

Teacher Performance in Trinidad and Tobago

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Teachers in Trinidad and Tobago have been variously described as caring, hard-working, and self-sacrificing, but they have also been perceived as mercenary and even criminal. In light of these varying perceptions, I sought to obtain scientific evidence of teachers' perceptions of their own performance and compared these to their principals' perceptions.

I defined teacher performance as the behaviour of persons who perform the functions required of teachers, particularly those activities that are concerned with the guidance or direction of the learning of others. This definition was further fine-tuned to measure performance in terms of efficacy (the confidence teachers have that they can get the job done and therefore make a difference), morale, teacher commitment to their schools, student learning, and professional development. I also tried to ascertain whether teachers worked because (a) teaching is interesting work, (b) of job security, (c) of promotion and opportunities for growth in the education system, (d) of good working conditions, or (e) of good salaries.

The data for the study were collected through interviews with 8 principals and questionnaires administered to 155 teachers in 8 secondary schools (traditional, junior secondary, and senior comprehensive) along the East-West corridor. Analysis of the data collected showed that, in descending order, secondary teachers in Trinidad and Tobago are motivated by: 1) opportunities for promotion and growth in the education system, 2) their perceptions of existing salaries, 3) their perceptions of existing working conditions, 4) their perceptions of job security, and 5) their beliefs on teaching as interesting work.

Teacher morale was found to be generally low in the secondary schools studied. Many teachers argued that this was a result of government policy, the leadership style of administrators in the Ministry of Education, and the school environment. Others felt that it was the result of the disappointment felt by teachers when some students failed to meet teachers' expectations with respect to academic achievement and acceptable behaviour.

Teacher commitment in terms of commitment to the school, student learning, and professional development was found to be moderately strong. These findings appear to be unusual and contradictory, because the research literature on commitment and morale argues that commitment is closely correlated with morale. In other words, once commitment is high, morale tends to be high. Among our teachers, it seemed that in spite of low morale, commitment seemed to be moderately high.

Teachers and principals did not agree on the state of teacher efficacy in the schools. Teachers believed that it was moderately high, while principals believed that it (a) varied among teachers, (b) was not as it should be, and (c) resided primarily among the more experienced and older teachers.

My own conclusion was that teacher performance in Trinidad and Tobago is moderately high, and that it is difficult to establish a direct link between teacher performance and (a)

teacher perceptions of the status of teaching as a career, and (b) the type of schools in which teachers work.

A major part of the debate on teacher performance in Trinidad and Tobago has been conducted on the issue of whether teachers in 'prestige' schools perform better than their counterparts in junior and senior comprehensive schools. Claims have been made that teachers in prestige schools appear to be more effective because of the impact of extra lessons and the fact that the more able students are assigned to these schools. However, the findings of this study have not indicated any meaningful difference among teachers in the various school types in terms of commitment, morale, and efficacy.

Whatever the issues raised, I am satisfied that teacher performance can be managed and enhanced. However, for this to be achieved in Trinidad and Tobago, more systematic and systemic attention will have to be paid to the socialising experiences, and the personal and occupational characteristics of applicants at the teacher recruitment stage. Also, continuous and ongoing staff development (based on need) would contribute considerably to greater efficacy and effectiveness among teachers. Efforts to develop teachers should include cultivating in them a better understanding of the link between the curriculum and (a) our survival as a people, (b) national development, and (c) social integration.

In addition, appropriate administrative structures, and effective recruiting and other relevant policies must be put in place. Greater professionalism must also be allowed to permeate the education system. Clearly, a new culture has to be developed--a culture in which teachers see professional development as an essential part of improving the education system, rather than only as an opportunity for promotion and increased remuneration.

The experience of several countries shows that effective teacher performance must be a team effort. Schools, therefore, will have to define visions, missions, and goals. Policies relating to how schools will be governed and relationships fostered will also have to be developed. Teachers should no longer be expected to operate in isolation. Educators must now preach the gospel of inclusiveness--an inclusiveness that ensures a place and role for all stakeholders. Parents, therefore, should not and cannot be marginalised. Teachers have to realize that, as important stakeholders, parents should be allowed to work with teachers to help determine their children's life chances.

Finally, TTUTA must continue to assume its mantle of leadership, and strive to set standards, chart new professional directions, and win public and official recognition for teachers.

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