Can the Catholic Church lead the way for reform of the education system?
By Leela Ramdeen (for CREDI Conference on Sat 24 April, 2010)

This question implies that our education system in TT needs to be reformed. I am sure we will all agree that it does – if we are to achieve the goals of Catholic Education. The Ministry of Education has been involved in educational reform for a number of years e.g.

- identifying core curriculum areas (e.g. in Form 1: Maths, Science, Eng. Lang., Spanish, PE, Social Studies, Music, Visual & Performing Arts; subjects for the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC), and for the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination (CAPE)

- decentralisation

- collaboration with the community

- the promotion of continuous assessment practices

- teacher professional development e.g. Dip Ed, courses at UWI and UTT

- the upgrading and construction of Early Childhood Care & Education (ECCE) centres, primary and secondary schools etc.

Two of the Government's strategic goals over the years have been to promote accessibility to educational opportunities for all and to deliver a system of quality education to citizens at all levels of the education system. The Government's Vision 2020 talks about developing "innovative citizens". Hon. Esther Le Gendre said in an address last year:

"Our guiding philosophy is that all children regardless of ethnicity, religion, socio economic status or gender have a right to become all they are capable of becoming…(Address by the Honourable Esther Le Gendre Minister of Education on the occasion of the celebration of the 25th anniversary of Charis Works on Wednesday, September 30 2009 at 8:30 am) http://www.news.gov.tt/index.php?news=2002.

In spite of all the above, I believe that our education system continues to fail many of our children. It is one thing to say that TT provides free education for all (50% paid for post-graduate studies), but it is quite another thing to determine how many of our people can access this free education. Too many of our people are unable to access education e.g. because of poverty and social exclusion. The UNDP's 2005 figures show that more than 210,000 persons in TT live in poverty on less than $650 per month.

Social exclusion is wider than poverty. The Social Exclusion Unit, UK describes social exclusion as 'a shorthand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination

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of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low income, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown' (SEU 1998). You cannot teach in our schools without considering these wider issues.

Why should the Catholic Church be concerned? Well, because the Church is committed to what Pope Benedict XVI calls "authentic integral human development" (the development of the whole person in all his/her dimensions and of every person), we Catholics should be concerned not only about those students who attend Catholic Schools, but about all students in our nation. As the Holy Father stated in his encyclical, Charity in Truth, Jesus is concerned with the whole person. This, of course, has implications for you as educators in Catholic schools.

In my presentation today I wish to focus specifically on Catholic schools. There are about 119 Catholic Primary Schools and 21 Catholic Secondary Schools. With such large numbers of schools in TT run by the Church, it is fair to say that we should be leading the way to show the State what 'good practice' is all about. Yet, many of our own schools are failing many of their students.

In my presentation at CREDI's Conference in Chaguanas on 9 Jan 2010 (see CREDI's website or CCSJ's website – www.rcsocialjusticett.org) I focused on the distinctive nature of a Catholic School so I won't repeat that today. Suffice it to say that the Catholic school must "seek to offer an alternative which operates out of an education philosophy which aims to meet the needs of young people today in the light of the Church's faith in Jesus Christ and to prepare them for life as Catholics in the community". This is what is different from the State's philosophy.

You may be aware of the *Performance Enhancement Programme* – an intervention programme which the Ministry of Education launched in 2009 "to improve and sustain Student Academic Performance in Selected Primary Schools."

Just to give you a brief history of this programme, the Minister of Education was concerned to discover that there are 139 of the nation's 475 Primary Schools, including Catholic Schools, that are consistently underperforming.

These 139 schools were chosen because they were underperforming in their academic performance. These schools are consistently performing below the National Mean on the National Tests in 1st and 3rd year of Primary School, and below 30% in SEA.

I suppose you know by now that 43 of our Catholic Primary Schools fall within the 139 selected schools. Yes, 43 of our Catholic Primary Schools are deemed to be underperforming. This does not mean that all our other schools are performing at a level that promotes excellence in all areas of Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences – 1983 – Harvard Univ.:

1. Linguistic intelligence (word smart)
2. Logical – mathematical (number/reasoning smart)
3. Spatial intelligence (picture smart)

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4. Bodily –Kinesthetic intelligence (body smart)
5. Musical intelligence (music smart)
6. Interpersonal intelligence (people smart)
7. Intrapersonal intelligence (self smart)
8. Naturalist intelligence (nature smart).

Gardner said that the traditional notion of intelligence based on IQ testing is too limited. He proposes the above 8 different intelligences to take account of a broader range of human potential in children and adults.

Just to let you know that the PEP schools have been asked to focus on 6 targeted areas:

I. *Curriculum* – Teaching & Learning, Instructional Strategies, curriculum adaptation, literacy development *

II. *Leadership & Management* – Time management, School climate, conflict resolution, instructional leadership

III. *Human Resources* – Training, Staffing (including remedial and specialist teachers), Professional & Personal Development, Discipline, Staff morale & motivation

IV. *Student Support* – Guidance, Counselling and engagement through surveys, interviews, etc.

V. *Parental Support* – Guidance, Counselling

VI. *Others Resources* – ICTs, Facilities.

- *For Curriculum see breadth, balance, relevance, coherence, continuity, and progression.*

These may be of assistance to you also as you focus on your own classroom's/school's performance. You are here because you are committed to CREDI's Vision and Mission. Hopefully, you are here because you want to be Catholic Servant Leaders.

(The Vision of CREDI is "*Servant Leaders Transforming the New Millennium – Integrating Mind, Body, Heart and Spirit*". The Mission of CREDI is *"Developing Catholic Servant Leaders by providing spiritual, moral, technical and intellectual formation and support".*)

The Catholic Church and teachers in our Catholic Schools will only become Servant Leaders when they reflect on their practice and commit to make the necessary changes to improve their practice. I urge you to do your best and the best will come back to you.

My article in Catholic News this weekend focuses on the theme the Holy Father has chosen for Vocation Sunday: *Witness awakens vocation*. Your witness will awaken your vocation as teachers. Teaching is more than a job, and indeed, it is more than a profession, it is a vocation.

I have prepared a number of questions on which you can reflect. You can access these on CCSJ's website. Note that the questions are in no particular order and there may be some repetition:

SOME QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION by Leela Ramdeen, Chair of CCSJ
Read these questions and think about your own school/practice as you do so:

- How are my studies at CREDI influencing the teaching and learning process in my classroom/school?

- Do I have a clear understanding of the nature and purpose of Education? What are Catholic Schools for? Do I know what the characteristics of a high performing teacher/school are/should be in a TT context? (See Malcolm Baldrige's *Criteria for Performance Excellence: Characteristics of High Performing Schools).*

- Do I/my school have a vision about the kind of society we would like to build?

- How am I using this information to inform my planning/delivery to help prepare my students to participate in/build such a society?

- What is my understanding of concepts such as 'equity', equality', 'social exclusion', 'social inclusion', and 'seamless education'? What are the dimensions of social exclusion? What interventions are needed to address this e.g. at school level, home, government etc.?

- Access to education is an important right (see the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989).

   (Social Exclusion Unit, UK : The Unit describes **social exclusion** as

   'a shorthand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low income, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown' (SEU 1998).

   See: Case Paper on Schools, Education and Social Exclusion: http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/cp/CASEpaper29.pdf

   - What structures/safety nets exist in school/society to address the multiple disadvantages of some of our students?

- What are the challenges that I/my school face(s)? (Like the PEP schools, you should reflect on what is working in your classroom/school, what is not, why, what are the

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barriers to teaching and learning in your school/classroom? What predictions can you make?)

- What is the quality of leadership/management in my school? (Look at e.g. team work, opportunities for collaborative work, staff meetings, evaluation of the value-added dimension of education, that is, what knowledge, skills, capabilities have accumulated to students as a consequence of the education they have received at your school (See: www.dcsf.gov.**uk**/research/data/uploadfiles/RW85.pdf *for info on School Value-added Measures in England)*? How does your Principal walk the job/offer support to staff? How do you all act as advocates for students e.g. seeking to secure adequate numbers of remedial teachers, access to guidance counsellors' time etc.)

- What do I need (and my colleagues/schools) to help us develop an **inclusive** culture and practice in school/classroom?

- Is there a profile of my school – basic facts about the school and students therein? (e.g. vision, mission, number of students, student-teacher ratio, demography, resources available in the school, number of students who drop out/repeat a year or more/are late/suspended/expelled, challenges facing the school community(ies), activities in which the school has been involved locally and nationally, how the students are performing, strategies that the school is employing to improve student achievement, parental/community involvement etc.)

- How does the school profile inform the development planning process/the teaching and learning process?

- Have I been involved in the process of School Development Planning (SDP) in my school?

- Does our SDP provide a clear direction – clear learning goals/objectives - to promote high quality teaching and learning? Do I know what goals and targets have been identified by the school in which I teach?

- How do I use the folder provided by the Ministry of Education for School Development Plans, and the QA systems in my school to evaluate teaching and learning in my class?

- How do these support me in my work as a teacher?

- Am I involved in discussions about whether or not the SDP plan is being implemented effectively? Do we - staff, parents, students, other stakeholders - discuss issues relating to equality, equity and so on? (See home/school/community links).

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("If we are to succeed as a nation, and if our young people are to succeed as individuals in the knowledge economy of the 21st century, we must provide all teenagers with the opportunity they need to make the transition to adulthood." (DfEE 2000: 8-9)

- What are the factors (positive and negative) that influence students' performance in my classroom/schools?

We need to consider these carefully. Many educators and researchers still debate which school variables influence students' achievement most. Variables that play an important role in what students learn include:

the child's background and general social context; class size; school size; the school environment; teacher qualifications/attitudes/expectations/behaviour; school/classroom organization and management; the quality of the teaching and learning process; subject matter knowledge by teacher; the quality of leadership in the school - at all levels; the intended, the offered and the received curriculum; the quality of resources available, equality of opportunity for all. I know from my years in education that, together, the family, the community and schools matter and must forge effective links to enhance the teaching and learning process. If we do not believe that teachers and schools can add value to children's lives, then we should close up shop and go home.

Research demonstrates that schools can make a difference and a substantial portion of that difference is attributable to teachers. I believe that one of the most powerful factors in students' success or lack of success is their access to high quality teachers. In other words, teacher quality, including training, qualification, and participation in high-quality targeted professional development - both in (school-based) and out of school - have a significant impact on students' outcomes. I believe that teacher quality is **the** most important school-related factor influencing student achievement.

This has major implications for teacher education and for the way in which new teachers are inducted in our schools. But teachers operate within a hierarchical system and the quality of leadership in a school has an impact on the quality of teaching within that school. Effective leadership is vital to managing diversity and to school improvement.

- Is my classroom/school truly child-centred? (Patrick F. Bassett said in *School design for 21st Century Schools***:** "The current conundrum facing schools and their design is that we have Information Age kids trapped in Industrial Age schools: In a world where ideas and information are increasingly fluid and in flux, we frame (conceptualize) and construct schools that are fixed in time and space"). And what about the infrastructure of my school? (I heard a TTUTA Officer rightly stating on a TV programme that we need to have a qualitative approach to education and that we have schools that were built in the 1920 in which people's feet are going through the floor boards). See: *Education Discussion Group* - Home for articles re School/Classroom Design. *educationdiscussiongroup*.com/

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- What are my expectations of and my attitude towards the students in my class/school?

- What is the state of play regarding *information and communication technology (ICT)* in your school e.g. the number and age of computers in your school, student/computer ratio, the quality of computer hardware and software, the suitability of their location in your school, the ability of teachers and students in your school to use computers for effective teaching and learning – how they are used and for which subject areas etc.?

- Do we really have an inclusive education system? Equality – the law in TT says that every child has access to free education – all the way to tertiary level. The issue of equity should help you to focus on whether or not all children in your school/TT can take advantage of educational opportunities. How can you address some of the obstacles that prevent them from doing so? See social exclusion - obstacles such as: basic needs not being met – physical and emotional needs etc – food, shelter, parental support/supervision, living in high crime environs, poor health, poverty, family breakdown, unemployment, unskilled, illiterate etc. Abuse issues, barrel children, homeless children, children looking after younger siblings or missing school because they are helping their parents sell in the market or on the road side. What are the problems that face many of our children; what are the causes and the solutions? Are you part of the solution?).

- Does our school development plan have a professional development plan for staff – as part of a Performance Management Appraisal System?

  (There is a need for the Ministry's PMAS to come on stream urgently. The current 14 category areas related to performance is archaic. It is important to understand that professional development is not only about attending courses, it involves your keeping abreast of educational issues, reading about educational and other matters linked to education, listening to children and parents in your classroom/school and to your colleagues in and out of school; it's about reflecting on your own practice and allowing others to observe you teach and provide feedback to you (and vice versa).
- What have I done to promote my professional development over the past 3 years? For example, do I engage in self-assessment? How do I do this? How do I evaluate my lesson plans and schemes of work? How do I keep track of students' performance and of my own performance?

- Do I have a compelling picture of where teaching and learning in my school/classroom needs to go?

- Are teachers in my school really united around the same goals?

- What quality assurance systems does my school have in place to promote accountability and transparency? See e.g. monitoring and evaluation, assessment procedures, recording and reporting mechanisms. (Has my school developed a data-driven culture to enhance performance at all levels e.g. school/classroom self-evaluation – see www.ofsted.gov.uk for a comprehensive outline of a framework for school self-evaluation. The framework focuses on the following 8 areas:

  1. A description of your schools (the context in which teaching and learning is taking place)

  2. Overall effectiveness of your school

  3. Leadership and management

  4. Achievement and standards

  5. Personal development and well-being

  6. The Curriculum (including the hidden/covert curriculum)

  7. The quality of provision (including resources available/used/how used)

  8. Home/school/community links).

- What data do we collect to determine if we are achieving our goals/targets? How is this data analysed, interpreted, stored, used for school self-evaluation? What kind of data should you be collecting – besides test scores e.g. teacher/student: attendance, absenteeism, punctuality; information about students with special educational needs; discipline/indiscipline procedures; drop-outs, truants, at-risk students; literacy skills; success/failure of intervention strategies used to enhance performance? What does your school do with this data?

- Since we have no agreed **national education standards**, how do I know what children should know and be able to do in various subjects and at different ages – what concepts, principles and skills should they learn at different ages? (Standards help us to address questions such as: What do we want students to learn? How will we know when students have learned it? How will we respond when students are not learning?)

- What goals and targets have I set for my students? Have I taken 'differentiation' into consideration when setting these?

- How do I demonstrate my commitment to the students in my care – daily?

- What relationship do I have with the rest of the school community and the wider community?

- How have I used the folder provided by the Ministry on School Development Planning to assist me in setting goals and targets for my students?

- What do we need to do to improve the quality of leadership in our school and classrooms?

- What classroom instruction/instructional strategies work for me? (See Robert Marzano's instructional strategies that are most likely to improve student achievement*?*

- What am I/my school doing which is good for students in my school?

- What have I done to create conditions in my classroom/school that will empower students and help them realise their potential?

- Is there a synthesis between my faith and my profession? How is this reflected in my planning and teaching practice?

- What areas of my teaching/students' learning need development?

- Do I have a clear understanding of what 'success' means for the students in my class/school? How do I/my school monitor and measure student success? Do I/my school have a system for tracking student progress? (Formative and summative assessments, internal and external evaluation procedures/audits etc.).

- How do I manage diversity in my classroom/school e.g. in terms of age, physical and mental ability/disability/learning difficulties/special educational needs e.g. visual and hearing impairment, gifted students; learning styles; cultural, linguistic, religious, ethnic, and gender (male/female) diversity; diversity in terms of values, ethics, class – the socio-economic backgrounds of students and staff – see the impact of social exclusion on the teaching and learning process; diversity in terms of the quality of the learning environment in which teaching and learning takes place – infrastructure, organizational culture, geographic location?

- Do I know what support I need to help me manage diversity e.g. student support, remedial teachers, guidance counsellors, social workers etc?

- Do I have ready access to such support?

- What other resources do I use to enhance the teaching and learning process?

- What can I do to improve student achievement?

- How am I/my school addressing issues relating to equity and equality in our policies/school development plan and in implementation of these? (See the intended, offered and received curriculum as well as the hidden curriculum). Look at the match/mismatch between the Teacher's weekly *Record and Evaluation Book* which is submitted to Principals and the Students' exercise books. How does the Principal use the information contained in these to monitor and evaluate teacher performance?

- How am I/my school managing the implementation process?

- Do I/my school keep records of students who are truanting/have dropped out of our school over the last 3-5 years? How is this data used?

- Is there a data-driven/performance-driven culture in my school/classroom e.g. in terms of punctuality and absenteeism among teachers and students, test results, information relating to Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences – not just concerned about academic performance?

- How is data analysed and used to inform the teaching and learning process?

- How effective are our partnerships between teacher, school/parent/community? How do I/my school address structural inequalities in society that may be impacting on the lives of our students (advocacy work)?

- Teacher training: Do our teacher training institutions prepare teachers effectively for teaching – do they give them the skills and develop in them the competences they need for their vocation? Yes, their vocation – teaching is not just a profession, it is a vocation. How are these institutions preparing teachers to deal with school violence, child abuse at home, indiscipline at school? How are they preparing them to use the internet? Indeed, do all our schools have access to the internet (see Matelot Pri. and Sec. School and one other school – no signal, therefore no internet).