

**BARBADOS UNION OF TEACHERS  
CONFERENCE**

**FEATURE ADDRESS**

**BY**

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The theme that you have chosen is a very provocative one. It has captured in a nutshell perhaps one of the most contentious issues in education. All around the globe the debate rages on, on how to improve the standard in education. It is not an easy question to answer, because there are many points of views to consider. The views of politicians and their think tanks, the views of parents, administrators, teachers and many others who consider themselves partners in education. Then there are those issues, which some parties choose to highlight while conveniently forgetting others. Sounds confusing, doesn't it? Yet there is a bright spot, a silver lining so to speak at the edge of our dark cloud of what sometimes appear to be a never-ending debate. You have asked what will be the way forward? We are seeking answers to questions. We are seeking consensus. We are seeking to move on and we must be clear as to where we are going. We are indeed moving in the right direction, for I have been told, that 'the greatest thing in the world is not so much where we stand, but in which direction we are going'. In whatever direction that we go the aim should always be clear. "Each child, each of the young, should be able to advance to full capacity in accordance with general and special ability and aptitude" (Brendwein, 1999).

Let us think back 75 or 100 years ago. Now fast forward to today. In many ways, those years reflect more change for humans than all the years before in recorded history. Think about farming 100 years ago and today. Consider the 20<sup>th</sup> Century's changes in engineering, clothing and communication. The transformation is dizzying! While most of us succumb to the occasional nostalgia for "the good old days", few of us would opt for yesterdays physicians, communication systems or transportation.

Although we may think of school as a static enterprise, the field of education has grown and changed too. Today, we understand many things about teaching and learning, that we had little way of knowing a century or even a few decades ago.

Some of these insights stem from psychology and the science of the brain. Others come from continuing observation in the classroom. Whatever their genesis, these educational changes are every bit as revolutionary as moving from the pencil to the typewriter to the personal computer. We must use this new knowledge towards improving the standards in education.

Yet, we must ask ourselves the question, is it a new phenomenon that we should seek to improve standards in education? In the Caribbean context in particular, we have always had the notion of improving standards whether implied or pellucid stated. Historically many of our classes were actually referred to as standards. Even as early as back then, for one to move from standard one to standard two, he must have demonstrated some mastery of the knowledge, skills and competencies at the grade one level. Yes, the issue of standards is not new. Why then the ongoing debate? Why the sudden urgency over improving the standard in education?

Many have chosen to answer this question in a variety of ways but they all come back to the same conclusion as that of the Delor's Report that we are living in an era where knowledge and life long learning has become very important to nations. Many have come to realize along with Nobel Laureate Economist Gary Becker, "that human capital is the investment in training, education, health, values, and other aspects of human potential. Human capital investments increase the ability of people to create wealth". Moreover, there is a lot more to wealth than just money to consider. We must also of necessity consider the value of quality of human existence.

Every single day in the Caribbean, many of our children witness the divorce or separation of their parents. An increasing number are taken from their parents' homes and committed to social services for foster care. Many unmarried teenage girls become mothers. Too many of our adolescents begin using illegal drugs. Secondary school students are found to be bringing guns to school and many drop out of school and the typical 14 year old watches three hours of television every day, and if you are lucky does one hour of home work. The education systems are being called upon to save the human capital.

However, in too many cases, school-teachers also are victims. Many who wish to teach find themselves stifled by an expensive, arrogant, narrow-minded bureaucracy who often times have unilaterally arrived at the conclusion that they alone have the answers to improving standards in education. Well if they do, then the public has not been convinced. People are still anxious about education. The West Indian Commission established by Carioca Prime Ministers, has had consultations with a wide cross section of groups, community interests and persons in Caribbean countries. Education was a major item on the agenda of

concerns for all countries. This is indicative of great public anxiety over the state of education in Caribbean countries.

The debate has also been heightened with the direct link that has been created between our education systems and the ability for our small island states to survive between our educational systems and the ability for our small island states to survive in a world where knowledge is key to competitiveness. Derek Cogtown (University of Michigan) argues that the role of knowledge is leading to a whole range of new industries and new developments in biotechnology, new material science, informatics, computer science etc., thus to meet these needs, nations are called upon to improve the standards in education.

Closer to home, Dr. Claudia Harvey, UNESCO Representative and Caribbean Education Advisor points out that human development is King. She further points out that education is critical to the process. She points out that the region should seek to deliver quality education to its people. An education that addresses the following issues:

*Basic Functional Literacy: She notes that the quality we strive for cannot be achieved if our population cannot read, write and articulate. As a people we can articulate, but recent studies have shown that some of our children and adults are not reading as well as they should. Our education systems must find ways to overcome this.*

*Economic Literacy: Understanding the forces of globalization and responding adequately.*

*Cultural Literacy: do we know the strength of our family forms, our folk culture?*

*Linguistic Literacy: the ability to speak other languages.*

*Health Literacy: Living healthy lives. Primary health promotions plus changing attitudes towards HIV/AIDS prevention.*

*Entrepreneurship: The ability to seek opportunity, seek opportunity to seize opportunity, facing the risk involved therein, without being reckless.*

*Information and Communication Technologies: These have transferred the world. We must make use of them.*

I have spent a lot of energies showing why education has taken on new levels of importance. Yes, we must improve the standards in education but we must ensure that we have the right strategies. Any conversation about improving standards in education is talking about how we can achieve quality education. It is talking about what Robert a Sullo calls inspiring quality in our schools. I therefore submit to you that we need to seek to place the improvement of teaching at the center of efforts to improve schools. Why focus on the teachers? We must focus on teachers because “the society depends on teachers to mould the personalities of the youths so that they can contribute to the spiritual, moral, social, cultural and economic progress in the community. Teachers are not only the key element in the provision of good quality education and therefore critical to the success of any strategy for human resource development, but they are the chief standard bearers of the efficacy and chief agents of the effectiveness of the education process. Who the teacher is and how the teacher is perceived in society are as important as what the teacher does. (Miller et al, 1990). Have we placed the improvement of teaching at the center of our efforts to improve standards in education? Let us consider a few areas that we must address.

### **The Recruitment of Teachers:**

If we are to improve the standards in education, then we must seek to develop a recruitment and selection process that engage well qualified teacher candidates in the profession. In the Caribbean, this task of recruiting and retaining good teachers is complicated by several factors. At present morale in the teaching profession in most territories is low. The public perception of the teaching profession is that it has lost its status. Low salaries, poor formal qualifications in several instances and poor working conditions in many schools are all contributing considerably. In addition, with higher levels of general education in the population; teachers no longer command respect by venture of superior education nor are they automatically elected or appointed to leadership positions. Affirmative action is required to promote teaching as a career.

### **Standards and Assessments:**

New standards for teaching are a promising lever for transforming teacher education and professional development and ultimately teaching and learning – clearly linking teacher learning opportunities to what teachers know and are able to do. Teaching standards may also help to create greater accountability by ensuring that students are taught by teachers who are knowledgeable and competent (The national partnership for excellence and accountability in

teachers 1996). However, a great deal of work must be done, to ensure that standards really reflect the most important aspects of teaching – that is, those that are associated with teacher’s effectiveness with students. Work is also needed to ensure that new assessments are fair and appropriate – that they reflect good teaching as it occurs in different context. It is equally important to understand what kinds of learning opportunities teachers need in order to be able to meet these demanding new standards. It therefore means that the first and most important goal of teacher evaluation is not to establish a naming and blaming campaign but to identify strengths and weaknesses and implement remedial measures.

Administrators and policy makers must therefore understand their role. They must see themselves as part of the movement towards developing quality schools. For this to happen, they must seek to:

- Eliminate coercion
- Focus on quality
- Seek to evaluate themselves

They must move away from the traditional models of boss management. Bosses are listened to and obeyed, because they have power over their subordinates. They capitalize on the fear that exist in the workplace and coerce workers into doing what is expected of them. Most of our schools operate from a boss management perspective. Principals do not only boss, but they generally are bossed from above. I do not wish to suggest that bossing is always wrong and that systems that need only compliance in order to prosper cannot successfully utilize a boss management approach. The question really comes down to the mission of the system in question. As educators, we claim to want to pursue quality. If that is really true and not simply a meaningless platitude, bossing won’t work, and teachers’ unions must not allow it to persist. In order to achieve quality, boss management must give way to lead management.

The lead management differs from the boss manager in several ways. Whereas the boss tells you what to do, a leader will show you. The boss is more intent on assessing blame and controlling things by rewarding good workers and punishing poor workers. The leader on the other hand, helps each worker contribute as much as possible and is primarily interested in helping the organization pursue quality. All managers in education must seek to become lead managers if we are to improve standards in education.

### **Teacher Education and Professional Development:**

We must focus our attention on this area, under the cardinal assumption, that teacher learning, broadly construed, and is a critical determinant of educational improvement. I hasten to add that I believe that this is not a point that has been made firmly to the public, to policy makers, or in some cases to educational leaders. Our teacher education programmes must address:

- ❖ The area of initial teacher preparation. The practice of sending a student straight from schools to the classrooms without any prior training must be addressed. Often untold damage is done before that teacher even get to a teacher training college. Further research is showing that once individuals become set in their ways, it is extremely difficult to effect change.
- ❖ We must be allowed to share our best practices. We must seek to introduce induction programs and monitored experience.

We must also seek to:

### **Restructuring Schools as Learning Organization (Education Reform):**

All efforts to restructure schools must be well taught-out so that they are connected to one another and not on conflicting paths. These school reforms must take into consideration the central role of the teacher. Any reforms that do not take into account the central role teachers play in school effectiveness are unlikely to have must impact. The fact still remains that teachers' professional development is a keystone for progress in developing schools that promote high levels of student learning.

There are basically three ways to improve teaching:

- ❖ Enhance teacher capabilities
- ❖ Increase their motivation
- ❖ Create conditions in schools, which facilitate teachers use of their expertise and energy.

Rarely are motivation, capability and conditions of work addressed as a coordinator set of reform of restructuring strategies. Policy makers should note that, professional development may improve both teacher motivation and skills, but much professional development strategies are unlikely to be effective unless teacher conditions of work make possible the use of new instructional techniques and thus provide teachers with psychological rewards that follow from their high impact on higher levels of student learning. Similarly, recruitment strategies that draw new, capable individuals into teaching and new kinds of

leaders into school administration, will not succeed, unless schools are restructured to make use of their talents and sustain teachers' commitment. That is the pre-requisite must be in place. Our schools must take into consideration the health and safety of those who interface there. We must bear in mind that the teacher's working conditions is a child's learning conditions. Who is going to wish to work or continue working in a place where the bathroom facilities are inadequate, where rats run free, where the use of chemical are not monitored, where proper ventilation and lighting are not considered important. Who will want to work in a place where the stress levels are among the highest when compared to other places of work. Sadly, some of our schools in the Caribbean or by extension the world, is exactly like have been described.

Even when there are new technologies introduced, they bring with them new safety hazards that must be monitored and addressed. Policy makers must not think that teacher unions and teacher unionists are being cantankerous and a nuisance when they raise such issues, because unless we address such issues, standards in education may not be improved. They may contribute to a shortage of teachers or a shortage of quality teachers, which is an enemy of education improvement.

Consider the example of the OECD countries who have technology, money and still a shortage of teachers. The Education International Magazine reports that "London, New York, Berlin and Ruther Dom are hotspots of teacher shortage. The lack of qualified teachers lead to declining results. The daily news with many 'supply' replacement teachers have lower exam results. Education Week writes in a dossier on teacher shortage that declining position of the USA in the recent Third International Mathematics and Science Study - an international comparison of Math scores - is no coincidence but a consequence of the teacher shortage problem. The British Educational researcher John Houson links the declining results on tests in secondary education in England directly to teacher shortage".

We need to take note and see that it is not the computers, but the use of the computers. It is not just the economy but, the ethics which goes along with its use. It is not just the cognitive but the effective as well as only qualified teachers can fulfill these tasks. It is not just money, but how we spend the money.

The USA spent annually over 620 billion dollars on education. This comes to 10% of the nation's Gross Domestic Product and nearly twice as much as the defense budget. Yet, seven nations in the Western Hemisphere have functionally literacy rates below 80%. Haiti, Guatemala, Belize, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras. The mightier USA is the seventh. This is why they are busy

recruiting your qualified teachers because reality have forced them to admit that qualified teachers improve the standards of education.

The final point that I will make is that we should understand and facilitate effective partnerships if we are going to improve standards in education. Policy-makers, Universities, parents, teachers unions and other areas of civil society must take an active part. There must be a willingness to work together in the interest of our children and our nation. You see, education is a dynamic force. It is not static and quality is the best you can do at the particular time.

We must always look to improve, what is adequate today, maybe obsolete tomorrow. As partners working together, we can make a difference and improve the standards in education. I pledge the support of our teachers. I pray for God's guidance on our mission, for it was His son that said "suffer the little children to come unto me" and it is their future that is at stake. Let us continue to celebrate and cherish what we have achieved so far, but let us guard against loosing focus by becoming complacent.