

The Challenges to the Barbados Education System in the 21st Century

By Dan C. Carter

The beginning of the last decade of the twentieth century saw UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCO and the World Bank collaborating in putting together perhaps the largest and most significant conference on education. This international gathering of educators met under the label, the World Conference on Education for all – Meeting Basic Learning Needs. The conference was held in Jomtien, Thailand from March 5 to 9, 1990.

The importance of this major education meeting was seen in the fact that Barbados was represented by three of its top education officials – the then Minister of Education, the Hon. Cyril Walker, Permanent Secretary, Mr. Beasley Maycock, and the Chief Education Officer, Mr. Ralph Boyce. Its purpose was “to draw attention to the importance and impact of basic education, and to forge a global consensus and commitment to provide basic education for all.”¹

The reality then was, and still is, that in spite of efforts of all countries to provide basic education for all their citizens, there still remain more than one hundred million children and countless adults who fail to complete basic education programmes, with millions more who ‘satisfy the attendance requirements but do not acquire knowledge and skills’.

The World Conference on Education for All (EFA) then set out three principal objectives:

- 1) to highlight the importance and impact of basic education, and renew commitment to make it available to all;
- 2) to forge a global consensus on a framework for action to meet the basic learning needs of children, youth and adults; and
- 3) to provide a forum for sharing experiences and research results to invigorate ongoing and planned programmes.²

These three objectives are indeed laudable, and while (2) and (3) are achievable within the context of UNESCO, it is fair to conclude that Barbados has achieved the first

(1) objective. While this is an enviable accomplishment for a small country, the challenges to our educational system in the twenty-first century are already ominous.

Globalization

The most identifiable challenge seems to be that of globalization which is essentially about the major industrialized capitalist countries strengthening their trading groups and competitiveness within the international economy. At the same time, underdeveloped and developing countries have had, from the earliest times of colonialism, to continue to negotiate with the developed world, preferential markets for their primary products, whether it be sugar, coffee or bananas.

This economic arrangement has not always been to the advantage of the poorer countries of the world. Subjected to the vagaries of international trade, they have never been in a strong position to demand a fair price for their products. The end result has been that the third world has been constantly faced with varying degrees of poverty, malnutrition, high levels of unemployment, over-population and inadequate and poorly supported education systems.

However, unlike most developing countries, Barbados, even prior to 1993 when there was consistent negative growth, was still able to survive with its education system virtually intact. Since 1993, with unbroken growth rates, the system has been able to maintain its expansion. What then is the impact of globalization on the education system?

What globalization has done is to force the government to re-examine its revenue earning foreign exchange options. With sugar on the decline and its quota with the European Union under constant threat, Barbados has strategically opted for a service-based economy with tourism and international business services the leading exchange earners. In addition, globalization, which according the Minister of Education, Mia Mottley, will make geography and space irrelevant, will create a world market in which competitiveness of goods and services will be the new *modus operandi*. Accompanying this change has been the phenomenal expansion in technological innovations.

If Barbados is ever to maintain its social and economic stability in this new world of trade liberalization and the technological revolution now sweeping the world, then it must reform its educational system. This will mean the creation of a system of education and training that would facilitate a job market that will be subject to/able to accommodate constant change. A key factor in this process must therefore be the role of tertiary education.

Access to Tertiary Education

In order, therefore, for a country like Barbados to become competitive within the global village, there needs to be greater access to tertiary level education. Professor Hillary Beckles has alluded constantly to this imperative within Caribbean education systems. Writing in the Daily Nation, Beckles had this to say:

The regional trend, then is consistent with the global response to find new synergies in order to facilitate the central role of higher education in development paradigms with the globalising economy and society that is driven by new information and communication technologies.³

It is significant to note that the more economically successful Asian countries have access to tertiary level education that more than quadrupled those of the Caribbean. For instance, while in 1995 Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago had enrolment ratios of 8 and 6 percent respectively of the 20 to 24 year age populations, South Korea and Singapore had 52 and 34 percent respectively. Within the British Caribbean itself, the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) have less than ten percent of their population accessing tertiary education while Barbados is nearer 20 percent.

