

Professional Development and Schooling

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Educators worldwide are increasingly asking whether professional development is contributing to improved teaching practice and, by extension, improved school performance and student academic achievement. According to the literature, professional development should help to enhance our practice and increase our orientation to innovation.

Several schools of thought exist as to what professional development is. The National Commission on Teaching & America's Future has produced a description, which has become acceptable to all. It sees professional development as the provision of ongoing learning opportunities to teachers and other education personnel by their schools and districts, and believes that it is increasingly vital to school success and teacher satisfaction.

Those of us who wish to embrace current trends in professional development must develop a new mindset and be prepared to engage in bold and purposeful action. This includes: 1) increasing awareness among the decision makers in the Ministry of Education, as well as among educational leaders, teachers, and the general public about the need for quality staff development; 2) reviewing policies and incentives that shape staff development, and determining what changes may be needed to support educational reform; 3) setting standards and priorities for the design, conduct, and content of professional development; 4) increasing the time available (without disrupting student learning in schools) for teacher interaction and ongoing staff development; 5) supporting the adoption of promising approaches to professional development; and 6) making greater use of outstanding teachers in staff development activities.

In addition, we have to recognise and be ready to overcome the three fundamental challenges that have emerged in the 21st century: 1) meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student population—diverse in the sense that students in today's world bring diverse histories and cultural perspectives, new patterns of experience and expectations, and diverse styles and approaches to learning and organising information; 2) adopting new and more appropriate goals for schooling; and 3) implementing and working in new organizational contexts.

The Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers' Association (TTUTA) demonstrated this awareness of the importance of professional development in its choice of theme for its Professional Day on October 14, 2005, *Professional Development: A Shared Responsibility*. TTUTA emphasised that teacher professional development must be seen as a shared responsibility—a responsibility to which all must be committed and which can only be ignored at the risk of creating societal problems for all.

Critical to all of this is the role of the Ministry of Education, which has to deliver in such way that our schools can continue unhindered with the business of schooling. This suggests, among other things, that future professional development activities will have to

be conducted at times when time on task in schools will not be affected. The Ministry also needs to pay greater attention to how schools develop programmes of instruction for meeting the needs of their students. It also means that professional development sessions for improving teaching strategies, classroom management, perceptions of how students learn, and assessment procedures must be introduced and sustained on an ongoing basis. To my mind, these sessions are best run on a school-by-school basis or on-site. Participation by all, then, becomes compulsory.

We may ask ourselves the following complex question: If the relentless march of turbulent global forces is forcing the need for school improvement on us; if school improvement results from the need for change; if there must be something to initiate this change, what other than inclusive professional development can activate this desired change?

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