

Teacher Education and the “Good Teacher”

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The Symposium on Teacher Education that begins at The University of the West Indies (UWI) tomorrow (28 April, 2004) provides a much-needed opportunity for members of the national and regional community to discuss the future of teacher education in the Caribbean.

Here in Trinidad and Tobago, we are well aware of the critical importance of teacher education to the accomplishment of the education reform process upon which this country has embarked. The reform thrust has focused, just as earlier attempts had done, on increasing access to education for all citizens. It is attempting to develop new, more relevant curricula, and more and better-equipped schools. None of this will make a difference, however, if we do not pay attention, at the same time, to how we prepare teachers to deal with the changes proposed.

Teachers have been placed at the centre of the change process. The state’s policy of decentralisation has given teachers some new power and much new responsibility. They are expected to be change agents and change leaders, instead of merely acquiescing to the changes being introduced.

Moreover, these new responsibilities come at a time when they are encountering students in their classrooms who are in many ways more sophisticated than before, but who are at the same time more vulnerable to the many upheavals of a society in transition. Thus teachers have to find ways of responding to students who come prepared to challenge established structures and ways of doing things.

At the same time, teachers must come to terms with the fact that they are often regarded by both those students and their parents as being, somehow, engaged in a second-class type of work. I have heard students say to their teachers, “But Miss, how come you want to stay in teaching? There are so many other things you could be doing!” The implication often seems to be – and if you really could do anything else, why would you want to stay here?

If teachers cannot deal with these challenges effectively, the best conceived plans for education reform must fail. Hence, teacher education becomes central to the reform process. As Professor Errol Miller (1999) has noted, “the transformation of teachers in the Caribbean is intimately linked to the transformation of Caribbean society.”

Discussions, as stakeholders meet over the next three days, must focus on how we can educate teachers so as to effect such transformation. Thus it is critical that participants should attempt to arrive at some common vision of the sort of people we are preparing teachers to become. It is to be expected that all the deliberations over the next three days will start with the question of how we define “the good teacher,” and will return to that issue repeatedly.

What, then, are some dimensions of “goodness” that might be considered? In the first place, clearly, there is the ethical and moral dimension. Whatever model or models of teacher education are proposed, one necessary outcome that must be catered for is the ability to produce teachers whose practice is informed by a strong desire to behave morally. Whether teachers are dealing with the grave issues of how to assert and use their positions of authority without abusing them, or apparently lesser issues like the decision about whether to come to class early or late, from moment to moment, teachers must make decisions about the “right” thing to do. Yet the right thing may not always be clear, or popular. We may need to ask, then, how programmes of teacher education might best incorporate learning experiences that will prepare teachers to make choices about what constitutes acceptable professional and, ultimately, ethical behaviour.

Another dimension of goodness is effectiveness. How can we change the content, structure, and delivery of the teacher education curriculum to ensure that teachers are prepared to facilitate effective student learning? And what criteria will we use to evaluate a teacher’s developing ability to deal with the complexities of a career as a teacher? Furthermore, what arrangements can we put in place to facilitate an ongoing process of teacher education, so that teachers can come to see themselves as lifelong learners? What multiple sites and multiple modes of delivery will make such a process possible?

One final dimension of the good teacher is empowerment. The notion of empowerment has been overused in recent times. Nonetheless, it must be accepted that part of being a good teacher is the willingness and the ability to make one’s voice heard, and to make a difference, both to one’s personal environment and to the system as a whole. There is no doubt that many injustices and inequities are experienced by teachers themselves, and by their students. If teachers are now expected to exercise leadership, then one necessary type of good leadership is what Thomas Sergiovanni (1990) calls “Leadership by Outrage.” The term refers to leaders’ willingness to care deeply and passionately about the school, and to be uncompromising in the effort to achieve excellence in the classroom.

We must deal, then, with the challenge of providing teacher education that helps teachers develop the sense of self-accountability that fuels such leadership by outrage. We must consider, too, what role they are allowed to play in their own governance, so as to give them the opportunity to practise it.

The symposium will need to address these issues as stakeholders deliberate over the next three days, and policy makers will need to listen carefully to what is said.

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