

CRITICAL CHALLENGES TO EDUCATORS IN AN ERA OF RAPID GLOBALIZATION

By

Professor Frank Alleyne GCM. Ph.D

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Much of the current discussion pertaining to globalization at the local level conveys the impression that the phenomenon is something that emerged in the last decade or thereabout. It is my intention to remove this ill-informed notion from the thinking of anyone in my audience. In the real world change during any period invariably is linked to a continuum of events. The great discoveries that revolutionized civilizations did not happen overnight. The great quantum leaps were the product of sustained intellectual effort. The discovery of the computer is one such example. Through three and one-half centuries of research and sustained hard work several researchers/inventors came close to developing the computer until the machine was operationalized in 1943 to meet the exigencies of warfare. Four years later Von Neuman together with his group of designers perfected the blueprint for the modern computer. In like manner what we are witnessing today in respect to globalization has a similar history.

The foundations of 'globalization' in the modern era were laid immediately on the conclusion of the great tragedy that was the Second World War. The United States of America recognized that the US could not be prosperous without a thriving economy in Europe, and therefore put measures in place to facilitate the economic rehabilitation of Europe that was devastated by warfare. Historians refer to this early US initiative as the 'Marshall Plan', named after the US Secretary of State General George Marshall who articulated the ideas of the United States government in a speech delivered at Harvard University in 1947.

Early globalization focused on cooperation in security and economic policy between North America and Western Europe. Commencing with collaboration to reduce tariffs among the industrial countries trade and production were stimulated. Eventually, cooperation among this group of countries was widened to include services. Institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, now referred to as the 'World Bank' were put in place to ensure a level of international economic stability. The mechanism that was employed to negotiate tariff reductions among the industrial countries 'General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs' (GATT) was replaced by the World Trade Organization in the middle 1990's. Several developing countries are members of this threesome of international institutions

that exist to promote global economic stability and expansion. Some cynics refer to the process as laying the foundation for 'world government'.

Capitalist economic systems thrived under the new arrangements with cyclical setbacks referred to as recessions. The defining feature of capitalism is the search for profit. The profit motive is not confined by national frontiers. Consequently the drive to enhance profits led to transnational operations by capitalists in all spheres of economic activity. Much of the early transnational investment was directed into mining and services (banking, insurance, telecommunications, shipping).

What is new about globalization during the latter part of the 20th century is the emergence of new and modern technological, transportation and communication capabilities that have radically transformed the speed of decision making, movement of goods, location of industrial activities, and dissemination of information. Today because of the availability of powerful, high-speed computers we can move massive amounts of money between countries in mere seconds. Components of a commodity can be produced where the unit cost of production is lowest, assembled where the labour is cheapest, sold where the prices are more remunerative, and the firm incorporated where the host country's fiscal regime is most beneficial to the business. An event that occurs in the most distant part of the globe can be transmitted to any country in a matter of seconds via satellite. The new technology has literally transformed the world into a global village, where national frontiers decline in significance.

The current phase of globalization places great store on knowledge and therefore demystifies the old notion that the route to improvement in the standard of living of a nation was by control of valuable natural resources (precious metals, oil etc.) Natural resource endowments and access to capital no longer determine the wealth of nations. If that were so, Japan would be a poor country. Japan possesses no known deposits of iron ore or coal, and yet she is the world's dominant producer of steel. Today, knowledge and skills stand alone as the key determinants of the competitive advantage among nations.

The 1990's were a period of mergers and retrenchments across North America and Western Europe. A similar trend is becoming evident in the developing countries, the CARICOM is no exception. Note that the more successful firms in the 1990's generated large productivity gains by doing away with traditional functional divisions in

their workforce, pushing decision-making further down into the organization to dispense with layers of management hierarchy. All these actions require a much better educated and skilled workforce at the bottom. In the global economy of the 21st century there will be hardly any accommodation for the unskilled worker. The unit operating cost of robots are lower than comparable semi-skilled and unskilled labour in performing the same task and they do not resort to industrial action.

Because of the rapid advance of global economic change, effective strategic planning by individuals, businesses, and governments is more important to success than at any previous period of human endeavour. The approach by the Japanese government to the current global challenges is instructive. In 1990 Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry speculated as to what would be the leading industrial activities in the early part of the 21st century. After a thorough investigation of available options they came up with a package that included microelectronics, civilian aircraft manufacturing, machine tools, robots, computers (hardware, software). Note that the entire package is comprised of 'brain-power' industries that could be located anywhere in the world. Where they will be located will depend on who organizes the 'brain- power' to capture them.

What are the lessons to be learned by small developing countries such as Barbados? In the era ahead, these countries will have to invest in knowledge and skills that will enable them to attract investment in high value goods and services that allows their citizens to earn high real wages and enjoy a high standard of living. As long as these countries persist in placing the emphasis of national training programmes on acquisition of low level skills their workers will have to endure low wages and corresponding low levels of living.

