

The Teacher as Revolutionary

By Bruce Paddington

As a student in London I visited the grave of Karl Marx in Highgate Cemetery. The following words, taken from Marx's famous *Thesis on Feuerbach*, were engraved on the tombstone: "The philosophers so far have only interpreted the world; the point is to change it." Many people, especially young people, are very aware of the many problems that exist in the world and in their country and want to do something to improve the situation. But how can they make a difference? One way might be to become a teacher--a revolutionary teacher--as teaching provides the opportunity to make a profound difference in the lives of young people and a significant impact on the society.

Let us look at the role of a teacher. I am not here referring to what most people believe is the main function of a teacher--that of a custodian who, as Ivan Illich describes in his book *Deschooling Society*, "arbitrates the observance of rules and administers the intricate rubrics of initiation to life. At his best, he sets the stage for the acquisition of some skill as schoolmasters always have. Without illusions of producing any profound learning, he drills his pupils in some basic routines." This is the conventional view of a teacher--a sergeant major who frightens his students into memorising numerous facts and figures that have little relevance to their lives. Instead, the teacher often functions as a virtual or surrogate parent providing guidance and advice to the young persons under his or her charge, playing a critical role in character formation and the development of values.

A key area for discourse is the scourge of discrimination and prejudice--whether it is based on race, class, or gender--which still exists in our society. Teachers can model behaviour that treats all students with respect, refusing to treat them any differently because of their race, ethnicity, religion, social background, or gender. Teachers can also ensure that any incident of such anti-social behaviour among the student body is severely dealt with. The teacher can thus be an agent for positive change, a true revolutionary, rather than simply replicating or even aggravating the existing problems in the society.

School, and the classroom in particular, is a key socialising agent, and the teacher has the awesome responsibility of being a positive role model, both in and outside of school. Teaching should be much more than packaging instruction with certification. A mathematics teacher's role is not just to teach subject content but instead to be part of a team of educators that provides a holistic environment in which students are cared for and respected. Unfortunately, many teachers are not trained to deliver this hidden curriculum, especially secondary school teachers who are still allowed to enter the classroom without any teacher training, once they have A'Levels or a university degree.

The teacher is only one of the many agents who shape students' behaviour. The home, the family, and religion all play major roles in the development of young people, and teachers often complain that their influence is thus severely limited. However, Illich believes that school as an institution has a major impact on the "shaping of man's vision of reality (and) school enslaves more profoundly and more systematically, since only

school is credited with the principal function of forming critical judgement, and paradoxically, tries to do so by making learning about oneself, about others, and about nature depend on a prepackaged process. School touches us so intimately that none of us can expect to be liberated from it by something else.” Illich thus recognises the power of the school system as the major agent of socialisation. He is concerned that it often functions as an enslaving institution and would prefer to scrap the entire education system and “deschool society.”

In Trinidad and Tobago, Lloyd Best made a revolutionary proposal to radically change the emphasis of the education system from being school-based to community-based when he delivered the feature address at the annual Pan Trinbago prize-giving ceremony on Tuesday 24th April, 2001 at the La Joya Complex. He “sought to map out a new vision for transforming the pan yard into a centre of social and economic activity that is rooted in the resources of the community. The "Schools in Pan" approach would be to make education, entertainment and business into one organic whole in the pan yard.”

Teachers, while arguing for similar fundamental changes to be implemented in the education system, have the difficult task of trying to promote such meaningful change while working within the system.

Teachers must first recognise that their role as content specialist is no longer so important in this information age. Instead, teachers have to provide guidance to their students and assist them in accessing information and managing their research. Teachers have to be equipped with expertise in a range of complementary skills, including family life and values education, and media literacy, if they are to be change agents in the education system and, by extension, the society. In this age of globalisation, with traditional values under siege and the country seriously affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, family life and values education must be integral to the work of all teachers. The School of Education of The University of the West Indies (UWI) and the Ministry of Education must work together to ensure that teachers have the necessary skills in this area.

While information and communications technology (ICT) is now a key component of the curriculum in most schools, media literacy skills are also critical to the work of a teacher, as the media has such a powerful influence on young people. The predominance of foreign music and television programmes promotes values and attitudes that are often diametrically opposed to the ones teachers are trying to instill in their students. Teachers therefore have the added responsibility of having to provide the students with the skills to decode and understand media texts in order to help them to develop a sense of critical autonomy.

The challenges faced by our students in the twenty-first century are so overwhelming that teachers have to be retooled and provided with the necessary resources and incentives as they rededicate themselves to perform their expanding roles as educators. They must accept this challenge and be true revolutionaries in the battle to ensure that our young students become valuable citizens in a new, caring, and tolerant society. The teacher’s job is not just to interpret the world but to change it.