

## **School Places and Quality Education**

Raymond S. Hackett

Recent opinions expressed in the media suggest that some people are beginning to realise that over the past decades, national educational policy has not necessarily been in harmony with the needs and aspirations of all citizens. Since independence, successive governments have been obsessed with the provision of school places. Their vision for education seems to have been inspired by a compelling desire to create a continuous stream of additional school places. In fact, over the past four decades national elections seemed to have been fought (among other strategies) on the assumption that the more school buildings erected by an administration the more secure would be its tenure.

Our nation is now forty years old. We have had enough time to reflect on the direction being taken by our major institutions. Our politicians have been articulating interest in achieving “intelligent nation” and “developed nation” status by the year 2020. What is not as apparent is their strategy for achieving this.

I am assuming that no society can go forward unless it is propelled by its education system. However, I recognise that for any education system to be effective it must be well structured, guided by empirically based policies, and staffed at all levels with individuals who possess expert training and a sound philosophical base.

I will therefore begin with the very core of the Ministry of Education—the Central Office, the centre from which educational policies are directed. Effectiveness and efficiency of the administrative personnel there would be considerably enhanced with training in educational administration. Indeed, even personnel at the clerical level and in finance should be convinced of the importance of education to the society and should understand the need to work in tandem with personnel in the schools, guided by common objectives and performing interrelated functions. The understanding must be that when one component falters, it would activate a domino or ripple effect throughout the system. To avoid this, educational divisions should hold regular meetings with all parties responsible for the delivery of education. As a result, school needs would be monitored and addressed in a systematic and timely manner. Under no circumstances should politicians interfere with the day-to-day running of the ministry. Their functions should be restricted to ensuring that national educational policy is implemented.

Also, it must be emphasised that training and development should never take place in a vacuum, but should be preceded by needs analysis and manpower planning in order to ensure their effectiveness. This would enable us to ascertain the number of teachers, principals, and auxiliary personnel needed by the system within a specified time frame. This kind of planning would reduce the frequency with which we are bombarded with cries of teacher and other relevant personnel shortages.

Our teaching institutions too can play their part. For example, I believe that our teachers' colleges could substantially enhance their development of primary school teachers by placing more emphasis on such areas as curriculum design, teaching skills and methods,

the various learning theories, and methods of traditional and authentic assessment. In addition, they can add greater value to the good work they have been doing by ensuring that their graduates represent the colleges' ideal of the caring, effective, and efficacious teacher. Indeed, our teachers' colleges must continue to help our primary school teachers develop a strong commitment to student learning, their schools, and the nation.

Personnel in all teachers' colleges should also be upgraded with relevant training and development in their area of specialisation. It is also imperative that, with their enhanced professionalism and expertise, teacher educators receive remuneration consistent with their higher qualifications and responsibilities. Indeed, it is the professional staff of the teachers' colleges that will have to inform practice and new initiatives in our primary schools.

The School of Education, working in partnership with the primary schools and teacher colleges, should be seen as a centre of research for the education system. One of its major functions, therefore, should be to liaise with schools to offer guidance, approaches to best practice, and perspectives on action research. Indeed, the School of Education should see the injection of greater professionalism and the eradication of anti-intellectualism as major goals of its mission. This cannot be achieved without a strategic alliance among the Ministry of Education, the teachers' colleges, and the School of Education. Without this alliance, Trinidad and Tobago will not be able to generate the kind of energy and provide the necessary direction to launch the nation towards developed status. Further, such a partnership would ensure the development of a system manned by professionals who are familiar with national objectives, and who possess the required knowledge, skills, and philosophy for creating a culture of excellence and pride.

Personal research over the past five years and participation in the system over the past forty years have convinced me that our teachers must internalise an educational philosophy that could help to develop in them a commitment and fervour for seeing that their efforts in our schools substantially contribute to the national economy and society. Very often, our educators see themselves as simply part of the labour force in search of a decent pay package. They should instead see themselves as the conscience and creators of our society.

With respect to the emphasis placed by the political leadership on the mere construction of school buildings, I readily acknowledge that school buildings are a reflection of the society they are designed to serve, and that when they meet the users' needs, increased learning takes place. However, school places cannot and should not be the main reasons for erecting school buildings. The larger picture of human resource and national development at all times must be kept in mind. Finally, we cannot dismiss the views of those among us who believe and continue to argue that school buildings must be designed with the types of curriculum and technologies required to meet the demands of contemporary society.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine