

Quo Vadis, My Teacher?

Raymond S. Hackett

Friday, October 10, 2008 registered yet another event in the history of the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers' Association (TTUTA). Teachers in both Trinidad and Tobago assembled in their respective educational districts to promote the theme for Teachers' Professional Day, "Teachers matter for a better world." As one of the feature speakers for 2008, as I have been since 2000, I cannot comfortably state that most of our teachers have been able to truly understand TTUTA's motive for promoting such an event. Indeed, I often wonder how many recognise that TTUTA's main objectives have essentially been to facilitate the professional growth of teachers, and to imbue them with new energy and an updated mission to carry on the very important business of teaching.

In spite of our rich history in education, most of our teachers have developed only into excellent technicians of pedagogy. Few have bothered to engage in profound philosophical thought about teaching and education. Indeed, few have dared to approach education from an intellectual standpoint. Too many teachers still see teaching mainly as a task to prepare our children for examination success.

As I understand it, forward thinking educators in Trinidad and Tobago, as well as those in the rest of the English-speaking Caribbean, have not been able to fully convince our teachers that their performance and their roles are critical to national development and, consequently, crucial to our position in the race for hegemony in the globalised world. I am also convinced that our teachers do not passionately believe that they have a part to play in helping the youth of our societies embrace an ideology of purposefulness, which can cultivate in them a "hope for tomorrow;" a love for country; a work ethic that can impact positively on our societies and economies; a sense of pride in community, society, and region; and a concern for fellow citizens and Caribbean neighbours.

Indeed, I am not sure that our teachers understand that a prime aspect of their jobs is to imbue our young people with this sense of hope. I even wonder if teachers ever reflect on whether it may be because of our failure to promote hope and to inspire that many of our young people have become deprived and victims of our underground economy.

When asked what she thought of TTUTA's Professional Day agenda over the past decade, one principal told me that she saw this day as an opportunity to meet and interact with people she had not seen for the past year. She was surprised that I saw the day as a starting point for ongoing reflection and future discussion for staff in our schools. For example, one aspect of my address on the 2008 Professional Day was that teachers have many roles to play; that they do not exist simply to teach. I insisted that teachers must embrace such key roles as leader, counsellor, manager, tutor, team member, and human resource developer. I also submitted that, as far as possible, teachers in our society should strive to develop our students spiritually, morally, emotionally, and physically. I went further to declare that our schools in general and our teachers in particular are charged with the responsibility of helping our students to become God-fearing, ethical, caring, productive, change embracing, creative, innovative, and critical thinking citizens.

I would direct any readers who might be wondering why I found an article such as this necessary to the title of the article, “Where are you going, my teacher?” I deliberately ask this question because over the past decade I have witnessed, with dismay and horror, the rising indifference to teacher professionalism and union affiliation displayed by the average teacher. Most teachers, it would now seem, engage in professional development only for the purpose of certification and promotion. Also, many teachers appear to have joined TTUTA only for protection from perceived persecution and victimisation.

My experience with TTUTA has revealed a weakening of the ambition among teachers to compete for the Teacher of the Year award. Also, the available evidence suggests that many teachers no longer see Teacher Professional Day as a highlight of their professional lives. If we wish Trinidad and Tobago to become a better society, we must first start with ourselves as educators. It is because of this reality that I, by way of this article, am appealing to our teachers and TTUTA to find a way to make professional development, strong union affiliation, and collegial collaboration critical features in the professional lives of our teachers.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine