

Schools, Leadership, and Good Citizens

Raymond S. Hackett

Increasingly, we in Trinidad and Tobago have been hearing and reading about, and even witnessing, the increasing incidence of violent crime, declining productivity, and indifference to the need to establish a strong, social, multicultural, and ethical base in our society. Some of us, driven by frustration, have openly blamed the present political directorate for these unfortunate events. Unfortunately, there can be no simple explanations.

According to writers on matters of education and civil society, we cannot discuss issues related to the socialisation of good citizens without referring to the nature of effective schools. Indeed, the accepted view in modern western societies is that societies should strive to inculcate the following in graduates of their educational institutions: integrity, ethical behaviour, and a profound sense of justice; a passionate propensity for caring for fellow human beings; patriotism and nationalism; a desire to be not only consumers but also, more importantly, producers dedicated to innovation, creativity, inventions, and the exploration of change; a high work ethic; and an ability to think critically and resolve conflict rationally.

Confronted by these formidable imperatives for good citizenship, we should now reflect on whether we should continue to hope that leadership in our schools emerges as a matter of course and not by design. Informed opinion insists that school leadership has a significant effect on student achievement and, by extension, good citizenship. Guided by dynamic leadership, schools are now mandated to produce for us the best among the intellectuals in the world, the most humane people, the best in culture and the arts, and, of course, the best on the sports fields of the world.

To achieve these goals, however, our Ministry of Education, the Teaching Service Commission, and our leadership preparation institutions must ensure that individuals with the right values, skills, competencies, and personalities are installed in our primary, secondary, post-secondary, and tertiary organizations. Our education leaders must recognise that their responsibility is complex and multi-dimensional, and rooted less in technical expertise than in simple human integrity.

Personal observation of the appointment of principals to primary and secondary schools in the English-speaking Caribbean has convinced me that the powers responsible for appointing and confirming leaders in schools seem to have done so on the basis of such inappropriate criteria as seniority, length of service, a “good interview,” political “contact,” and even church affiliation and attendance. The time has definitely come for us to recognise that more valid and appropriate criteria must be applied, if we wish to avoid the crisis in leadership that is now strangling so many of our schools.

For decades, our teachers’ colleges have been preparing teachers for the primary school, but not principals, vice-principals, heads of department, and senior teachers. From 1997 to 2003, the School of Education, UWI and the Ministry of Education collaborated to

spearhead a five-year World Bank-funded Bachelor of Education (B.Ed., Administration) project to produce qualified primary school administrators. However, all the graduates of this project have not been appointed to leadership positions in our schools, since the project was not reinforced by changes in the emphasis on seniority in the appointment of administrators in our primary schools

At the secondary level, leaders are currently prepared by way of a postgraduate Diploma in Education (Dip.Ed.) and a Master of Education (M.Ed., Leadership) degree—an initiative under the Secondary Education Modernization (SEMP) programme—offered by the School of Education. As at the primary level, these programmes are not fully supported by mechanisms that favour training over seniority.

Clearly, if we wish to build a strong, cohesive, productive, and caring society, much more attention will have to be paid to the quality of leadership in our schools. Also, we will have to establish a satisfactory method for admitting prospective students of educational leadership into our training and development programmes.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine