

# 'Anger pervades our secondary schools'

**Lucie-Smith says politics should not dictate education policies**

By PAULA LUCIE-SMITH



Mrs. Paula Lucie-Smith. PHOTO: GUYTN OTTLEY

**Mrs Paula Lucie-Smith received an honorary Doctor of Laws (LLD) from the University of the West Indies for her contributions as a teacher, advocate and pioneer in adult literacy classes. This is her guest speech to graduates on Friday, October 26 at the 10am graduation ceremony for the Faculty of Social Sciences.**

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**Good morning and congratulations to the graduates. For each of you, today celebrates the achievement of a goal, but a goal often set by others or by expectations. From now on, you choose.**

When in 1990 I chose to work as a volunteer adult literacy tutor, it was in line with what I'd done before, but I found myself on my own, without curriculum or books, with adult learners looking to me to teach them to read, and other volunteers expecting me to teach them to teach.

I faced a new choice.

Go back to teaching at a school?

Or make a new path in adult literacy?

Almost three decades later, what do I see as the key to successfully forging a new path?

On his visit to Trinidad some years ago, author Richard Gerver made a statement that has stayed with me. He said that to change an underperforming school you need "a vision powerful enough to engage people". Should you decide to make a new path, this is what you need: a vision powerful enough to engage people.

For a powerful vision and purpose that they believe in, people will work hard, some without pay. 2018 marks ALTA's 25th year and for our new tutors to understand ALTA's heritage and culture, tutors who had over many years given more than classroom teaching spoke about their ALTA experience. I was surprised that tutor after tutor said the same thing: they got a phone call from Paula to ask them to take on more than they had signed on for, and they said "yes":

Yes to conducting the first National Literacy Survey, and thus trekking across ravines and up steep slopes in parts unknown to enter homes unknown.

Yes to risking personal safety to teach youth in hot spots – with no regrets despite lying on the floor as bullets flew around the building.

Yes to coming back to volunteer when they had definitely "done their bit".

What made them say “yes” though they didn’t intend to? What made them say “yes” again and again?

They said “yes” because they believed in ALTA and in its higher purpose, trusting that what they were asked to do was important and would bring positive change; knowing that they wouldn’t be on their own, that we would be doing this together.

ALTA has been able to engage high calibre people as tutors, staff, board members and partners. ALTA’s vision is powerful enough to engage people.

So the doctorate may be in my name, but it’s shared by some 3,000 tutors and 15,000 students. If our students didn’t take that scary step into an ALTA class, there would be no ALTA.

Although you are at the top of the education ladder and ALTA students on the first rung, an ALTA certificate is much like the certificate you receive today.

Both represent the culmination of effort and sacrifice. However, the level of effort and sacrifice is probably greater for an ALTA student because you chose your field of study to match your strengths and aptitudes. ALTA students have to study what they are not good at and have no aptitude for. The fact that you are here graduating, especially from a language-based field, means that your brain came wired for literacy. Consider what your life would be if written words just didn’t make sense.

The UWI and ALTA certificates both engender a sense of accomplishment and pride. What is different is that ALTA has no public graduation. Why? Because our society wrongly equates literacy with intelligence, failing to understand that reading and thinking are two different skills. When we recognise that a beginner reader is not a beginner thinker, then ALTA students need not just be privately proud, but also publicly proud of their achievements.

An ALTA certificate opens a new world to our students – the vast and wonderful world of the printed word that has surrounded and frustrated them for years. Like an ALTA certificate, your degree opens a new world to you.

What will you choose? What vision will engage you? Or will you create a vision to engage others?

As a child of independence, when I left university I was fully engaged by the powerful vision of nation building. So were many of my friends. I taught at Senior Comp, friends worked in the hospital, state enterprises and ministries. Sooner or later, we all left and for the same reason – decisions governed by votes at the next election. Politics invaded to erode the integrity and quality of the nation’s institutions and made our efforts futile.

Here’s one example from education. The abolition of the Common Entrance exam was announced by Basdeo Panday on a political platform in Princes Town. He declared that he would put an end to the 11+ trauma. Politics was the driver of universal secondary education.

In early 2,000 before the first SEA exam, the Chief Education Officer asked to meet to discuss what ALTA could offer as those in education were well aware that several thousand students who were not literate would be entering secondary school. ALTA submitted a proposal and mobilised. No word came.

In the 18 years since, ALTA has built a national adult literacy programme and, with NALIS, Youth Lit for under 16s. As ALTA stuck firmly to our course, a stream of initiatives in education came and went, as each was about the big launch – not implementation. Politics again.

Eighteen years later students continue to enter secondary schools barely able to read, and exit five years later with the same low literacy, but now with an entrenched feeling of being outside of society. Anger pervades our secondary schools; anger wrought by extreme frustration. Why else would teens place their “school feeding” lunch on the overhead fans to interrupt the secondary education so prized by their parents? What did the group of teens who set fire to their school have in common? Not one of them could read. Without provision for those with no aptitude for literacy, universal secondary education is destroying trust in our schools, and eroding belief in the value of education. Our schools no longer engage people.

Why didn't we say "no" when a politician dictated education policy?

In the early 1970s, Finland had an underperforming education system. Then they took education out of politics. They embarked on a long-term policy to develop a professional body of educators, and then turned over the decisions to the teachers. Finland is rated among the highest in the world in innovation, entrepreneurship and creativity.

More than 40 years ago, the Finns recognised that there is no place for politics in education. Isn't it time we took politics out of education? And out of other areas? Since independence, successive governments have taught us that we can neither trust their vision nor their purpose. Our politicians fail to engage people.

So why do we look to government to lead and bring positive change? It is time to be independent – to look to ourselves to effect positive change. It is time to build alternatives that are independent of government. ALTA is one such alternative – so it can be done.

I leave you with a quote from Clarissa Pinkola Estés which captures the ALTA experience:

“What is needed for dramatic change is an accumulation of acts, adding, adding to, adding more, continuing. We know that it does not take everyone on Earth to bring justice and peace, but only a small, determined group who will not give up during the first, second, or hundredth gale.”

Be that small, determined group who will not give up.