

FEATURE ADDRESS AT B.U.T. ANNUAL GENERAL CONFERENCE 2008

Madam President, Hon. Ronald Jones, Minister of Education and Human Resource Development, Officers and Members of Barbados Union of Teachers, Permanent Secretary, Chief Education Officer, Education Officers, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.....

I commend the leaders and members of the Barbados Union of Teachers, recognizing it as an organization that has built an excellent record of achievement, that can boast of a proud tradition of providing service and leadership not only in matters relating to the national education agenda but also on issues that are at the centre of the national development agenda, issues that have to do with building a healthy and informed society.

I also commend you for the choice of the theme for this year's conference, QUALITY EDUCATION in a CHANGING GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT. The renewed emphasis on quality education is timely. Barbados has achieved a high degree of success in its efforts to provide universal access to primary and secondary education and in removing institutional barriers restricting access to tertiary education for persons of post-secondary school age. Participation rates in the education sector in Barbados have traditionally been high and they continue to be high. This achievement reflects the commitment of the people of Barbados over the last forty years to giving highest priority to 'people development.' Undoubtedly the strong emphasis on education, health and social services has propelled this small country to a place within the top twenty countries in the world; this according to the United Nations' Human Development Index.

However, beyond statistics on participation rates, literacy and other quantitative indicators, Barbadians have to take steps to ensure that we are able to earn a good living in a highly competitive global environment. At the start-up of the World Trade Organization some of us formed the impression that the breaking down of traditional trade barriers had to do with liberalizing the movement of commodities and goods. More recently we have had to come to terms with the fact that 'services' constitute a big and growing factor in the cluster of items in the market. The comparative cost and efficiency of educational and health services, (in a word, their competitiveness) are, and will continue to be, an important factor in the implementation of this country's development strategy. We will return to some of the implications of this reality later.

For the moment, let us accept that Quality Education is an imperative.

What is Quality Education? One useful working definition of "quality" is "fitness for purpose". This general definition may be applied to a physical product, a service, or an educational programme. The challenge that faces our curriculum developers is the need to arrive at a clear understanding of the "purpose" for which the particular curriculum is intended and designed. Equally important is the need to put in place and maintain effective monitoring and review mechanisms that will indicate whether or not critical adjustments or changes in the curriculum are required.

Where does the responsibility lie for providing quality education? The responsibility lies with all of us in the education sector and with stakeholders in the wider society. Ministry of Education officials, school administrators and teachers have a major responsibility in the process of designing and implementing quality education programmes. Following the taking of decisions on the curriculum,

the professional teacher has a duty to develop and implement appropriate teaching strategies that respond to the needs of the learners.

If we were to take stock of the state of our system of education and seek to devise a strategy for delivering quality education at all levels, what might a SWOT analysis tell us ?

STRENGTHS:

- At the core of the delivery system is a well trained and trainable teaching force.
- A record of achievement over the years and especially over the past forty years as the country has successfully implemented policies leading to universal education at the primary and secondary levels and is currently committed to increasing access to tertiary education, and at the other end of the spectrum, is making provision for pre-school and early childhood education.
- The production of a succession of school leavers and graduates of our schools and colleges that have demonstrated that they can compete at the national and regional and international levels..
- A national consensus in support of the need to improve and further strengthen our education system.

WEAKNESSES:

- Persistence of uneven levels of students' performance across the educational system.
- Manifestation of negative behaviours by a significant minority of students and school leavers.
- The relative absence of strategies designed to mobilize the support of parents and guardians of students "at risk" for curricular and extra-curricular programmes and activities. We need to recognize that a significant minority of adults remain to be persuaded that there is a link between access to quality education and enhanced life-chances.
- Failure to ensure that persons with disabilities enjoy equitable access to education at all levels.
- The inadequacy of key infrastructural supports for the delivery of quality education from pre-school to tertiary level. There are conspicuous gaps in the provision and maintenance of the infrastructure required to support the curricula and the co-curricula. The spectrum of needs extend from the requirements of physical education in support of the basic goal of "Wellness" to the completion of the agenda of Edu-Tech.
- Persistence of the notion that technical and vocational education does not have to be at the core of the general education curriculum , but should always be available to students who are not coping with the traditional academic subjects.
- There is evidence of a resurgence of a sub-culture of violence that is disruptive of the learning environment.

OPPORTUNITIES

Provided that we ensure that the balance-sheet continues to show that the positives outweigh the negatives, there is a good prospect that we can take advantage of the confidence resulting from past achievements and dedicate the next phase of our educational development strategy to providing quality education.

- Our ability to provide services on a competitive basis on the international market requires that we give high priority to fast-tracking implementation of policies that emphasize quality assurance and accreditation. A good start has been made, eg. Tech-Voc, CXC, CVQ, certain Professional programmes etc..
- There is much to be gained from a policy designed to ensure that youth development initiatives and programmes complement the school curricula particularly in the areas of Culture, Health and Wellness, Sports and Youth Leadership'. The graduate of today and tomorrow will, on average, change jobs several times during his/her working life. He/she should be enabled to develop basic entrepreneurial skills and be able to add 'self employed' to the list of his/hr options.
- Recognizing the dangers inherent in allowing the perceived increase in the incidence of physical violence and other forms of disruptive behavior among a minority of school children, and recognizing that the staffing resources of our schools do not include the specialists who have the competence to detect and treat cases of emotional and psychological disorders, all schools should have access to the appropriate specialist services as a matter of routine.
- The emphasis in the global environment will increasingly place a high premium on quality products , services and processes, and on competitiveness. In education as in other areas we must prepare ourselves to meet this challenge head on!

THREATS:

- The threats we face as we go forward are real. They include the sharply rising costs of educational services, health services and other social services.
- The tendency of these rising costs to outpace the country's ability to earn income.
- The fragile state of our national and regional economy.
- Increase in competition from off-shore and on-shore providers of education at all levels.
- The constant threat that failure to deliver a quality product in education will make us non-competitive in the supply of educational services.

What has to be done in order to achieve the desired goals?

There must be continuing and sustained effort to improve the management of our educational resources. The measurement of success in the context of quality education must go beyond the number of persons earning certificates and degrees. It must reflect whether and if so to what extent

the educational experiences gained 'fitted' or equipped the students for success at the personal and or sectoral level in his/her field of endeavour; did the educational experiences enable the students to be self-starters or did they need to have their hands held?

I see the need for much more and much better communication among practitioners in the teaching profession. Subject seminars at which teachers meet from time to time to discuss the relative merits of teaching strategies of methods of assessment, all in an effort to have a better idea of what works. Surely that kind of exercise would be a wholesome learning environment for teacher trainees!

There needs to be greater emphasis on innovation and on sharing the results of employing different methodologies and approaches.. We need to ensure that the institutional memory of our educational system is activated so that the positive results of our more successful teachers are shared with members of the profession and where there are more opportunities to recognize and reward excellence in teaching as in learning..

My recent exposure to the do's and don'ts of quality management initiatives as they apply to the world of work (Courtesy of National Initiative for Service Excellence) has taught me "If it can't be measured, perhaps it is not happening." In any strategy that may be launched to ensure the delivery of quality education provision should be made for effective measurement of what is achieved.

In order for this process to operate constructively the partnership between teachers, teacher representatives and officials of the Ministry of Education must be strengthened to the point where it is characterized by mutual respect and trust. This is necessary so that there can be a forum in which professionals can consider progress reports and evaluation of initiatives in order to improve the level of effort required to achieve success.

I now return to the impact communication technologies have had, and continue to have, on the learning environment worldwide, and the implications of this revolution on the ability of small poor countries like Barbados to stay competitive in the field of education.

Over fifteen years ago I participated in a conference hosted by the Commonwealth Secretariat and Commonwealth of Learning (COL), which examined the implications for national education systems of the revolution in information and communications technologies. We noted that several countries in the Commonwealth were struggling to provide primary education for all, even as they sought to extend the reach of their secondary school plant. We noted that a major constraint on their ability to achieve their targets was the persistence of a considerable deficit of trained teachers across the spectrum of disciplines included in the schools curricula. We learnt that in India, for example, Distance Learning strategies were being extensively employed to increase access to primary education.

The conference devoted an entire session to the likely impact, positive and negative, which Distance Learning programmes were likely to have on the education landscape especially in developing countries . Distance Learning currently earns education providers in the Developed Countries substantial income. They are able to recruit highly competent teachers to prepare syllabuses, and

with the assistance of a team of specialists, produce excellent teaching materials that have an extended shelf-life. Given the large and growing market for such courses financial success is assured.

The learning environment has undergone significant change. Failure on our part to harness the appropriate technologies in order to deliver quality education programmes, including training programmes and continuing education programmes , or exclusive reliance on face-to face classroom encounters will prove to be an increasingly expensive option and given the competing claims on the time of participants, the reach of programmes delivered via traditional modes will continue to fall short of the intended target group.

There is one other area in which the new technologies are underutilized. It is in the area of public education, parent education, dialogue between school and community. I believe that current experiences of parent-teacher associations would suggest that regular attendance at meetings, though highly desirable, may be proving increasingly difficult for some parents and teachers. The apparent decline in levels of participation in meetings of the PTA's or at PTA sponsored events is happening at communication between school and parent has never been more crucial. It would seem that we should try a variety of communication modes in order to improve communication between parents/guardians and teachers, education officers *et al.*

I hope these thoughts will serve to give encouragement to you the members of Barbados Teachers Union as you continue to work through the agenda of this important annual conference.

Keith Hunte

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