

## Forging Ahead With Quality Teachers

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The Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers' Association (TTUTA) commemorated "The Month of the Teacher" on October 8 of this year with a most appropriate and nation-building theme, *Forging Ahead through Quality Teachers*. The theme brought to mind the following clause in the preamble of the *World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action*, adopted by the World Conference on Higher Education, Paris, October 9, 1998:

"Convinced that education is a fundamental pillar of human rights, democracy, sustainable development and peace, and shall therefore become accessible to all throughout life and that measures are required to ensure co-ordination and co-operation across and between the various sectors, particularly between general, technical and professional secondary and post-secondary education as well as between universities, colleges and technical institutions."

As I reminisced on the clause, the following questions came to my mind: In Trinidad and Tobago, to what extent:

- is education helping to promote human rights? How many of our citizens are aware of and can exercise their democratic rights? How many of us teach and model human rights in our homes and schools?
- do we teach and articulate the importance and sacredness of democracy to our children and among the people with whom we interact? How many of us still vote according to ethnicity and blind parochial or selfish loyalty?
- is education contributing to sustainable development? Is education in Trinidad and Tobago helping to contribute to economic growth, competitiveness, and prosperity through a vibrant, export-driven economy and through research? Without our oil and other natural resources can education help us survive? Is our education system helping us to respond to the imperatives of the knowledge economies that now characterise the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Is our education system producing entrepreneurs who are innovative and internationally competitive?
- is education contributing to peace among our ethnic groups, warring gangs in North Trinidad, husbands and wives, jilted and betrayed lovers, and our citizens in general?
- is the Ministry of Education effectively and efficiently ensuring coordination and cooperation across and between the various sub-sectors of our education system?

My intention is not to provide answers in this article but to induce reflection, that is, to encourage readers to reflect on the direction our country is taking. Also, I wish to help readers—teachers in particular—to recognise that education is power and that this power is in our hands.

An examination of such countries as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland could help us to identify appropriate directions for future development of the education sector. For some time, these countries have been preparing and implementing plans to promote learning for a knowledge economy and society. They are aware that the world has progressed over the past centuries from the Agricultural through the Industrial to the current Information and Communication Age, with several dilemmas resulting from this transformation. They all seem to agree with Alvin Toffler who, in his book *Third Wave*, advised that we cannot, with impunity, continue to use first wave (pre-18<sup>th</sup> century) and second wave (19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century) strategies to

solve third wave (21<sup>st</sup> century) problems. Unfortunately, this is precisely what is happening in Trinidad and Tobago today. As teachers, we continue to use first and second wave teaching concepts, strategies, and interventions to educate third wave children. In politics, we seem glued to first wave and second wave traditions and as a result find ourselves with 18-18 roadblocks and comedy after comedy in Parliament. Our criminals are playing *rounders* and *hopscotch* with our crime fighters and court officials simply because our public officials in these departments have not yet started to employ third wave measures to address crime.

On the other hand, Australia has been successfully planning and implementing an education and training action plan in response to the imperatives of the information economy and society. Australia clearly recognises that modern realities are transforming the way we live, work, and think about a wide range of activities and possibilities. Australia also understands that the new economy and society are global, breaking down national, state, and territorial boundaries in education, training, recreation, and work. As the document, *Learning for the Knowledge Society: An education and training action plan for the information economy* (published by the Department of Education, Science and Training of the Commonwealth of Australia) states, these new structures are challenging the ways we have done things in the past and offer opportunities to create better ways of doing things.

We too will have to recognise these new realities. We will also have to understand that our future status, among other things, will demand that:

- we develop our nation to the extent that the economy and society will help generate a quality of life favourable to all;
- unemployment levels be made and remain extremely low—with employment for all those who have qualified in their occupation of choice;
- the society be characterised by high levels of social responsibility, through which all citizens will demonstrate political, economic, social, spiritual, and technological maturity.

For us to be prepared, however, we will have to ensure that our education system becomes characterised by well-trained principals, quality teachers, and support workers, as well as by an environment and culture conducive to achievement, collaboration, and excellence.

Indeed, if we agree with Adam Urbanski, President of the Rochester (New York) Teachers' Association, our teachers, in particular, will have to develop attributes of highly qualified teachers who know their subject area or content well; who know how to help students learn; who connect students' learning to their lives and experiences; who involve the families and communities of students; who take into consideration student learning outcomes and adjust their teaching to increase the prospects for learning and to decrease the chances for failure; who respect students and care about their learning; who seek new knowledge and feel responsibility to access it.

In addition, we, as individuals, will have to change our work ethic, our attitudes to professional development, and our beliefs about national development.

The Ministry of Education, for its part, will have to enter strategic alliances with industry and other relevant ministries to produce and implement an action plan similar to what Australia has developed. Indeed, it has now become imperative that we forge ahead with quality plans, quality

leaders, and teachers to meet the imperatives of globalisation, the knowledge society, and economy.

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