

Increasing Educational Effectiveness

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In Trinidad and Tobago, we continually boast about how well our graduates perform in international examinations. But can we now say that our students are among the best socially adjusted and disciplined international students? Also, do we have statistics to prove that our young workforce has been found to be imbued with a laudable work ethic? Or have our students simply become masters of the art of preparing for examinations?

I am aware that our system may be so elitist that even the weaker ones [according to our standards] tend to do well in systems that essentially cater for the average student [as we have seen happening with many of our students who go to the United States].

Without doubt, our education system has made tremendous strides. Whereas in 1959 we had only a limited number of secondary schools, we can now point to many different secondary school types in the system. Whereas parents, like my parents, had to pay for the secondary education of their children, today's students can now access universal secondary education.

However, it can be argued that for all the money spent on education, and in spite of the phenomenal growth in school places, the country has not received value for money. The question to be asked therefore is: Where have we gone wrong with education, or what have we failed to do that we have found ourselves in such deep crisis?

Consider some of our problems: 1) We seem unable to cultivate in our educators, administrators, teachers, and students a vision and ideology that can help the nation rise to an optimum level of societal effectiveness; 2) We still have situations where teachers, with impunity, refuse to attend staff development sessions, which are so critical to their teaching effectiveness; 3) While we focus on building more schools and providing more technology to these schools, the institutional framework for education—performance appraisal and management, revising financial regulations for improving school governance, revamping regulations and procedures to enhance the development of our administrators and teachers, and promoting an ideology of purposefulness among our students—remains flawed; and 4) We continue to have problems with recruiting and selecting appropriate administrators and teachers. Indeed, we are still too preoccupied with certification and with how applicants perform in interviews. How much longer should we wait for a system that also considers the applicant's track record and psychological profile?

Clearly the quality of our education system is far from acceptable. Yes, the Ministry of Education has been trying, but, according to one prominent writer, effective schools do not just happen; they are caused to emerge.

So what can we do to increase effectiveness in our system? First, both we ourselves and our organisations will have to change. Departments in the Ministry of Education and schools will have to engage in organisational development, renewal, and restructuring. As

individuals, we will have to change our work ethic, our attitudes to professional development, and our beliefs on national development and social solidarity.

Also, the time has come for the Ministry of Education to establish strategic alliances with industry, and other relevant agencies and ministries, in order to produce and implement an action plan for preparing secondary students—our nation’s future human resources. Indeed, it has now become necessary for us to forge ahead with quality plans, leaders, and citizens to meet the imperatives of globalisation, the knowledge society, and the knowledge economy. Unfortunately, little will be achieved if our principals and teachers ignore the importance of collaborating with the communities in which they work.

We have to ensure that we understand the attributes of quality teachers. Particularly among our young, teaching cannot be just a job from which we enjoy a salary. It has to be tied to human resource development and national development. Indeed, teaching cannot be for transients and mercenaries. It must be a vocation, which attracts missionaries in education.

We need highly qualified teachers who: 1) know their subject area or content well, 2) know how to help students learn, 3) connect students’ learning to their lives and experiences, 4) involve students’ families and communities, 5) take student learning outcomes into consideration and adjust their teaching to increase the prospects for learning and to decrease the chances for failure, 6) respect students and care about their learning, and 7) seek and access new knowledge.

The Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers’ Association (TTUTA), of course, cannot be left out. TTUTA has to ensure that all citizens receive their due from the education and training sector. Indeed, TTUTA must never forget that its main responsibility is to ensure that teachers constantly manifest the three Cs of commitment—commitment to their schools, commitment to student learning, and commitment to their own professional development.

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