



CSC Evaluation and Monitoring Programme

From At-Risk Youth to Retirees: Advocating for the Transformative Power of Lifelong Learning in Trinidad and Tobago

Rachael Guzman De Vlugt



Trinidad and Tobago has a strong tradition of adult education programmes stretching back to the mid-1940s when Adult Learning Centres were created to prepare citizens for universal adult suffrage. The value of lifelong learning has been evidenced repeatedly: adult education supports citizens in the workplace, producing economic benefits and increasing confidence and resilience. Trinidad and Tobago's network of Adult Learning Centres offer opportunities to address gaps in education, providing adults with the opportunity to complete their secondary or technical vocational education. These Centres attempt to address the correlation between educational attainment and socioeconomic status, and are located in areas of the country with the greatest need.

At the same time, there are persistent concerns in Trinidad and Tobago about youth involvement in crime, with young men in particular at risk of becoming involved in criminal activity. Recognising this, the government has stressed the need for community-level interventions that reinforce basic life skills, support families, and strengthen education systems. Lifelong learning and community development are therefore closely related to improved outcomes for at-risk young people.



Rachael with UNESCO Officials at the IPI International Press Institute World Congress 2012.

It is within the intersecting landscapes of youth crime prevention and adult education that Rachael Guzman De Vlugt has forged her career. As a Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholar, she completed an MSc in Education for Sustainability at London South Bank University. Since her graduation, she has translated her academic experience into practical action, both through her role as the National Coordinator of the country's Adult Education Programme, and through her work as the Director of Operation Miracle Hour, an NGO she founded with the goal of supporting at-risk youth in Trinidad and Tobago.

Rachael Guzman De Vlugt has spent decades supporting at risk young people in Trinidad and Tobago. Beginning in the 1980s she volunteered in the youth incarceration centre, and in 2006 she founded her NGO, Operation Miracle Hour, to provide community interventions for young people involved in crime. Her work has attracted the attention of UNESCO, which partnered with her organisation to establish a multimedia centre for incarcerated youth. Seeking a deeper understanding of the global forces shaping national policy, Rachael sought out a Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship, and in 2020 she graduated from London South Bank University with an MSc in Education for Sustainability. This qualification opened the door to new career opportunities, and she became the National Coordinator for Trinidad and Tobago's Adult Education Programme, overseeing 26 centres and over 200 tutors. Due to her expertise, she was invited to complete her country's contribution to UNESCO's Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE). She has continued to operate her NGO, and through Operation Miracle Hour she developed a national Active Parenting Curriculum to support parents in the digital age. She also proposed the NEST model, linking lifelong learning to local government reform and sustainability. Today, she continues to expand her impact, collaborating with UNICEF on the Child Friendly Cities initiative, promoting lifelong learning for retirees, and exploring faith-based tourism, all while championing education as the foundation for sustainable development.

Pre-Scholarship Career: Supporting At-Risk Youth in Trinidad and Tobago

Since long before her Commonwealth Scholarship, Rachael has been committed to supporting young people to fulfil their potential. As early as 1986 she was volunteering in prisons, focussing particularly on the Youth Training Centre and working with incarcerated young men. Rachael observed that young people in Trinidad and Tobago were becoming increasingly likely to be involved in criminal activity, and she wanted to find ways to prevent this. This is why in 2006 she founded her NGO, Operation Miracle Hour.

Operation Miracle Hour is focussed on providing community intervention measures that support at-risk youth and youth involved in crime. It was founded on the principles of cooperation and deliberate community action to address rising crime levels. Since 2006, Operation Miracle Hour has facilitated several projects, ranging from the provision of music lessons for at-risk youth to the introduction of a national Active Parenting Curriculum for Trinidad and Tobago.

Rachael's growing expertise in this field were recognised, and in 2009 she was approached by UNESCO. UNESCO partnered with Operation Miracle Hour to establish a Community Multimedia Centre at the Youth Training Centre – the facility for youth in conflict with the law and incarcerated youth. Following the end of UNESCO's role in the project, Operation Miracle Hour maintained the programme's momentum, supported by government funding that Rachael secured.

'Youth who are involved in learning multimedia skills tend to steer away from a life of crime and violence. So that was the rationale behind it, and it found favour.'

Education for Sustainability

Whilst Rachael had a strong knowledge base honed through years of experience, she felt that she wanted to better understand the ways in which the challenges facing young people in Trinidad and Tobago fit into a broader global picture. She particularly wanted to enhance her knowledge of national and international economic policies, and understand how these policies impacted her country and local community. It was this interest that led to her applying for a Commonwealth Scholarship, and in 2017 she began an MSc in Education for Sustainability at London South Bank University as a Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholar. Rachael's Master's dissertation was entitled 'Serendipity in Adult Education: A critical analysis of economic policies and practise in Trinidad and Tobago'.

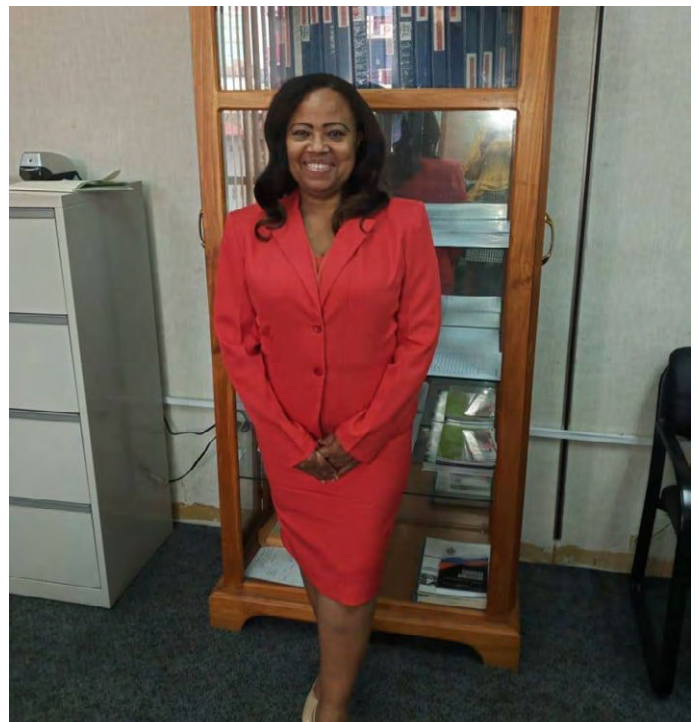
'It was a real revelation to understand that the policies that our government implements are not just based on something that they come up with in our parliament... I learned that what we do in our country is as a result of what they are signatories to. So, it's not like they're operating in isolation of what is taking place in the rest of the world.'

National Leadership in Adult Education

Through her Master's degree, Rachael came to believe in the value of lifelong learning programmes and adult education, and she sought out opportunities to apply her newfound knowledge to her ongoing work.

The qualification she had achieved opened new doors in her career, and in 2019, whilst studying for her Master's, she was employed as the National Coordinator for the Adult Education programme. Rachael credits her Commonwealth Scholarship for providing her with the skills she needed for this role:

'I would not have qualified for the job if I had not been doing the Master's... So that's one of the benefits in terms of being better equipped or qualified for employment.'



Rachael in the National Adult Education Programme Administrative Office.

As National Coordinator, Rachael led a distributed network of 26 Lifelong Learning Centres, serving all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago aged 15 and over. Crucially, the programme offered opportunities to gain recognised certifications, allowing adult learners to fill key gaps in their education. Specifically, learners are offered the chance to acquire their secondary and technical vocational education certificates.

There is a close correlation between attainment of these key educational milestones and employment levels. Research by the OECD has shown a relationship between education levels and long-term unemployment; among the unemployed, 36% of those without upper secondary education have been unemployed for 12 months or more. Long-term unemployment has serious detrimental effects on socioeconomic security.

