

Lessons from Ecuador

Raymond S. Hackett

As the world marches forward in this 21st century, educational issues worldwide are increasingly emerging to occupy centre stage. In Trinidad and Tobago, we have come to believe that we have hydra-headed problems in the education system. Therefore, it is easy to imagine how surprised Mr. Roustan Job, Third Vice-President of the Caribbean Union of Teachers, and I were to discover that, to a great extent, our education problems are almost insignificant in comparison to what has been taking place in Latin America.

At the Second Ecuadorian Congress of Public Education (April 23–27), we were apprised of some major industrial relations issues that plague such countries as Mexico, Brazil, Peru, Argentina, Costa Rica, and Bolivia. These include the need for more public funding for education, security of tenure, increased salaries, and better pensions for teachers.

In addition to the Congress sessions, we had to participate in sessions geared to the strengthening of a Latin American researchers' network. From the latter, we identified the following as the main controversial reform issues in most of the countries mentioned above: 1) decentralisation; 2) the quality of education provided for the masses; 3) the nature and trend of teacher development; 4) the impact of standardised evaluation and assessment on education systems in general, and on students of lower socio-economic groupings in particular; 5) the negative impact of privatisation in the education sector on lower socio-economic groupings; 6) the adverse impacts of trade agreements on education; and 7) the role of neo-liberalism in weakening education systems in the hemisphere.

Perhaps what was of greater concern to us was the perception of our Latin American counterparts that governments in the region did not seem to care about, or wish to address, the ravages that inflation is wrecking on workers in the education sector. Another cause for concern was the risk to the lives of trade union activists in the region. We were briefed on trade union officers who had been jailed or even killed in pursuit of better conditions for teachers.

While in Trinidad and Tobago we are demanding that the pace of decentralisation be quickened, teacher unions in Latin America are openly condemning decentralisation, which they argue is ultimately a vehicle that governments can use to abdicate their responsibility for public education. Advocates also believe that decentralisation is the gateway for promoting and consolidating privatised education systems.

With respect to the quality of the education system and professional teacher development, the unanimous cry was for governments to bring respective education systems in line with the demands of the information age. According to proponents, the world is increasingly and rapidly changing, and unless education systems and, by extension, teachers are prepared, the human resource in individual Latin American states would be ill prepared to cope with the imperatives of the times.

As indicated above, standardised evaluation and assessment are causing great disquiet among teacher unions. Many claim that such an approach is not democratic and cannot be in the best interest of students, since it does not seem to take into consideration student individual differences, socio-economic status, and cultural differences among students, schools, education districts, and countries.

When we informed fellow delegates of the progress being made in education in Trinidad and Tobago, they laughed and insisted that we in the Caribbean are products of neo-liberalism—the new political and economic ideology that has replaced Keynesian economics. They also submitted that neo-liberalism could easily cause our political directorate and education policy makers to make disastrous decisions.

If we should take the advice and complaints from Ecuador seriously, the road forward for us is clear. Not only must we shout about a system in crisis, but we must also determine the extent to which the following are working against us: 1) foreign funding of national education projects, 2) decentralisation, 3) standardised testing and assessment, 4) the increasingly rapid emergence of private educational institutions in our society, and 5) the rise of new teacher preparation institutions in the country.

Some critics of neo-liberalism are openly declaring that we have not been giving a good account of our stewardship when negotiating trade agreements, and that we are naively allowing the proponents of neo-liberalism to negatively affect or undermine the effectiveness of the structures and policies of our education system that have been created over time. They also believe that more attention should be paid to the extent to which we develop new curricula and systems to help our young people cope with contemporary civilization.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine