Professionalism and Partnership: A Development Dilemma for Schools?

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There is an increasing trend for school professionals, the members of their school managements and governing boards to formally meet together. These meetings are designed to exchange ideas, to acknowledge each others' contributions and to examine ways in which they could perform even better. Such occasions bring together the parties involved in the management of educational enterprises. They signify the ongoing process of a collaborative approach to educational development at the community level as well as at the level of a cluster of schools. It shows that such a cluster of schools and their community representatives at the management level could work together cooperatively and collaboratively to provide quality education. This is possible even if initial difficulties arise in such emerging relationships. With commitment to collaborate for the common good of the community, one not only overcomes the initial impediments, but also turns them to one's advantage. In the development of schools and the high level of quality education that they are able to deliver, one can very well see that the partnership is in fact working well and bearing fruit. This shows that partnership between professionals and the community is not merely a strategy but a process leading to and paving the way for development - a development that is meaningful and satisfying to all concerned.

Partnership to stakeholdership

We should not allow ourselves to be deluded by the belief that some formal structures and mechanisms alone would serve to run our schools on a partnership basis. For partnership to be enduring and productive it has to be continually reviewed, carefully cultivated and necessary changes instituted as and when required. One of these changes should be to move from the concept of *partnership* to the concept of *stakeholdership*. With the kind of experience and maturity that school communities have gained, it is an

opportune time to make this shift in perception and action. As a stakeholder, one takes the relationship even more enthusiastically and with a greater sense of responsibility. A kind of mutuality and symbiosis develops in this new arrangement. As a result, the tendency to find 'scapegoats' and to shift the blame for inaction or a wrong initiative to others is considerably reduced. Unlike in partnership, in stakeholdership there are possibilities to enlarge relationships by co-opting or incorporating other groups such as Parent Teachers' Associations, and Ex-Students' Associations, institutions and organisations such as Jaycees, Rotary, the Local Chamber of Commerce, etc. Some of these organisations have a legitimate role to play and others have a moral right to exercise. Still others may have an obligatory or a mandatory duty to perform in an educational enterprise.

The concept and practice of stakeholdership, calls for changes in some of our traditional beliefs, entrenched value positions, and configurations of roles and relationships. Although easily said, these are not easy to achieve. Mutual trust among and acceptance of complementarity of contributions of each of the stakeholder groups are necessary. Tolerance of some 'teething troubles', initial shortcomings and some 'messiness' are inevitable during the early stages of development of this new pattern of working together. These cannot be remedied overnight. They call for constant stock-taking, careful nurturing and inspiring support. The school management and school professionals are the logical and appropriate points of contact for this to be translated into reality. Now that school professionals and school managements have an ongoing forum such as this, they should seriously consider embarking on a dialogue, a consensus-building exercise and a programme of reaching out into the community. In the course of time, other groups and organisations concerned with, and those able to contribute to educational development, could also be incorporated. These require more non-conventional approaches to working together. Even the prevailing concept of professionalism may have to be reconsidered.

Re-examining professionalism

Traditionally, professionalism has been viewed as identifying with a professional group, a belief in self-regulation, a feeling of autonomy, a sense of 'calling' and a commitment to providing service (Hall, 1968). This view is still valid, but it needs further clarification and amplification. Professional autonomy is neither an open licence nor a blank cheque. It cannot entirely ignore humanity and society, nor their aspirations, problems, basic needs and human rights. Unfortunately, some professions over-emphasise their autonomy and rights and undervalue their duties and obligations. They tend to narrowly conceive the scope of their service and restrictively define their 'sense of calling'. They may also be too exclusive in not targeting some potentially valuable clients on the one hand, and in not providing their professional service to certain deserving as well as disadvantaged beneficiaries on the other. In order to counteract these restrictive practices of professionalism it is necessary to enlarge their vision, extend their mission and re-examine their priorities as professionals. For want of a more appropriate and yet an inclusive term that could encapsulate all these expectations, the term *extended professionalism* has been proposed (Velayutham, 1986).

Schools as learning organisations

For long, schools have served as teaching organisations, and less as learning organisations. More has been said of teaching and teachers, than of learning and learners. Admittedly, teaching and learning are reciprocal, interactive and interdependent processes. In this sense, learning takes place in schools in the usual curricula and co-curricula areas, as far as individuals and groups of students are concerned. But we should be alert to the fact that organisations like schools could also be learning (Schon, 1987). They can learn from past mistakes, experiences and successes. This is possible when we find time to reflect not only individually, but also collectively as a school staff (Smyth, 1991), and even more productively when school staff and school management engage in collective reflection. In such situations, the participants are able to interact, exchange views and collectively reflect on and take stock of past accomplishments and plan future developments.

Thus fellowship and socialisation on special school occasions could be combined with some kind of 'collective introspection'. This could be valuable for jointly planning future developments.

Redesigning teachers' work

Educational literature in recent times is replete with calls for redesigning teachers' work. The underlying assumption seems to be that if teachers' work is redesigned for them by someone other than the teacher (Smylie, 1994), the teaching-learning process would be improved. By implication, the products resulting from such a process would also be improved. This could very well be a too simplistic and mistaken assumption. It is based on a technocratic model that could even be viewed by some as manipulative in intent.

It is proposed that if teachers are to perform effectively we should not redesign their work as such. Instead, ways and means should be found to redesign their work environment which could create those kinds of enabling, conducive and facilitative organisational conditions in which the desired changes could occur. In such organisational settings teachers would be able to act as *transformative intellectuals* (Giroux and McLaren, 1986) and not as mere functionaries and purveyors of knowledge. It is then that a society can expect its teachers to contribute to the process of social reconstruction and emancipation. However, these worthwhile ideas cannot be translated into reality where teachers are expected to produce standardised products, to base their teaching on unimaginative and often uninspiring prescriptions and to reward and reinforce conforming learning behaviour. On the other hand, teachers should have the benefit of a professional environment where they could continually review and redesign their work. Such educational contexts could be expected to promote dialogue and encourage critical examination of issues in teaching - learning. Thus, approaches to teaching and solutions to problems in teaching contexts and processes would considerably differ from those of a tradition where a teacher's work is redesigned for him/her by others who are only remotely involved in the classroom processes.

A new role for school management

Traditionally, school managements have been playing a controlling role that was based on an accountability model of governance. This was quite appropriate at a time when schools that were established through community initiatives had to conform to central direction and had to be subjected to departmental inspection. However, school systems have come a long way towards carrying out their initial task of 'maintenance'. Now they are not only able to consolidate, but are also ready to develop further, forge ahead and collaborate in social reconstruction in collaboration with the communities they serve. These are possible only when managements are able to augment the accountability model with an appropriate mix of advisory, supportive and mediating models of school governance (Packwood, 1988).

For this to happen I have argued elsewhere for the need for a paradigm shift from the concept of *ownership* to *trusteeship* (Velayutham, 1994). A more sensitive and responsive handling of societal and community demands would be necessary in the years to come if this paradigm shift were to be made effective. How creatively and constructively these demands are met and responded to may determine the continued role of this important intermediary level of community representation, exercised through school boards and management committees.

Conclusion

If these suggested reforms and adaptations are considered by the schools and their managing and governing bodies, one could be optimistic that a productive partnership between the school professionals and school management would be strengthened. It would also eventually evolve into a more viable and adaptive stakeholdership. Thus schools, in collaboration with and support from their managing authorities, would be in a position to face the challenges of the future and engage in imaginative planned development.

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