

Change in Primary Education

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Change is inevitable. According to one writer on educational change, “No sooner do we seem to have implemented one set of changes than another set is winging its way to us.... Change is a means to achieve progress; if we want [our schools] to progress..., then new procedures, ideas, etc. have to be put in place.”

Trinidad and Tobago, therefore, cannot be faulted for its determination and attempts at keeping up with the tide of change that seems to be sweeping the global educational landscape. We have perhaps been achieving more than many other Third World countries.

All, however, may not be necessarily well. Indeed, I wonder if we, in our crusade for change, have ever really considered the views of those writers who have been cautioning us in a number of ways. For example, Belasco (1990) argued that change is not something pursued solely for its own purposes; that it is a process and not a product. Two others, Kowalski and Reitzug (1993), believed that change is a medium for adaptation; that it may be beneficial or harmful; that it can be short-lived or permanent; that it can be rapid or gradual; that it can be planned or unexpected.

I draw attention to all of the above simply because I want to share my interest in the dynamics of some changes that have taken place in our education sector within recent times. More specifically, I refer to the introduction of heads of department, senior teachers, and administrative assistants in our primary schools. First of all, I wish to endorse Belasco’s view that change cannot be something pursued solely for its own purposes. Further, I want to agree with both Kowalski and Reitzug that change has to be a medium for adaptation; that it has to be permanent in an ongoing sense.

For me, therefore, educational change in Trinidad and Tobago should be pursued in response to imperatives in the wider societal and global environment, which demand a higher level of quality and efficacy in our education system. Therefore, any new structure or structures must contribute to these goals.

The question then is: To what extent will administrative assistants, heads of department, and senior teachers generate greater professionalism, effectiveness, and efficacy in our primary schools.

From my reading of the literature on school effectiveness and school improvement, I have absolutely no doubt that these personnel can play an invaluable role in generating school effectiveness and school improvement in our primary schools. In addition, I believe that strategically placed heads of department and senior teachers could substantially enhance teacher performance as well.

Unfortunately, what the evidence so far reveals is only the introduction of new posts, without a corresponding philosophy to give direction and conviction to the initiative. Where administrative assistants should operate as corporate secretaries and the

administrative lifeblood of schools, too many principals still appear to be unsure about how to effectively use them. In some schools, they are present, but without computers and other relevant equipment. How can they function under such conditions? In most cases (if not all), they are not trained and are simply thrown into the arena. Clearly, the administrative assistants need permanent posts (for which they should be well trained). In addition, they must understand their roles in the school and have an appreciation for the school as a learning organisation and a centre for moulding our students and motivating our teachers. Indeed, both principals and teachers should be able to expect administrative support from administrative assistants—particularly with respect to serving as secretaries at staff meetings and helping in the preparation of correspondence and statistics for the Ministry of Education and other relevant individuals and entities.

As for heads of departments and senior teachers, they are, together with the principal, instructional leaders. Heads of departments and senior teachers who teach classes must also be model or master teachers. They should be the very essence of best practice in the schools. Given this reality, the principal, vice-principal, heads of department, and senior teachers, where they exist, should form the management team of the school. Under no circumstances should a principal be encouraged to operate without them. Close collaboration should be mandatory for principals and senior teachers in schools with senior teachers.

Without doubt, the time has come for the new structures in our schools to ensure greater organisational performance, enhanced professionalism, and increased student learning. We cannot encourage change for change sake.

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