

## **Evaluating Teacher Competence**

By Arthur Joseph

Teaching at the secondary school level can be extremely challenging in countries like Trinidad and Tobago, given the complex, multicultural nature of the society. In order to help diverse learners master more challenging content, teachers need to do more than engage in knowledge transmission. They need to know their subject area deeply, understand the cultural context of their student, know more about the linguistic and other social attributes of their students, and understand how students think and learn. If teachers are to develop the level of teaching skills that is required, especially at the secondary level, principals must assist their teachers to gain greater clarity and deeper understandings about what students need to learn in order to succeed in life, and to recognise how they, as teachers, can facilitate this process.

The challenge for principals is exacerbated by the fact that a large percentage of secondary school teachers in Trinidad and Tobago enter the profession without being professionally prepared to engage their students. Graduates from the university with little or no professional training, or pedagogical skill and experience, form the bulk of persons recruited and selected to teach at the secondary sector.

Typically, the first year of classroom experience for most secondary school teachers is one that can be described as trial by fire, or a rude awakening. In all schools, the principal is responsible for coordinating the orientation and induction of new teachers, and assisting in the development and assessment of the level of competence of all teachers. They invariably complain of inadequate time or clinical supervision skills to engage teachers in professional development. The blurring of the principal's assessment and development roles often proves problematic and may even create conflict of intentions. It is therefore not difficult to understand the dilemma of many teachers who are expected to become competent in the art and science of the profession, while under the supervision of principals who themselves may not be competent in determining teacher competence.

Decisions on teacher competence are invariably complicated by the lack of consensus on what makes a good teacher. In addition, there is no commonly agreed set of standards for admission to the teaching profession, or an agreed set of competencies for teachers practising the profession. There is some debate in the literature about whether there should be a single set of competencies for classroom teaching or whether a distinction should be made between the teacher competencies necessary to begin teaching as a novice and the wider competencies and confidence that come with classroom experience. Many commentators have suggested that a useful way to bring closure to such debate is to recognise that teachers develop from novice to experts over time, and that an individual teacher may be at various points on the developmental scale at any one time, depending on the competency being considered. In addition, in order to develop and evaluate a teacher's competence, there needs to be some level of agreement on what

teachers are expected to demonstrate, and what skills and behaviours should be observable by an external reviewer.

At a time when there are attempts to view teacher competence simply as an assemblage of technical and mechanistic skills, some educationalists have questioned the adequacy of sets of competencies for describing teaching practice. For instance, there is a view that since competence is shaped by one's values and beliefs, and thus carries different meanings, then the list of statements and acts that purport to describe and demonstrate competence can never provide an impartial view of how a good teacher should be able to perform. These educationalists point to the importance of the intuitive artistry of the teacher. They regard this aspect of the teacher's practice as an indeterminate zone of practice, which should be the central concern of teacher professional development.

Other educational gurus have observed that there can be no common agreement on the criterial attributes of competent teaching. Therefore, the validity of using a particular list of competencies teacher appraisal is questionable.

Pragmatists, however, are of the view that teacher performance can be measured in terms of competencies that are (a) easy to understand, (b) permit direct observation, (c) can be expressed as outcomes, and (d) can be transferred between settings. Such a view assumes that teacher competence can be described objectively, independent of the individual, and that there is one way of understanding competence.

The issues raised by these different thinkers in education, therefore, seem to question current perceptions of teacher professional knowledge. If in fact there is a particular ingredient possessed by some people by virtue of their personality characteristics, which is an important area on which to focus in teacher development, then it implies that a constant body of pedagogical knowledge is yet to be discovered and is not now being taught in the teacher training institutions. Or it may mean that although the body of knowledge is known, it cannot be taught because each teacher trainee has to view this body of knowledge and acquire it in relation to his/her peculiar and specific context. This line of reasoning may mean that the process of producing a competent teacher is a mystery, and that competent teachers may only be discovered in some unexplained way by people sensitive to the teaching situation.

Notwithstanding the disparate views and the difficulties inherent in the establishment of an agreed-upon set of competencies for teacher evaluation, the employment of a competence-based teacher development strategy by our principals seems to offer the most useful and adaptive approach to teacher development and teacher assessment. Nevertheless, several conditions must be met to validate the use of competencies in the teacher appraisal process. These are that: 1) teachers must be assured that they can be evaluated fairly by principals, 2) a set of desirable competencies devised by experts is sufficient to describe good practice, 3) the appraisal process acts as a quality control and developmental mechanism for the profession, and 4) personality considerations must be factored into the appraisal process.

However, these criteria do not obviate the fact that the supervision and assessment procedures, and the standards adopted by principals, can and will vary, as do their expectations regarding the professional needs of teachers. This is so because some principals may assume that whatever training secondary teachers receive only prepares them to begin to teach, while others may believe that the training institutions totally prepare teachers to engage their students.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine  
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