

Good Principalship

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History has repeatedly confirmed that human societies cannot develop as they should in the absence of effective leadership. A 1997 World Bank publication reinforced this view with the declaration that good government is not a luxury, but a vital necessity for development. A case in point is school governance in Trinidad and Tobago—especially against the background of increasing concerns about the ills of our education system.

While I recognise that there can be no one reason to explain why an education system is not as effective as it should be, I believe that leadership has a critical role to play in this regard. This is especially so with respect to the principalship in our schools.

The leadership to which I refer is the process of influencing team members and stakeholders through the use of benevolent power. Indeed, the principal must address the attitudes, values, and motivations of the relevant Ministry of Education officials, school board members, and professional and support staff who have their own ideas of school governance, teaching, and learning. This leadership must be about engaging in decentralised and shared decision making. In other words, I am calling for democratic and transformational leadership in our schools. This demands principals who, although they generally ask staff members to follow rules and procedures, tend to display some concern for the expectations of their teachers and support staff and, as a result, try to promote development, flexibility, autonomy, and collaborative decision making in their schools.

The issue now must be with how we select and develop such principals. Whatever we do; however we wish to do it, it is critical that we cultivate some consciousness about certain basic functions of the principalship in our principals. It is also important for us to develop some crucial abilities in them. Unless we do this, like a ship caught in the grip of a hurricane, our education system will continue to flounder.

To my mind, we must produce principals who see competence in the following as critical and integral to effective leadership and management in our schools: 1) helping to formulate and promote a shared vision for the school; 2) deploying staff strategically and collaboratively; 3) facilitating instructional improvement; 4) curriculum design and development; 5) student pastoral services; 6) resource procurement; 7) developing a network of relationships—both internally and externally; 8) allocating resources consistent with the vision of the school; 9) extending the resource base of the school; and 10) promoting teacher development and preparation.

The old debate—that teachers are born and not made, which has raged over centuries, is also relevant to the present discussion. I have found that training is not a sufficient condition for preparing principals in our schools. Ideology, aptitude, and personality must also be important. Therefore, qualifications alone cannot be all in selecting principals. As I see it, candidates who offer themselves for the post of principal must demonstrate certain abilities among which should be included: 1) the ability to plan and organise

work, 2) the ability to work with and lead others, 3) the ability to analyse problems and make decisions, 4) the ability to communicate orally and in writing, 5) the ability to perceive the needs and concerns of others, and 6) the ability to perform under pressure.

Taking all of the above into consideration, I believe that persons who do not possess a clear philosophy of education, and who have no knowledge of either human resource and school-based management or instructional leadership and clinical supervision, or an understanding of facility and risk management, should not be promoted to the level of principal in our education system.

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