

Preparing Quality Teachers

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Once again, calls are emerging for reform of the education system. This time, the focus is on the need to revisit teacher education. Our society has experienced several waves of teacher education initiatives. Our colonial masters and several religious denominations, in keeping with their respective ideologies, are on record as having attempted to improve the work and performance of teachers. Indeed, teacher education today owes its status to the legacy left behind by these attempts. More recently, our former teachers' colleges were brought into the fold of our latest university—the University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT). However, one wonders whether this change will result in the cadre of teachers Trinidad and Tobago so desperately needs to help with national development and to cope with the imperatives of a knowledge-based economy. This is certainly an area requiring continuing research and reform.

We are not the only nation facing such a dilemma. The USA—a country known for prolific research and debates on educational matters—continues to experiment and reflect on how to upgrade its human resources. Recently, writers in the UK have been lamenting that the time has come for schools to help students to develop social graces. Japan persists with educational reform to help its students develop a greater sense of national identity and to overcome the sense of powerlessness and hopelessness that is beginning to envelop its students.

There is consensus in the literature that approaches to teacher education are flawed, since teachers' colleges and faculties of education—particularly in the USA—have failed to recognise that teachers have to be more than technicians to be effective. It is argued that it is difficult to make teachers human resource developers. Most writers report that good teachers and good administrators must be encouraged to internalise a philosophical base before they are taught theories and content related to curriculum implementation. Others remind us that teachers and administrators cannot be effective without understanding the setting and environment in which they must operate. These arguments suggest that teachers must be more than technicians; that they must be intellectuals and researchers engaging in action research—a technique that practitioners can use to monitor and evaluate their practice on a continuous basis, and to try out new strategies that have been informed by reflection on the evaluation of their practice.

Both the School of Education of The University of the West Indies (UWI) and UTT have indicated their commitment to producing quality teachers for the nation. This is not an easy task. Knowledgeable researchers worldwide have been insisting that teacher education can be effective only if schools of education and teachers' colleges establish strong links with schools on an ongoing basis. In addition, they argue that teacher education programmes must get teachers to (a) see themselves as central to student learning; (b) focus on individual, collegial, and organisational improvement; and (c) see the need to reach out to parents for the good of the children. Perhaps what may be more compelling for us in Trinidad and Tobago is the view that teacher education institutions

must recognise the need for strengthening the institutional framework of education systems and that their programming must be driven by a coherent and long-term plan.

Clearly, there are lessons for Trinidad and Tobago emerging from current trends and debates on teacher education, especially because of developments now taking place in our society—the increasing evidence of aimlessness among many of our youth, particularly among our boys; the embarrassing brigade of illiterate secondary school graduates; the rapid decline of morality; and the exponential explosion of violence and delinquency in schools—and the apparent difficulty experienced by some of our teachers in understanding their importance and role in national development.

Our school system needs a cadre of teachers who understand and are ready to respond to the imperatives of the information age as they relate to Trinidad and Tobago. Unfortunately, such a cadre can only emerge if the Ministry of Education, our teacher preparation institutions, the teachers' union and other teacher and administrator bodies, the National Parent Teachers' Association (NPTA), trade unions, and the Chamber of Commerce and other employer associations agree to come together to form a permanent think-tank for promoting teacher quality.

We must believe that teacher education cannot be conducted in a vacuum or be isolationist; that it is everybody's business and must be appreciated by all. We must recognize that teacher preparation is more about creating professionals driven by commitment, accountability, and passion than about certifying a group of individuals who seek employment as teachers.

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