

School Culture Matters

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By
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Every school is a different school, and every school would always be what it has always been.

First, is it right to say that every school is a different school? Mrs Merell, our relatively new Principal, is a lady of few words and sparing actions, but I can hear her saying, “Tell me about it – St. Stanislaus College is no Bishops’ High School!”

For that matter, Bishop’s is no Saints, Saints is not QC, and as much as they might want it to be otherwise, QC is no St. Stanislaus College. Each school is unique, every school is a different school.

But isn’t it obvious, that every school is a different school? Schools have different resources, different uniforms, different teachers, even different school buildings.

Well let me try again. Suppose I took all the students from SSC and transferred them *en bloc* to Bishops (or QC), and at the same time transferred all the students from Bishop’s (or QC) to SSC, would ‘Bishop’s’ then become Saints, as if by magic, and Saints Bishop’s? Would QC become Saints, and Saints become Bishops?

Clearly, no. Saints is Saints, is Saints; Bishop’s is Bishop’s, is Bishops; and QC is QC, is QC.

And that’s a wonderful thing, if we were to think about it. If we were at Bishop’s, then we’d know that some significant fraction of the 5th Formers would get more than 8 distinctions; and if we were at QC we’d know that we’d cop the best CXC performance award in the Caribbean, the best science student award, and so forth.

When I attended SSC, I took pride in being a Saint’s student because for us, our school motto – *Aeterna Non Caduca* – created in us an ethos, a characteristic of Saint’s students, that announced both to ourselves and to the other schools, that we were driven to do the things that mattered, not for this time only, but for eternity. In my eyes we were set apart from other schools because we were going to be good Guyanese

citizens, concerned about order in our society; and when it became necessary, concerned about justice and the welfare of our society, willing to do what was necessary to change the world around us, for the better. We had those dreams, and even if we were too small or too few to make our dreams become reality, we desperately believed in them. That's how I saw myself as a student of SSC, wearing that fantastic grey uniform with the badge of honour and dignity stuck onto my shirt pocket.

These were the things I believe, that made SSC 'SSC,' that made it different from other schools in its class of high-performance schools. But that was then. So if every school is a different school, how is *current* day SSC different from other schools, I wonder? I don't know, and indeed, I cannot know. I could of course ask you, but that would take some time.

What I'd do then is tell you of another school, not SSC, that also has a similar set of resources, teachers; one that in many respects looks and smells a lot like SSC – but it is not SSC. That school was clearly different from QC, Bishop's, PC, St. Roses, and the other schools we'd normally put into the same reference group. That school was so different from the other schools that when it got a new School Principal, its biggest worry was that the new Lady (but remember, I'm not talking about SSC) would ruin the plans for the graduation 'Prom' – I cringe as I use that alien expression, alien to Guyana and to the English vocabulary!

The new Principal herself was amazed at how different the school (not SSC, I insist) was from other schools. Classrooms were prisons, and people were not supposed to be in them – that was the clear view of both the teachers and the students. School rules were offending constraints on otherwise free-spirited behaviour. Students and teachers felt that school was meant to be fun first, learning and high academic achievement later.

Little did the Lady know that the school's motto was not the one inscribed on its Crest, but it was the one embedded deep in the minds of students and perhaps even teachers, and that that motto was in fact captured by the words of the song "Schools are Prisons:"

You took the best years of my life
And made it so I couldn't decide
Unable to respond
To the beautiful world
That goes on and on
And on and on

And those 13 years in prison
Didn't teach me how to love
They say they had their reasons
All coming from above
[but] you can't forget the seasons
Inside your factory
There's one thing they can't teach you
That's how to feel free
And stand alone
In a beautiful world
We have to respond

[CHORUS]
Schools are prisons
Forgot the seasons
Schools are prisons
What are the reasons for this waste of the spring?
Oh where to begin?
Outside, or within

You took the best years of my life
And made it so I couldn't decide

The group that sang that song, the *Sex Pistols*, was an English Punk group of the 1970s, and this particular song represented the punk culture's view of schools and schooling. Though the new Principal hadn't realised it, the school to which she had been newly appointed – remember it wasn't SSC – was in fact - a *punk school!*

But before we get carried away, let me emphasise that the punk culture was a deep culture, and so was the particular culture at this school. It would be foolish to overlook the sincerity of the view that what mattered for an education was more than just a set of good grades. If we were talking SSC, I'd urge Mrs Merrell to view the school she inherited as one that emphasised the highly philosophical view that education is really about

“... how to feel free
And stand alone
In a beautiful world”

and about how to “respond” and to be able to “decide” or make decisions.

[Though Saints has been a school that might have distinguished itself by its emphasis on a greater education of this sort, let me remind you that we are not talking about Saints!]

So to get back to the story of this school, this very different school, let me make something clear: While it’s true that we need an education that makes us able to stand alone, to respond to a changing world and we need an education that generally equips us to make good decisions, it’s impossible to do these things without a good formal secondary education. Or if not impossible, it’s certainly less likely that we’d be able to escape the poverty of mind, spirit and even material poverty, if we did poorly at secondary school. This is not to say that working hard and getting good grades would guarantee you a future without challenges, but it would help to ensure that when those challenges do come along, you’d be in a better position to deal with them than if you were just a punk, with a punk education. Rather than becoming free, as the punk education would envisage, we become enslaved by our inability to deal with a changing world.

