

Get Set, Teachers

Jennifer Yamin-Ali

Part 2

Part 1 of this article placed teachers in the “on your marks” position. Now they need to “get set” in order “to go.”

School administrators recognise the invaluable role that the classroom teacher plays in curriculum implementation. Yet teachers may ask questions similar to those that principals and vice-principals ask when faced with policy changes. “What is expected of me? Where am I in the scheme of things? Why do I feel that I am being pulled in different directions?”

To cope well with any new undertaking requires that we maximise the skills and knowledge we already possess, and develop new perspectives and attitudes that would facilitate, in this case, our understanding of the philosophy and rationale that undergird new policy. If teachers accept that student learning is achieved by a curriculum brought to life by their teaching, then each subject teacher will look forward to benefitting from regular meetings of their Principal, Vice-Principal and Head of Department (HOD). They will look forward to the establishment of specifics about what are essential deliverables from teachers, and the systems necessary to elicit these deliverables.

“Getting set” means that teachers will expect regularly scheduled meetings with their HODs, where each teacher gets an opportunity to take a leadership role. In such meetings, topics such as team teaching, collaboration, group work, and assessment can be considered and clarified. Teachers should welcome opportunities to learn how to operate in teams, and should also explore ways of team teaching; for example, with staff from a nearby school in a fixed slot on the timetable (to enhance content and pedagogy).

Teachers can take the initiative in exploring timetabling innovations to enable regular departmental meetings, and in providing minutes of such meetings. These meetings would enable systematized departmental goal-setting and reporting, and provide a forum to discuss efficient functioning, such as developing systems for sharing teaching materials and involving library staff in the organization of such materials for easy access.

Very often, teachers argue that they are on the lower echelons of the system’s hierarchy. However, organisational theory reminds us that power is not always wielded by the persons with legal authority, but perhaps by those who are proactive enough to be innovative and sell an idea. For example, if teachers were to take the proverbial bull by the horn and “call the shots,” their professionalism could well be enhanced and recognised as they have long clamoured for. One example of demonstrating this professionalism and self-governance is by establishing a culture of videotaping lessons for the purpose of self-critique, peer critique, clinical supervision, substituting for an absent teacher, or student revision. If teachers feel sufficiently equipped professionally to critique macro and micro policy, surely they can turn the critique inward so that brilliant

and effective policies are derived from their own analysis of what would make their performance better suited to higher levels of student engagement and consequent learning.

I therefore call upon all teachers who have had the benefit of professional training to use and build upon their current knowledge. If teachers prefer not to be bulldozed into action, they have to already be in gear as they come to terms with how to realise the objectives of the written curriculum. Graduates of the Diploma in Education (Dip.Ed.) programme, for example, have the capacity to facilitate mini-workshops that would provide practical ideas for increasing student motivation; for eliminating boring, unstimulating lessons; and for promoting the notion that a textbook is not a syllabus but an instrument.

“Getting set” assumes the understanding that instruments used currently in the school system are just that—only instruments. So if a set lesson plan structure is not working for you, as a professional practitioner in the classroom, you ought to be able to devise one that is more appropriate, but also be able to convince others on the team of its usefulness. You may even attempt to negotiate a reinterpretation of your Performance Management Appraisal Programme (PMAP) guide to allow for credit for new internal goals that may have emerged through new understandings in your department.

The professional skill set required of the teacher “on the move” includes those personal competencies that are known to breed success in any sphere. The professional must be able to accept critique, to willingly share, to communicate without hostility, to be articulate, to be magnanimous, to be self-critical, and to yearn for empowerment through self-awareness and understanding. “Getting set” means doing a personal SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis.

When teachers “get set” wisely, it is they who call the shots.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine