

Misunderstanding Teacher Education

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In Trinidad and Tobago, whenever professionals talk about teacher education, regardless of which level of the teaching profession they come from—classroom teacher to Ministry of Education officials—they focus only on the institutions of teacher education, that is, the two Teachers' Colleges and the School of Education at The University of the West Indies (UWI). This is a rather short-sighted approach.

The education of a teacher has to be approached as a systems problem, beginning with the education the teacher receives before entering the teaching profession. Teacher education has a pattern of interdependence with the system of schooling. If teachers have crammed formulae and facts to pass CXC examinations and acquire first degrees, then the task of preparing them to be teachers requires a whole new acculturation in educational values if they are to transform the system that produced them.

The preparation of the teacher has to be conceived as a lifelong process beginning with early education, recruitment, selection and orientation, pre-service education at the teacher education institutions, followed by arrangements for induction and continuous education while operating as a teacher in the school system.

The process of educating a teacher has to be conceptualised as one articulated process beginning in the schools and universities, and then continuing with institutions of initial teacher education. The policies and programmes adopted at each level have to synchronise with what takes place at other levels. This can only happen if all the agencies involved in teacher education know and accept their function, and share some common understandings about what it means to prepare a teacher to work in the school system of Trinidad and Tobago and the stages involved in such preparation.

This means that there are several sites of teacher education besides the Colleges and School of Education and, consequently, there is also a wide range of personnel involved in teacher education. Recruitment and selection must proceed with clear understandings of what is required of a teacher in Trinidad and Tobago. Teachers cannot be prepared with all the knowledge and competencies required for lifelong functioning as a teacher during the period of initial teacher education. Initial teacher education can only realistically prepare a teacher to function as an intelligent beginner.

As such, clear arrangements for in-service professional development must be put in place to facilitate the continued development of the teacher. If intelligent beginners are to continue to learn and develop, then Curriculum Officers, Supervisors, Heads of Departments, Principals, Vice-Principals, and School Boards all have to be conscious of their roles in the teacher education process.

The teacher who is newly trained enters the working situation with a range of ideas and understandings that she has to negotiate in the work environment. If the teacher functions as an isolate, and if the values and ideals learnt during the period of initial preparation are

not supported in the workplace, then the teacher is likely to be socialised by the demands of the working environment and may end up abandoning some of the principles and theories that were learnt during the period of initial education. Curriculum Officers, Supervisors, and all the school-based personnel have to be willing and competent to support and help the newly qualified teacher to continue to grow and learn. In-service programmes, which span the entire working life of the teacher, have to be put in place to continue the process of education that began at the teacher education institutions.

To concentrate only on the reform of the Teachers Colleges or School of Education, UWI, would be a woefully insufficient way of approaching reform of teacher education in Trinidad and Tobago.

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