

## **The Learning Teacher**

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It is indeed exciting to think that each year in Trinidad and Tobago there are about 120 secondary school teachers who actually engage in classroom research. “Action research” is a term that is now well known in academic circles, and has been defined as a “subset of educational case study research: enquiry carried out in order to understand, evaluate and change” (Bassey, 1999). In educational settings, this type of research is carried out by teachers or administrators who hope to make a positive change within their own school. The current scenario is investigated and evaluated. Change is then devised, implemented, and evaluated. In other words, action researchers employ critical enquiry to try to improve their practice and, consequently, their students’ performance.

Though the “curriculum study” proves to be perhaps the most challenging of assignments for full-time teachers in training, it appears to be the most rewarding, in that practitioners can be seen to move along a continuum of desperation to varying degrees of inspiration and hope. It is an opportunity to put theory into practice, as teachers assess problems they or their students encounter in the teaching/learning process, and try to overcome them through techniques and strategies they have encountered in their academic journey through “Foundations of Education,” “Curriculum Theory,” and “Teaching Practice” in their own schools as well as others.

What is also significant about recent graduates and current students of the post-graduate Diploma in Education (Dip.Ed.) at the School of Education is that they have an appreciation of the roles of both quantitative and qualitative data in research—the latter facilitating in-depth investigation of the experiences and understandings of people. What these teachers have been learning is how to analytically identify a problem, create an informed intervention, and monitor the outcomes of the intervention. Thus, they are either testing theory or creating it. It is hoped that this practice would continue after the Dip. Ed. programme.

The teacher as learner sometimes finds obstacles in the path to inspired output. It is thus crucial that mentoring becomes an integral part of the human resource management in schools. Learning to become can be a lonely process. One would hope that it is not only the “teacher-in-training” who is “learning to become,” but indeed all educators. Mentoring involves open discussion, seeking and finding answers, and sharing. If teachers in the staff room are comfortable with such exchanges, then it may be more likely that the same skills would be encouraged among the younger learners in the classrooms.

Many principals claim to have an “open door” policy and to be “transformational leaders.” Surely those notions are inextricably linked to action research and “learning to

become.” Open door policies would facilitate problem-solving as a skill peculiar to the thinking teacher. Such a policy gives the enthusiastic teacher a voice. I would encourage principals in their planning, to create communities of learners in their schools. This calls for a great deal of creativity and perseverance. They may need to dip into their pool of knowledge of human resource management practice or to become learners themselves. Teachers are anxious to make their students succeed—academically, emotionally, and socially. What we need to understand is that while teachers learn and look for solutions to enable their students’ success, they have to face systemic realities that frustrate them. They are often called upon to make decisions in a second without consultation. In light of this, it is incumbent upon managers of schools to ensure that the basic infrastructure is in place to deliver the curriculum and ensure school discipline. While the system attempts to make adequate provision for students, let us not be blind to what is required for teachers’ self-improvement.