The era of rapid globalization generates critical challenges for teachers as a professional class and the quality of teaching. More than ever before in order to stay relevant the teacher has to seek out opportunities for retraining and continuing education. The industrious professional teacher cannot afford to await provision by government to enable him/her to remain relevant but must pursue upgrading of skills and knowledge on her own initiative. In addition to programmes designed by government to promote retooling by teachers, it is important that government creates the environment to

encourage individual effort through an appropriate structure of incentives. There must be a consistency between performance and reward at the national level in order to induce the maximum productivity and effort by teachers. If our youths are to be prepared to compete successfully in the global arena it is essential that teachers must be challenged to contribute their best efforts towards preparing our young students for the challenges that will confront them in an era of rapid globalization. Our youth must be helped to appreciate that Sir Garfield Sobers, the late Malcolm Marshall, the Reverend Wesley Hall, Sir Everton Weekes and others who brought great credit to Barbados did not achieve greatness by limiting their vision of possibilities to Barbados. Each one of these international stars took on the best in the world and proved his worth. Our youth need the self-confidence and discipline displayed by these international stars I have mentioned.

Challenges to Educators from Globalization

One of the pivotal goals of education is the preparation of the individual to cope successfully with the challenges of his environment. Because globalization exerts a fundamental impact on the socioeconomic fabric of all societies, it is imperative that our education/training policies and programmes be structured to enable all people and particularly the youth to benefit from the opportunities created by globalization.

Rapid technological change is one of the defining features of globalization in the 21st century. It impacts on all aspects of our daily life, including how individuals interface with financial institutions, commerce, and access to information. Ultimately it will impact upon the relationship between the individual and the State. Today, a minimal level of comfort in the use of technology is essential to effective functioning in society.

Technological progress introduces new ways of producing and distributing goods and services. The process requires adaptation by individuals to the new technology. In essence, the demand is generated for flexibility in thinking and acquisition of new skills. In order to be relevant in an era of rapid technological change the teaching fraternity must be committed to continuing learning. There must be no place in the education system of the future for individuals whose reading is confined to the daily newspaper.

The teaching fraternity has a pivotal role to play in equipping our youth with the skills to face the challenge of globalization with confidence. Teachers who function at

the pre-school, infants, and junior levels are critical to the attainment of our national education goals. There is an abundance of research that supports the thesis that children absorb ideas at a rapid rate in their early formative years. It is absolutely imperative that our infant and junior school students be introduced to the fundamental concepts of Mathematics in the correct manner if we are to overcome the 'bogey man' that Mathematics has been for generations of our people. Our infants must be exposed to teachers who enjoy literature.

I trust that the notion that the most inexperienced teacher should be assigned to the teaching of infants is a thing of the past. I have never encountered a normal young child who was not inquisitive. If we fail to build upon that love for inquiry by our youth in their early school life we will lose out in the competition. Unfortunately, the public perception of our primary schools is measured by their performance in the eleven plus examination. The urge to satisfy public expectation leads to a regimentation of students' thinking in several of our schools. Such regimentation in schools is inimical to development of our young peoples' capacity for inquiry and creativity. Moreso than in any previous period of human existence we need to encourage our youth to develop a capacity for critical thought and inquiry.

Much attention has been directed to the adverse consequences created by the current system of transfer from primary to secondary school. That system destroys the self-esteem of many of our youth and contributes to much of the senseless crime in our society. Equally important to national progress is the restructuring of the education system to enable all youth to achieve their full potential. Barbados has been slow to provide specialized education and training facilities for slow learners. Some progress has been achieved, but much more needs to be done. Provision for slow learners still depends to a great extent on the interests and financial capability of parents/guardians of this group of students. A similar observation is pertinent in respect of the physically handicapped.

A glaring omission in our national education programme is an absence of provision for our most gifted students. I know of no provision by the State that caters specifically to this group of young people. It is vital to our progress as a society that we include the needs of all students in our planning.

Globalization in the 21st century requires an effective partnership between all stakeholders in education in order to design and implement a programme that prepares our youth to compete and win in the new economic order. I refer in particular to cooperation between officials of the Ministry of Education and Culture, teachers' organizations, school principals, teachers, parents, and children. The frictions that exists between these stakeholders must be replaced by a recognition that all stakeholders have a vital role to play in the process of preparing our children to face the challenges of a world without frontiers. The need is for genuine consultation and collaboration and less one-upmanship.

I am aware that the quality of teaching in some of our primary schools compares favorably with the best in other parts of the world. Barbados can still boast of possessing highly dedicated primary and infant school teachers. I speak from a first-hand knowledge of our situation because my four daughters were educated in government schools. I can attest to the level of care and professionalism that was brought to bear on their early schooling. It is with deep regret that I observe that inspite of an excellent record by some of our finest teachers they do not get promoted. Education policy makers must address this issue as a matter of the greatest urgency because it sends wrong signals to young graduates contemplating a career in teaching.

Finally, it is important that we assist our teachers to stay relevant in respect to their work. The teachers' trade union and the Ministry of Education and Culture may wish to consider establishing a 'resource centre' that caters to teachers' needs for information on matters pertaining to their work and to the enrichment of their knowledge. The resource centre will address the demand for literature pertaining to all aspects of education and teaching methodology, as well as provide access to relevant databases. The teaching/learning environment of today is far more taxing than when I entered the teaching service many years ago. Because of the challenging environment that confronts our teachers, it is absolutely important to the progress of our society that members of the teaching conduct themselves in a manner that earns the respect and support of the public. I am confident that the vast majority of our teachers will respond to the challenges of this era and ensure that successive generations of our youth are prepared to face the future with confidence.

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