Rachael managed the programme, supporting 26 supervisors across the country to manage over 200 tutors.

'We know that lifelong learning, it's very important, and it's a part of education for sustainability, which is what I majored in.'

The Adult Education Programme was paused during the COVID-19 pandemic as part of efforts to slow the spread of the disease, and it is yet to resume. Rachael remains a passionate advocate for the importance of these centres, and she hopes to see them reopened in the future.

As National Coordinator, Rachael became a key representative for Trinidad and Tobago on the international stage. She was selected to lead the country's contribution to UNESCO's Global Report on Adult Learning and Education, completing the work on behalf of the government. Drawing on the specialist research skills she had developed through her Commonwealth Scholarship, Rachael undertook a rigorous 100 question technical survey, gathering and analysing evidence on the national state of adult education. Her expertise ensured that Trinidad and Tobago's Adult Education Programme was documented at the standard required by UNESCO.

Rachael believes that the specialist knowledge that she acquired whilst on award empowered her to work on this project. She says this is the most significant change she experienced as a result of the Commonwealth Scholarship:

'Knowledge is power. I received knowledge that I did not have before, and as a result of that, I was empowered to actually carry out my job in a very sustainable way... It's because of my immersion in the Master's that I was able to provide UNESCO with the information. I had to do research because you needed to provide the evidence of what you were saying. I was able to do that research to provide them with evidence that was legitimate.'

Capability: Equipping Parents, Professionals, and Young People

Following the conclusion of her work as a National Coordinator in 2021, Rachael's focus returned to her NGO, Operation Miracle Hour. Her attention shifted away from adult education, and she returned to her roots, once again seeking opportunities to support at-risk young people in

Trinidad and Tobago. Rachael became interested in the unmet needs of parents, and the challenges of parenting in the digital age. Rachael's interest in support for parents began in the early 90s, having herself benefitted from a parenting training course when one of her sons was in preschool. Since then, she has observed the changing pressures facing parents, and she saw a need to support parents to face the new challenges of the digital age.



Rachael in the role of National Coordinator of the Adult Education Programme taking part in a promotional photo shoot.

'We expect so much of parents, and parents are being held accountable for the actions of their children. But parenting, especially in the digital age, is very challenging because it's the most important job, and the only job in the world for which there is no mandatory training.'

In the digital world, with children exposed to so much peer pressure, having latchkey experiences, single-parent homes and all of that, I thought I would empathise with parents and offer them the tools that they may need in order to become equipped to more empirically treat their children and to guide them in the right direction.'

Building on her wealth of experience, Rachael worked through Operation Miracle Hour to collaborate with Trinidad and Tobago's Ministry of the People, Social Development and Family Services and the Ministry of Education to create a training programme for parents. In 2024, Operation Miracle Hour received approval from the government to introduce an Active Parenting Curriculum to the national school system over the next five years. This curriculum is currently in development, and the first intake of 2,520 trainees is projected for 2027 with the administrative work and baseline statistics to begin in the final quarter of 2026. The programme is called Capability – a shortened form of "Building Up Concerted Active Parenting Ability."

‘Active parenting refers to conscious, engaged and holistic methods of child rearing, and it focusses on understanding, guiding and supporting a child’s individual needs and development. And it’s not just about being physically present and involved in a child’s life, but also emotionally, mentally and socially involved.’

The proposed curriculum covers various topics, with modules tailored to the needs of the parent and the age of the child. Modules include: Our First Five Years; Active Parenting of Teens; Cooperative Co-parenting through Separation or Divorce; Active Parenting for Stepfamilies; and Anti-bullying, amongst others.

Alongside the implementation of the Active Parenting Curriculum, the Capability programme proposes the use of the Youth Level of Service Case Management Inventory (YLS/CMI). This framework, developed in Canada and approved by the Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago, assesses factors in adults and youth that increase the likelihood of criminal behaviour. The Capability programme will train parents and professionals within the school system to identify children at risk of offending or re-offending, in order that they can be provided with appropriate support.

