

Inhibiting Education Reform

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Some commentators have argued that the education system in Trinidad and Tobago has not been functioning as it should. Others swear that the “Government” is to be blamed. More analytical researchers submit that the issue may be connected with poor school leadership, and a lack of teacher commitment and parental involvement. The reality is that no one set of stakeholders should receive all the blame.

“Crisis” is defined in the *Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary* as “a stage in a sequence of events at which the trend of all future events, especially for better or for worse, is determined.” In Trinidad and Tobago, this stage refers to the state of our education system, whereas the sequence of events can only be interpreted as the intensifying series of educational reform initiatives that have been launched since 1959. The future events, of course, must mean the consequences of reform or the impact on society. Already we are seeing some—rising crime, a declining work ethic, a growing propensity among our young people to consume rather than produce, increasing apathy with respect to the dynamics of politics and national issues, and mounting indifference and unconcern for one another.

I believe that education reform can be more effective if it is taken more seriously by many of the stakeholders. Indeed, experience has shown that while education reform begins with events and forces located outside of schools, they must also be used to define the tasks of stakeholders of schools, and to develop programmes, technologies, structures, and internal environment in schools. They must also identify the resources needed for effective schooling.

Successive governments have made attempts to improve our education system, and much has been accomplished since 1959. However, many of the goals of national educational policy have not been realised, and many reasons have been proffered to explain this situation.

Some local commentators argue that we may not have engaged in the necessary needs analysis, post-mortem studies, and brainstorming before implementing reform. Others believe that we still need to consider ways and means of bringing stakeholders on board—particularly teachers and administrators—when introducing reform into the education system.

My experiences over the past eight years as a coordinator and supervisor for school improvement in Trinidad and Tobago, and over the past two years in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, have convinced me that the approach to education reform in the region is being constrained by other factors. I am sure that governments in the region mean well but, unwittingly and inevitably, value for money is never realised.

The following variables may be the main culprits inhibiting education reform: 1) the degree of sensitivity of our school leaders to the importance of understanding that

reform requires sacrifices and developing new perceptions and perspectives; 2) the cluster of commitments that order teacher professionalism—commitment to school, commitment to student learning, and commitment to professional development; and 3) the nature and dynamics of school cultures. We definitely need to pay more attention to these variables.

For years I have had to witness, with great pain, the manner in which some principals and teachers respond to school improvement projects in which I have been involved. Too many principals see school improvement as: 1) not relevant to the effectiveness of their schools. For them education is obtaining “great success” in the SEA or CXC examinations, and few see success in terms of schooling in areas other than the strictly academic; and 2) wasting instructional time. These principals simply are unable to understand that school improvement cannot be successful without investing time in planning, brainstorming, and staff development.

On the other hand, some teachers seem averse to reform and school improvement initiatives; they consume too much time and energy. Further, their commitment levels do not encourage them to professionally support these initiatives.

Unless governments in the region find ways and means of addressing these inhibiting forces to reform, the necessary goals will not be achieved. Principals must be made to recognise the important roles they have to play in the reform process. They have to serve as role models and give symbolic and tangible support to our regional ministries of education. Teachers also have a part to play. Without commitment to their schools, student learning, and their own professional development, much of the power of education reform will be wasted. Finally, we must refashion our school cultures if we wish to bring meaningful reforms into our education systems.

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