

Enhancing Teacher Quality

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Many people in Trinidad and Tobago believe that our education system is in crisis. However, none of the attempts at identifying the causes and nature of this perceived crisis have been able to provide persuasive explanations of what exactly is wrong with the system. My reading of the research literature and my own insight into the system have convinced that there are many factors responsible for the ills of our education system. These include the nature of teacher quality, the values parents pass on to their children, and the role models provided by adults in general and our “heroes“ and authority figures in particular. My concern in this article, however, will be with teacher quality.

I do not doubt for one moment that Trinidad and Tobago has had a long tradition of excellent teachers. Nonetheless, I insist that whether in Trinidad and Tobago or in any developed nation, there will always be room for improvement with respect to teacher quality because of the rapid changes in modern society.

Given these realities, it should not be difficult to understand that if our education system is to move out of crisis, our teachers must be ready and empowered to respond to the demands of the times. This can happen only if the Ministry of Education provides the necessary policies and structures for ensuring quality assurance and the type of teacher preparation that guarantees teacher quality in the system.

I recognise, of course, that teacher quality is a complex attribute. Other writers are also aware of this fact. For example, some believe that it can be enhanced when teachers are made to understand that they should take seriously and professionally what they should teach and the knowledge they should impart. Others argue that it is the type of training and qualifications teachers possess that determine their quality. Summing up existing arguments, Jennifer Rice, a respected and prolific writer on teacher quality, submits that teacher quality can improve by: 1) enhancing teacher preparation and qualifications, which can help make more effective certification, induction, mentoring, and ongoing professional development in schools; and 2) encouraging better teaching practices in classrooms.

I endorse the consensus in the literature that sees teacher quality as the most important schooling factor predicting student outcomes today. As a result, I believe that education reform in Trinidad and Tobago which does not understand the importance of teacher quality may make system and school improvement initiatives ineffective. I also submit that teacher quality can assume greater value (other things being equal) if teachers are encouraged to develop a sound philosophical base, a comprehensive grasp of their subject-area, strong pedagogical skills, and a profound understanding of the internal and external school setting.

These dimensions of teacher quality, unfortunately, cannot materialise from or in a vacuum. Participant experience in the system and literature searches have persuaded me that desirable teacher quality in Trinidad and Tobago can be introduced into the system,

and sustained, only if the relevant authority and agencies deliberately engage in effective recruiting, teacher preparation, ongoing professional development, promoting a supportive work environment, and improving the institutional framework of the education system of Trinidad and Tobago.

Against this background, I now declare that the time has come (if not passed) for the Ministry of Education to focus more on ensuring enhanced teacher quality in our schools. As we have already seen, this move begins with more effective recruiting, followed by more meaningful and scientific teacher development, and reinforced by a stronger and more rational supportive work environment, and the institutional framework in the education sector. Of course, that complex and critical factor of principal, vice-principal, head of department, and senior teacher leadership will always loom large.

If we in Trinidad and Tobago wish to enhance student academic achievement and student behaviour in our schools, we cannot do so only by advertising eye-catching Ministry of Education plans, or by building more schools, or even by creating a new approach to teacher development. Instead, we have to develop a philosophy of education that takes into consideration where we are now, where we have to go to ensure a reliable and efficient flow of human resources, and also to make available sound educational policies and structures to chart the way ahead.

We have to do more to take education forward. We cannot continue on the path we have been travelling for the past three decades. The world is changing and so must our strategies for education.

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