

Teacher Professionalism in Trinidad and Tobago

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The role of teachers in the education process has been recognised for centuries. Roman history presented teachers only as slaves in the homes of wealthy Romans. The Dame School Model of teaching, as proposed by the English educator Beeby, promoted the view that teaching can be done by almost anyone. Even we in Trinidad and Tobago seem to have been perpetuating this view with our recruitment policies. However UNESCO, through a number of conferences over the past decades on the status and role of the teacher, has done quite a lot to dispel this conception of teachers.

Fortunately, these efforts seem to be taking root in our society. Salaries of teachers now compare to a great extent with those of other occupational groups. However, much more can be done to improve the working conditions and work environment of our teachers. Despite this, teachers now need to see themselves as human resource developers. Unfortunately, this transformation cannot take place in the context of present professional development programmes for teachers.

A number of flaws exist in our approach to teacher training and development. We have allowed a culture of certification to prevail among our teachers, resulting in anyone with the required qualifications being able to become a teacher, without reference to temperament or aptitude. When teachers go to “college” the emphasis seems to be only on textbook theory, despite talk about reflective practice. Who really has time to reflect?

At university, the emphasis is on “beating” books for a degree. Even students at the School of Education appear susceptible to this certification trap. As a result, few are disposed to seeing the knowledge obtained from their books and lectures as levers to solve national and regional problems.

When teachers return to the classroom after professional development workshops, how do they perform? Do they ensure that: 1) children of all abilities learn and that the organisation of the school supports this learning, 2) children develop socially within a secure and supportive environment, and 3) children are allowed time and space to be able to manipulate their physical world?

More often than not teachers enter and return to schools where no induction and mentoring systems exist to help them cope or gain their footing in what is now increasingly becoming a turbulent environment. Local evidence suggests that both instructional and transformational leadership are lacking. Some local analysts suggest that this may be the result of the traditional and ill-conceived practice of appointing principals only on the basis of seniority. They argue that to be effective, leaders must have rational perceptions on how their jobs should be done.

Clearly, greater and more expert attention to policy formulation and implementation is needed. Indeed, we will create and sustain greater professionalism among our teachers

and generate greater morale, motivation, teacher commitment, and teacher efficacy in the education sector only when: 1) TUTTA, the Ministry of Education, and school administrators begin to see teachers as autonomous and empowered professionals; 2) the Ministry of Education pays more attention to the principles and process of human resource management; and 3) the Ministry of Education approaches professional development for teachers and the creation of healthy school cultures more seriously. Unless we as teachers clearly understand our roles in the education process in particular and national development in general; unless we view our jobs as vocations to be pursued with passion and efficacy, professionalism in the education sector will continue to be elusive.

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