

Improving our Schools

Raymond S. Hackett

Consensus among effective school researchers sees transformational leadership, a focused mission, and positive communication as important to the creation of good schools. Unfortunately, many of our principals and teachers have failed to buy into this consensus.

Perhaps this may be one of the reasons why so many of our schools now seem to be in such disarray. Another reason may be that the Ministry has not been successful in establishing a thoroughly systematic approach to professional development.

The School of Education was contracted by the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago under the Fourth Basic Education Project to provide training in educational leadership for administrators and senior teachers in primary schools.

From the outset, in 1998, some principals did not seem to have a full appreciation for the pivotal roles they would have to play in ensuring the success, at the school level, of this initiative. After all, this was an investment in the improvement of their schools, as a means of ultimately reforming the system as a whole. Unfortunately, this lack of appreciation affected the visioning and other processes in their schools, where the collegial and collaborative blending of voice and vision was not actively encouraged. It was expected that they would give their blessings and promote, at least, a tolerable level of cooperation.

Six years later, therefore, some barriers to the improvement process remain intact. Rather than see this aspect of the reform, which is called "the School Improvement Practicum" as an attempt to create more effective schools in Trinidad and Tobago, and as an attempt to improve cultures to meet the imperatives of the times, some school principals and colleagues of trainees are still reluctant to embrace this opportunity for transformation and view it almost as a threat. They do not see their fellow teachers in training as collegial change agents who will help all in the school to perform more efficiently and effectively.

More discouraging is the disturbing reports from current trainees, that some of the graduates of the programme of training now see themselves as having attained the position in which they can now withhold their support to teachers now involved in the practicum and to "get even" as it were. This is an issue that we are continuing to address in all areas of action research in our current programming. However, it has raised some important questions about the way in which trainees were selected and/or recruited under the scholarship programme, the criteria used for promotions to the principalship, and the performance appraisal system itself.

Against the background of what I have described above, it is my burning desire to see the Ministry of Education and the School of Education form a strategic alliance to bring about more effective school reform. This can be easily done through properly supported

school improvement projects like those now conducted by the School of Education. Every attempt must be made by the Ministry and School of Education to have principals and teachers see success in this endeavour as critical to the effectiveness of the education sector.

Also, it should be realized that in today's world, action research is critical. The School Improvement Practicum, therefore, can serve as an excellent instrument of educational research. Through it we can discover many of our flaws, address many of our problems, and introduce most of our educational innovations.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine