

## What Teachers Want

By Cynthia James

For as long as we continue to ignore teachers in our educational planning, for so long will we be spinning top in mud. The irony is that many Trinidadian teacher educators and planners were once teachers. But as those in the trenches will tell you, “These same people that were teaching alongside you, once they get to the other side, they forget.” Obviously, it cannot be “the other side,” since all are involved in the same service of educating people’s children and in the process becoming better educators themselves.

And, to be fair, those who were once in the trenches hardly forget. It is merely that with their changed responsibilities, comes the necessity to lead; and many a time there are few resources provided. All the more reason why instead of becoming defensive, instead of becoming pontificators from new, learned foreign texts, they should join hands with those who have to implement what might appear to be pie in the sky, for the common good of educating the children.

The fact remains, though, that teacher educators, education policy makers, and teachers are not reading from the same page, and the sooner we find out why, the sooner we can do something about it. In large measure, this is because many teachers do not have an iota of respect for those above them, because as far as they are concerned, the pontificators would not survive a day in the classroom. They know that is why many educators run out of it.

Let me tell you some of the things that used to be at the top of my list when I was in the classroom:

- I used to want my principal and the Ministry of Education to recognise that I was a master teacher working miracles with just my voice and goodwill, and say something good to me, give me credit for it, just not pay me a wage.
- I used to want a place where I could borrow books on teacher education, on the latest techniques—a teachers’ library that I could go to in order to upgrade my skills. I used to be vexed that once I left The University of the West Indies (UWI), UWI was done with me—that I could not go back in the library to help my students, unless I “tief” a chance or pay a fee because the guards (rightfully so, because of limited resources) would harass me.
- I used to want that education plans and educational policy would not be a secret or selective favour, dispensed piecemeal, only if I was in the right place at the right time.
- I used to want teaching to be a meritocracy.
- Most of all, I used to hate teacher educators and policy makers treating me as though I was ignorant and talking down to me, because I did not read the same books that they had read.

I used to want these things because teaching was what I did for my self-respect, and how I earned my living, and if you don’t get fulfilment in your lifetime place of work, enthusiasm diminishes. I tell you all of this because many people feel that all that

teachers want is more money. (Which, by the way, they do. You soon get to find out that young teachers make the greatest gains and as you grow old in the system, well . . . you grow old!)

But you would be surprised to know that even the most delinquent teacher, come August holidays, finds his way to his school when results are released to check his CXC and A'Level results, mark book in hand to see if his assessment compares with that of the external examiners. You may criticise his exam-orientedness but, ostensibly, exam results are the only thing that gives him prestige and makes him a master teacher in the system right now—the only measurement of worth that society values.

I bet you would be surprised to know as well, that teachers “mark CXC” not primarily for the car tyres they can buy with the measly stipend. Ironically, they “mark CXC” for the prestige of it all, and for the experience that they can take back to the classroom. Most of all (and many would find this hilarious), they “mark CXC” because it is where they meet once a year!

What this says is that teachers are dying for a professional fraternity and sorority. I am not knocking the teachers' union. What I am saying is that teachers want to know more about their subject areas and how to be better teachers.

What planners have to find out is how to support a profession with a massive amount of caring, but which has a legacy of silence and is crippled by archaic regulations and conservatism; how to transform existing meeting spaces into trusting proactive spaces.

It is no good throwing back teachers' naivety in their faces with taunts such as: “Nobody can earn your professionalism for you. You have a union. Why don't you talk to your principal? Get proactive.”

Such words will only breed a continuation of existing cynicism in those who know that at present, schools (public secondary schools, in particular) run like that old TV show “Survival.” However, in order for us to stop running schools like “Survival,” planners have to support teachers even if, regrettably, they have to make demands on them in the style of top-down reform.

I see a need for teachers to have financial and academic support to develop a research voice to give them the self-respect they need to really become partners in education.

Teachers need support to sustain professional associations and academic journals. And when they participate in workshops they must be assured that their names are not lost in the foreword or in the fine print on the inside jacket. In other words, all teachers want out of their partnership in education is to be treated, with respect, like thinking humans.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine