

Power From the Teachers

Raymond S. Hackett

Friday, May 26, 2007 may be described as a historic day for the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers' Association (TTUTA). Never in the history of this teachers' organisation have so many teachers rallied around their union in the struggle for increased salaries. Teachers came to Port of Spain from the south, east, and Tobago to join their colleagues from the west and the north of the country.

This solidarity carries deeper implications than a mere assembly of teachers. It suggests the development of a new cadre of teachers with a different psyche and value system. Increasingly, the ideology of the traditional school master is disappearing. Trinidad and Tobago now has to negotiate with a body of teachers who no longer see themselves as second-class workers, but as creators of all occupations in the society. The new cry is, "How can we who create all other professions and occupations be paid less? What value is placed on our intellectual property and rights or skills?"

Our teachers may have a point. They have a right to struggle and seek justice. However, I maintain that to whom much is given much is expected. Yes! Teachers deserve better. However, teachers—all of them and not just those missionaries who work themselves to the bone—must be made accountable for the work they perform in schools. The public must also recognise and appreciate this work.

As an educator who helps to develop teachers and who interacts very closely with them in schools, I am pained by the substantial number of teachers who report to work totally oblivious to their responsibility to the nation. I can identify many who lack commitment to their schools, their students, and even to their own professional development. Many among these teachers operate as mere technicians and certainly not as intellectuals. In no way do they demonstrate the necessary conviction, commitment, passion, and pride that characterise true professionals. A classic example is their deliberate absence on staff development days.

Another example of the way in which teachers do not rise to the status of professionals can be found in the fact that few consider themselves as human resource developers who see education as tied to national development.

If we really wish to prepare our youths for the demands of globalisation we will have to start creating a more dynamic perspective on education. We will have to see education as the engine that drives change in the society. This means more enlightened policy makers, TTUTA and Public Service Association (PSA) leaders, parents, teachers, educational administrators, and support staff. Teachers and principals are particularly significant in this context. Certainly, new strategies must be developed for recruiting and retaining the right individuals with the right personality, philosophy, perceptions of the job, aptitude, and attitude.

It must be understood that not all teachers in our education system are delinquent. Instead of saying that the delinquent teachers are bad, it may be better to say that many of them do not know how to be good. The question to be answered now is how can they be made to understand how to be good? This can be done in a number of ways. As already implied above, developing good teachers starts with appropriate and scientific recruitment, selection, and relevant teacher preparation.

Very often teachers—especially beginning teachers—are products of the school cultures in which they find themselves. As a result, their performance can only be a reflection of the beliefs and practices that prevail in the school. School cultures, however, are extremely complex entities made up of many forces. In this context leadership cannot be ignored. Many of our schools today are victims of poor, laissez-faire, and uninformed leadership. The Ministry of Education, the Teaching Service Commission, and the various denominational boards need to engage in a collective and revolutionary review of how principals are selected. If education is to be saved, this process must be activated sooner rather than later.

If we agree with Alvin Toffler that too many nations tend to solve modern-day problems with tried and tested solutions rather than revolutionary solutions, then the time has come for our policy makers to re-conceptualise and re-engineer the organisational structure of the Ministry of Education and its educational institutions. Above all, it is of paramount importance that we review and modify the Education Act and the Public Service regulations, simultaneously introducing a performance management and appraisal system. Yes! These measures can help to provide effective teachers.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine