

Evaluating Educators

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It seems to be the norm in educational organisations, especially within the formal school system, to play “catch up” with accepted practices in other fields, notably business. Focus on accountability and transparency has led to the now normal practice in many establishments of the dreaded “Quality Audits.” Such audits engage members of an organisation in the necessary self-scrutiny that allows for self-diagnosis, which in turn enables the organisation to highlight and examine its own weaknesses and strengths, and to treat with them. These audits are known to result in a buzz of activity, and even anxiety, as external observers provide the forum for addressing issues that should lead to a robust plan for the organisation’s short- and long-term improvement.

The recent three-day symposium on “Achieving Educational Quality through Teacher Education,” hosted by the British Council and the School of Education, The University of the West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine, was a heroic attempt to harness the involvement of a wide cross-section of the national, regional, and international human resource in education. This symposium chose to focus on three main areas of teacher education: Models of Teacher Education, Issues of Governance, and Evaluating Teachers and Teaching.

The evaluation of teachers is an issue for us in Trinidad and Tobago, as indeed it is elsewhere. The existing organizational structures do not accommodate an efficient evaluation system. During the symposium, discussions on Evaluating Teachers and Teaching provided the opportunity for what could be considered as a forerunner to a quality audit of the evaluation systems currently in place in our context. One recurring point of discussion was the inadequacy of the current strategies used for teacher evaluation at all levels, whether within the training programmes or post-training, and including the evaluation of teacher educators and school administrators.

Emerging out of discussions was the need for the establishment of formal professional standards for all teachers—teacher trainees, newly qualified teachers, experienced teachers, and senior teachers (including administrators)—which would then inform an appropriate evaluation system. If such evaluation is not to be ad hoc, there should be harmonisation of the philosophy, vision, and mission of all agencies involved in education. For too long now, individual providers and agents within the same system have been dancing to the beat of different drums, as they say, but to beats that are neither synchronized nor syncopated.

Just as we advocate that teachers pay attention to detail in the classroom-setting in order to maximise learning, so too should we insist that continuing support be provided for teacher development. Therefore, teacher evaluation must go hand in hand with support, not only in the form of physical resources, but also through formal systems of mentoring and guidance. The appropriate type of evaluation of teachers would be one that is developmental. It is in this light that teachers themselves need to become more

scrupulous about record-keeping, not only in the form of lesson and unit planning, but also in terms of their teaching and learning activities, as well as their encounters, dilemmas, conflicts, successes, and other significant elements of their professional experience. Teachers are advised to “mind their business,” in other words, so that they can provide evidence to back up their suggestions, questions, requests, or demands.

For us in Trinidad and Tobago, the evaluation of teachers has a history of negative connotations, with its antecedents in the school inspector of colonial times. Interestingly, the term “inspector” still exists in the United Kingdom, but the role is not characterized by the dictatorial patterns that we associate with it. As we take cognizance of the fact that the human element in evaluation implies that individual emphases and tendencies would vary, we ought to make adequate provision for the relevant training of evaluators, paying attention to the role of human nature and individual temperament. Training for evaluators should not only include skills in assessment, supervision, and the proper use of instruments and strategies, but in the behaviours that are sometimes far more appreciated—behaviours that demonstrate collegiality, respect, sincerity, patience, understanding, and the ability to really help and guide. Teacher evaluators are advised to keep records that would serve as a source for their action and interventions.

It is well acknowledged that our Minister of Education is a good listener and has a genuine interest in education for all. However, perhaps one of the outcomes of a micro focus on the education system is the introduction of too many interventions for educators to grapple with in the context of their daily lives. When the heart is not functioning, minor remedial measures are hardly likely to help; they sometimes compound the malady. A well-designed, integrated system of teacher education, inclusive of teacher evaluation, is the foundation on which to create an environment for the empowerment of the learner in the classroom. Such a system would be well placed to address the curriculum needs of our learners, who are in dire need of relevance in the classroom. The curriculum of teacher education courses must also reflect this need for relevance, providing teachers with the skills they need to ultimately achieve not just curricular goals but also those broader educational goals that practitioners at all levels have a tendency to either forget or ignore, in their quest to increase “passes.”

Even at the level of teacher recruitment, there is a need to develop a broader range of standards to guide our selection of beginning teachers at all levels. Qualifications do not a teacher make. It is time to reaffirm the professional status of teaching. Unless local education planners and educators are able to work together to ensure that they operate within a system that can stand up to scrutiny, teaching will remain as a last resort for many talented persons with great untapped potential. Let us begin by following up on our “International Symposium on Achieving Educational Quality Through Teacher Education.” Its outcomes should provide valuable groundwork for the elaboration of meaningful changes and development, which can be implemented through agency collaboration and cooperation.

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