

## **TTUTA ON TUESDAY (11.09.18)**

### **The Politics of Education**

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THE REOPENING of schools this year was in no way significantly different from the reopening of school in previous years.

As has become typical and expected, a number of school doors remain shut even after eight weeks to enact the vacation repair programme; even after the Ministry of Education would have received files upon files from affected schools throughout the preceding academic year about the various problems negatively impacting their effective functioning.

Given this prevailing trend over time, perhaps the time has come for us to examine the problem through different lens.

The failure of the education system to address these perennial problems must give us, the public, cause for concern. With a tagline that declares “Excellence in Education,” and which transcends changing political administrations, we are forced to ask, “excellence for whom?”

Who are the students that are negatively impacted by these school closures arising out of defective and degenerating school plants? Which segments of the society are placed at risk for their future development when these students are not provided with optimal learning conditions?

Proverbial ostrich paradise, it is time for us to take our heads out of the sand and recognise the true “political” nature of education in our twin-island republic, including thinking about who the education system serves and to what end.

Several previous contributions to this column have raised the issue of the purpose of schooling and education in Trinidad and Tobago – a questions that is hardly, if ever, taken up as part of our national narrative. However, these are questions that we must ask outright and seek to address intentionally.

For while on the surface it appears that politicians and policy makers are concerned with ensuring that public schooling (in particular) allows for the maintenance of society, preparing individuals to participate in our existing economic and political systems, or for individuals to at least have the opportunity to compete for access to the workforce, one cannot help but ask, “how is this being achieved?”

How will this happen when large numbers of our students are being left behind because of the system’s failure to address deficiencies in meaningful ways, especially for those students who are already at risk because of their prevailing socio-economic circumstances?

We comfort ourselves with thought that there is equality of opportunity – everyone has a chance. But do they really? Ponder on that a little.

Too often when we think about politics in Trinidad and Tobago we narrow down to conceptions of political parties. However, if we are desirous of inquiring deeper into the state of education service provision and whether we are in fact moving towards excellence in education, then we must adopt a broader understanding of the nature of politics.

Thus, as we think about the politics of education, we have to ask questions about the exercise of power and the allocation of resources. We may just have to adopt the posturing of American political scientist Harold Lasswell that politics is about who gets what, when and how.

Using the framework of who gets what, when and how, we can analyse our school system to realise where resources are deployed and by whom. The state machinery will aver that they allocate equal resources to all schools, and from their vantage point schools have what they need to fulfil the responsibilities required of them.

However, equality of treatment is not enough; we need to think more along the lines of equity for there is no gainsaying that in our tiered education system that is supposedly based on meritocracy, all are not equal.

There are groups of students who face numerous disadvantageous circumstances that put them at risk. This is further compounded by them being placed in schools in which the physical plant is neither physically nor aesthetically conducive to learning.

Resources that may be par for the course in better resourced schools that have the privilege of well-developed social support structures divorced from the State are not readily available in these circumstances.

So yes, the students have access to a school building and a supposedly basic education, but do these provide them the opportunities to develop the competencies to at least compete?

As a society, we need to stop being disingenuous. The education system that we have is broken. It is not meeting the needs of all of our citizens, particularly those who are desperately in need of a fighting chance to forge a path towards individual competence and success. We all need to do our part to advocate for a more TTUTA equitable education system.