

Teachers as Professionals

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Recently, there has been much discussion in the local press about teachers as professionals. However, the views expressed by the various commentators, both lay and expert, have not always been consistent or clear. This lack of clarity has led me to reflect and speculate on possible answers to three related questions: How is the teacher as a professional different from the novice or career teacher? How do we train teachers to become professionals? and, To what extent does the formal education system of Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) celebrate and reward teachers when they function as professionals? My thoughts on these questions form the basis for this article.

Looking at what pertains in T&T and other education jurisdictions suggests that the teacher as a professional differs from the novice or career teacher in several fundamental respects. One is that the teacher professional has a more holistic view of the education enterprise than the novice or even the career teacher. For example, professional teachers see their work in the classroom as only a small, though significant, part of the professional role—a part of their responsibilities as educators.

This breed of teacher is not only trained to be intimately involved in the decision-making processes that impact student learning, but also with curricular reforms, budget allocations, and the assessment of outcomes. The current literature refers to people in these roles as “empowered teachers,” “peer mentors,” and “senior teachers.” These are the people who, if given the opportunity, respect, and resources, would train their own support personnel, set their own standards of practice, police their own ranks, and take responsibility for results.

Furthermore, these are the teachers who recognise that educational change, whether imposed or evolved, is never painless; and who play an important role in implementing this change. Hence one would expect them to be actively and meaningfully involved in such current education reform initiatives as the development of national certification standards and the National Certificate of Secondary Education (NCSE), in filling newly created school leadership positions, and in mentoring novice teachers.

How then does one transition from teacher to professional? An important aspect of this transition is the recognition that teacher professionalism cannot be taught; however it can be learned. In T&T, most members of the current teaching force have gone through essentially the same training programmes, invariably at the same teacher education institutions. Furthermore, these programmes are all built on the common premise that teachers must be educated to assume leadership roles within the schools and the profession. Additionally, these teacher preparation models expose the trainee to those competencies necessary for effective classroom leadership, namely, organisation, strategies, methods, conveying content, and interaction. They are also prepared for leadership roles among peers and within professional associations, for championing issues relating to change within the teaching profession, and for mentoring.

However, not all the teachers exit these programmes with a vision of future leadership roles. In many cases, many of the teachers fail to grasp the implications of their roles as classroom leaders, much less the broader notion that they have an important contribution to make in reshaping education as a whole. Those teachers who make the transition from teacher to professional seem to have what Daniel Goleman calls “high emotional intelligence,” and have internalised a more holistic view of the education enterprise.

So to what extent does our education system celebrate and reward teacher-professionals? The short answer is: not much. One problem these teacher leaders face is that they are invariably not given the basic recognition and respect accorded other professionals. For example, many of them are appointed to schools that are nothing more than what V.S. Naipaul might call “overcrowded bureaucratic barracoons,” where the free exercise of professional practice is limited by bureaucracy. As these schools are currently fashioned in T&T, the opportunity to control their professional practice is unavailable to these teachers.

Hence what I have come to appreciate, and what educational administrators and the general public need to appreciate, is that the teacher professional is an individual who has knowledge, skills, and the temperament to contribute to the important decisions that guide the education endeavour. However, without an appropriate avenue for fulfilment of leadership talents, and without a clearly defined and appropriately remunerated career structure within teaching many will simply opt out of teaching because of the lack of an outlet for their interests and talents, and the non-recognition of their market value, or will remain, without adding any real value to the education process.

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