

Supervision: Key to Educational Quality

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Within recent times there has been considerable discussion about the importance and relevance of quality education to the development of Trinidad and Tobago. Issues highlighted include the need for improved salaries and conditions of service for teachers, an expansion of the school construction programme, and curriculum reform. Unfortunately, these initiatives by themselves cannot lead to effective learning. They must be supported by the implementation of measures that can help to improve student achievement, and by the strengthening of systems for monitoring principal and teacher performance.

Experience has shown that academic achievement can be improved when clear and high performance standards are set in core subjects. In addition, research has revealed that learning is considerably enhanced when teachers have both extensive subject knowledge and effective teaching skills.

The results of studies on school effectiveness, combined with my own experience in the education system, have convinced me that strong principal instructional leadership is one of the factors responsible for effective teaching and meaningful learning in schools. Principals who exhibit this type of leadership understand that they have a responsibility to help teachers improve their practice. One way in which they can discharge this responsibility is through the practice of supervision.

Unfortunately, the history of educational supervision in Trinidad and Tobago has resulted a fairly negative image for this important process. However, it can be much more constructive and developmental in nature and process than our experience suggests. For example, it can be used to help us promote quality control, professional development, and teacher motivation. More specifically, it can be used to help monitor: 1) what our teachers and students actually do in the classroom, given overall school goals, knowledge of how children learn, and understandings of the structure of the subject matter to be taught; 2) actual learning outcomes; and 3) the need for remedial action to ensure deeper understanding of the teaching and learning process.

Supervision in schools may be of several types: clinical, developmental, collegial, individual, informal, and inquiry based. This article focuses on clinical supervision, which is primarily used to help teachers to become reflective and more effective practitioners. It also helps to create a culture of accountability, transparency, and professionalism in the school. It is generally agreed that clinical supervision can be effective only when it is guided by: 1) a sound philosophy of education, 2) a collegial relationship between supervisor and supervisee, 3) a genuine concern to improve teacher performance and school effectiveness, 4) an appreciation and understanding of effective teaching and meaningful learning, 5) sound strategies for teaching linked to effective and humane classroom management, and 6) relevant feedback.

While there are several approaches to clinical supervision, they all tend to be characterized by certain definite stages: 1) needs analysis, wherein the teacher's developmental needs are

mutually determined; 2) the pre-conference, during which both the supervisor and supervisee identify and discuss the areas for development and the strategies for action; 3) observation, which is used to observe how the teacher implements what was planned; and 4) post-conference, in which the entire exercise is reviewed so that the teacher can reflect on his/her performance.

Clinical supervision can be used alongside class checks by principals in our primary schools. Such an approach helps principals to inject greater meaning into the writing and implementation of forecast and records. It also helps teachers—particularly untrained and beginning teachers—to be more attentive to their practice.

In secondary schools, because of a greater number of teachers and a more varied curriculum, it may be more complicated for principals. While they must still be responsible for instructional leadership in their schools, they should allow their heads of department (HODs) to manage clinical supervision. HODs, in turn, should report regularly to the principal on the status of curriculum design, curriculum development, teaching, learning, and assessment in the school.

Another useful application of clinical supervision is to link it to performance management. Since performance appraisal and management will soon become a permanent feature in our schools, principals would be well advised to be proactive in seeking to determine how best to incorporate clinical supervision into the mix of administrative tools at their disposal.

A recent survey of primary and secondary schools, which I conducted, shows that clinical supervision is virtually non-existent in our schools. What exists is a type of inspection, which tends to highlight faults rather than develop teachers. In many instances, no form of accountability and transparency seems to prevail. This state of affairs is inimical to the promotion of quality education.

The research literature recommends that any action taken should involve culture creation. This culture creation should be characterized by perceptions that see the school as a learning organization in which individuals learn from their experiences or see mistakes, failure, and even surprises as learning opportunities; as well as a sanctuary for respect, warmth, and caring. This process should also be led by principals who: 1) at all times emphasise substance rather than process, articulate the need for effectiveness, bring divergent human resources together, inspire commitment, and induce extraordinary performance; 2) are committed to developing the leadership potential of their teachers; 3) provide teachers with the support and training they need to function autonomously; and 4) are always willing to provide their teams with the power and authority to accomplish what is considered important to and in the school.

It is clear that clinical supervision is one practice that principals cannot afford to dismiss lightly if they are to become more proactive in their instructional leadership and general performance management.

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