Guyana is not an easy place, neither is it an easy place to try to tell you about the importance of a good secondary education – not when you might see all sorts of people getting rich while the so-called educated ones can’t even seem to get a job; when it seems that becoming ‘someone’ might involve crushing those around you; when power seems to matter more than education; when the only way to deal with the all-pervasive violence in our land is to embrace violence ourselves.

So let me come back to our school motto: *Aeterna Non Caduca* – Not for this Life only, but for Eternity. We can take the idea of ‘this life only’ to refer to the things we can achieve by ourselves, for ourselves, as we live by ourselves.

The trouble is that we cannot possibly do anything by ourselves and we certainly cannot live by ourselves. We live in community, in a society, and what that society becomes is ultimately the sum total of how each of us lives our private ‘this life.’ Indeed, what that society becomes is usually greater than the sum of our private lives, so that if our private lives add up to nothing, the nothingness of society would be even greater than that.

We must live, ever conscious that the choices and decisions we might make as if we were standing alone, would add up to the society we live in. The choices and decisions

we might make as students of SSC, as if we could really do our own thing, eventually create the school that SSC is.

Plus ça change ...

Now the new Principal of the school I'm telling you about, and the Board of Governors, and the rest of the administration, teachers and staff, and even the students, they *all* realised that "Eternity" is actually whatever their choices and decisions 'added up to' in the long run, ultimately, so to speak. Ever conscious of the school's motto therefore, they all decided to do something about their school, so that it would become a school characterised by high effort on the part of teachers, diligent and disciplined students who were driven to high academic achievement, and a school where every student enjoyed safety as they worked together to be everything that they could be. It would be a school that was also outstanding in sports, it had an active drama club, there was a school orchestra, a steel band, a school choir, all of that. And they dreamed, a bit childishly, of the crowning moment when they too would feature in the Caribbean newspapers and television as a top performing school in the entire region.

Oh dear, I might have slipped into talking about SSC, with all this talk about *Aeterna Non Caduca*. Forgive me. At any rate, the point I want to make is that a school that has its own culture - and remember, every school has a distinct culture - is unfortunately one that wouldn't change, which is the second part of what I started with: Every school is a different school because each school has its own culture, *but it would always be what it has always been* regardless of what we did to change it. Plus ça change (plus c'est la même chose). The more things change, the more they remain the same. Or as Alfred Lord Tennyson said of The Brook – an apt metaphor for the school culture that actually governs our decisions and our behaviour, and that makes victims of those of us who have helped to create the school culture we now would want to change – "For men may come and men may go, but I go on forever."

At SSC we've seen countless HMs come and go, but we seem to go on our merry (shall I say punkish?) way, forever. Saints seems only able to be what it has always been, because student populations, even teachers, tend to conform to whatever culture prevails. So behaviour – the behaviour of students, teachers, staff – that behaviour doesn't change. Now please forgive me but I need to use the expression 'punk,' but remember that I said that it represented a serious point of view. As I was saying, SSC would always be SSC because behaviour wouldn't change, and that's because "we behave as 'punks' because we expect others to behave as 'punks,' and if we didn't

behave accordingly we'd seem weird, so it's always better for us to behave as if we were punks, given that others are going to behave as punks anyway."¹
Well where does that leave us – from Mrs Merell, to the Board, to Barbados and Toronto, and you the students and teachers who make SSC tick over, day by day, term by term, year by year?

The good news is that we know that what's required is a *cultural shift*. If we want the positive changes to add up to a new SSC, we cannot leave it to Mrs Merell. What she will do is to provide the leadership to support this transformation, but we need something more.

Before I conclude by telling you about your role in this cultural shift programme, let me pause to say that any intervention that detracts our energies from this programme, would completely derail any attempts to transform this wonderful school, to which we all belong. Everyone one of you is a custodian of this programme, and we must guard it jealously. We must know that this is what we are involved in, and must be single-minded in doing what we must do, to make SSC what it should be, and not just allow it to be what it has always been.

But how could we guard this cultural shift programme if we do not know what we should be doing to make it happen? In 2000 Malcolm Gladwell wrote a book called *The Tipping Point: How Little Things can Make a Difference*, popularizing the idea that cultural shifts can only occur if we could identify tipping points.

Essentially, we don't need **everyone** to get on board this programme. Among our students, we need only a handful, but a pivotal, critical handful of highly 'influential' students (perhaps 'popular' students?) to capture this vision of a high effort, high performance, high achievement school, and to themselves begin to act as if they were themselves that vision, and this would constitute a tipping point. Among our teachers, we need a handful of teachers – influential, high visibility teachers, who, gripped by this vision, would begin to teach as if they too were gripped by the vision. And so forth ...

Do it at the level of the classroom, start with the tipping points in each classroom, in each year ... Then yes, SSC would indeed be different from other schools, but we'd have become different ourselves.

And so, as I close let me congratulate each of the prize winners in each category. If I were looking for tipping points, I'd start with You!!

¹ To modify the classic statement of what a convention is in "The Economics of Conventions," by Peyton Young, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vo. 10, No. 2, pp. 105-122, 1996.

Thank you.ⁱ

ⁱ Dr Thomas Singh graduated from Saints in 1979, and went on to Sixth Form there as well. He lectures Economics at the University of Guyana, where he also functions as the Coordinator of the Institute of Development Studies. This address is actually based on his research on the significance of culture (or informal institutions) in determining economic behavior.