for assisting children with their homework. Whatever method is used, schools have to gain the confidence of parents because where there is parental guidance and encouragement students respond positively in the classroom.

It must be noted that any attempt at transformation from chaos will be plagued with challenges and difficulties but it is the persistence of administrators and teachers that will assist in the realization of goals. Administrators and teachers should periodically be given the opportunity to visit effective schools with the view of identifying what is working and adapting it to correspond with their unique situation. Administration also needs the financial support from boards or school districts to enhance resources and upgrade technological infrastructure.

External support from agencies, which deal with problem students, will be an asset in any quest for positive change. Students respond to significant people who they identify with like prominent sports personalities, media workers and other important individuals in the community. These people can be invited to challenge, encourage and empower the students to move to a new and exciting level in behavior and academic success.

Moving from chaos to success and being considered as effective requires a collective effort by all stakeholders. It must be the choice of the school, the community and the administration. One cannot put a time on the completion of a transformation process, as the final determination is dependent on the culture of each school undergoing the transformation process and the commitment of the staff. The significant fact of the matter is that chaos does not have to be accepted as the norm whether it is in an affluent neighborhood or an impoverished area. The success of the schools in the study has proven that there is hope for other schools if only they have the courage to initiate the process.