‘The professionals within the school system and parents who have the level of prerequisite training and exposure to a bit of psychology, can use it to determine where the gaps are in their children/students’ lifestyle and development.’

Local Government and Sustainability Learning – The Network for Education for Sustainable Transformation

Beyond the direct delivery of education programmes, Rachael has also maintained an interest in government reform – something sparked through her Commonwealth Scholarship. Her unique position as an expert in adult education and sustainability allowed her to see a link between lifelong learning, sustainability, and government reform:

‘I believe, based on the research that I did, that the key really lies in involving lifelong learning, education within the context of the local government. Because for all of the top countries that I looked at when I looked at the data, I saw that lifelong learning was a part of all of the models of the local governments that are top in the world.’

In 2024, she developed a policy proposal for a Network for Education for Sustainable Transformation (NEST), a model that puts lifelong learning at the heart of local government reform. Her literature reviews indicated that across the world high performing local governments tend to embed lifelong learning into staff development, citizen participation and service design.

The proposal argues for enhancing human resources roles with dedicated Sustainability Champions, who can foreground the importance of education for sustainability as a pathway towards government reform. Rachael’s vision integrates systemic government change and civic education, with the proposal of Lifelong Learning Educators who can deliver education courses specifically tailored to the needs of communities in Trinidad and Tobago. She believes that this kind of integrated approach is essential to government reform, as too often policymaking becomes siloed. Rachael submitted the proposal to the Minister of Local Government, and is currently awaiting a response.

When reflecting on the most significant change she has contributed to the community, Rachael feels that her holistic vision has been key:

‘It’s empowering others and encouraging others to achieve their goals and their vision... I have been encouraging government ministers in the former government and also the current government, sharing the information that I have concerning education for sustainability.’

Sustainability, of course, comprises of three pillars, which are social, economic and environmental. What I have seen is that policymakers themselves do not all quite grasp the need to incorporate all three in their work. So that is what I have been championing, that there must be that synergy amongst all of them.’

Looking Ahead: UNICEF, Retirees, and Faith-Based Tourism

Looking to the future, Rachael has plans to expand the scope of her work still further, and she has turned her attention to the trillion-dollar tourism industry. As an ordained minister, she believes that Trinidad and Tobago holds huge potential as a destination for faith-based tourism. She recently submitted a policy proposal suggesting the promotion of World Tourism Day in the country.

Despite her varied career, Rachael’s first priority has always been young people, and she plans to continue working with children in Trinidad and Tobago. She has recently started working with UNICEF on their Child Friendly Cities project, a global initiative aimed at creating safe spaces for children. UNICEF plans to establish a child-friendly city in San Fernando, Trinidad and Tobago, and Rachael recently met with the Member of Parliament for San Fernando and was referred to the mayor of the city who has oversight for the work.

‘I submitted an expression of interest to the mayor, so that Operation Miracle Hour can be a part of what they will do there in San Fernando.’

Alongside her work with children and young people, Rachael has maintained her interest in Adult Education programmes. Recently, she has begun work on a proposal for promoting lifelong learning among retirees, in partnership with the developer of a retirement community. Rachael believes that even if retirees have been unable to access educational opportunities throughout their lives, it is never too late to gain new skills and contribute to the community:

'Maybe they haven't fulfilled their dreams as yet, and we'll encourage them that you can still fulfil your dream. But lifelong learning again will be a key driver in that model.'

Throughout her diverse and accomplished career, Rachael has remained a steadfast advocate for education as a key driver of sustainable development, and will continue to advocate for the importance of education across all areas of society.

'In my opinion, in order to achieve all 17 of the Sustainable Development Goals, we need to have education programmes tailored for each one of those pillars.'

Find out more about Rachael Guzman De Vlugt's work:

[Discover Trinidad and Tobago's Adult Education Programme](#)

[Read the Global Report on Adult Learning and Education](#)

[Learn about the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities initiative](#)

[Understand the Youth Level of Service Case Management Inventory](#)