In fact, this question of access was highlighted in September last year when it was revealed that of the 5000 persons qualified to enter the Barbados Community College, only approximately one third was able to do so. One suggestion to increase access was

proffered by prominent trade unionist, Patrick Frost, who, at last year's Education Month John Cumberbatch Memorial Lecture, suggested that all secondary schools have sixth forms. On the contrary, I would abolish all sixth forms at secondary schools and convert either Harrison College or Queen's College into a branch of the Community College. In any case, the creation of the College was originally to replace the sixth forms. Finding increasing access must be constantly on the agenda of the educational planners.

Curriculum Reform

Perhaps the most commonly talked about subject in education is curriculum reform, this is so since education is seen as the strategic tool in the social and economic development of all countries. Within the last thirty years there has been an attempt to adapt the curriculum to facilitate the changes occurring in society. However, the momentum for curriculum reform had quickened within the 1990s and this trend is set to continue into the twenty-first century. I will, though, discuss the topic from the perspective of the public and not that of the professional educator.

The daily papers are generally replete with calls for the inclusion of one topic or another to be on the school curriculum. Whenever there is a downturn in the tourist industry, there is the call for tourism to be part of the school curriculum. A similar cry goes up when a tourist is attacked! When the industrial climate is threatened with strike action the labour leaders or the employers, whoever seem the more disadvantaged, demand that industrial relations be taught in the schools. When parents abuse children, the community raises its voice for the teaching of sex and family life education. Also, the recent increase in violence and crime is accompanied by the plea for the teaching of conflict resolution by the church leaders. And the story goes on.

These public calls for curriculum inclusion in response to the many societal and economic developments have seen the school curriculum under virtual siege. While the school is seen as the obvious institution to provide all the remedies of society's ills, the reality is that a curriculum cannot be the panacea for every problem. Of critical importance is the thrust of the new Curriculum 2000 which is being piloted in our

primary and secondary schools. This curriculum, which will be mostly technologically driven, should provide the creative teacher with enough scope to incorporate many of the topics of public interest.

The tourism sector and the private sector will be pleased to note that conversational Spanish and Information Technology will be on the primary curriculum. At the cultural level, the curriculum will now include Social Studies, African Heritage Studies and Citizenship. In addition, greater focus will be placed on such areas as music, dance and drama. Curriculum reform will be an ongoing exercise to meet the rapid socio-cultural, economic and political changes in Barbadian society.

AIDS

At the beginning of the decade the AIDS threat in Barbados was not as ominous as it is now. At that time adults were mostly affected. Today, the virus is threatening the lives of our unborn, as it is estimated that one percent of all pregnant women are infected with the HIV/AIDS virus. According to Prime Minister, Owen Arthur, the question of AIDS “is an issue that encompasses economic, social, cultural and educational developmental areas and requires a form of central coordination to make sure that the multi-sectoral, multi-disciplinary approach is going to be effective”. There is no doubt that this scourge will be with us as a twenty-first century challenge. The educational system therefore has to strategize itself to deal with this issue at the classroom level. But will it be easy?

Ever since the seventies when sex education was being introduced into the classroom, teachers have generally shied away from the topic, to the extent that it is rarely discussed today. It was first taught as a component of health education and has finally ended up in family life education. Will teachers now be more easily persuaded to join in an education programme to heighten students’ awareness of the deadly threat of this disease? Have we as yet developed the self-confidence to deal honestly and positively with our own sexuality? I doubt it very much.

However, the threat of this pandemic is such that it threatens to decimate the younger generation. David de Ferranti, Vice President of the World Bank for Latin America and the Caribbean, remarked that as persons become infected with the fatal

disease, the consequences will be “more children without parents” and “classrooms without teachers.”⁴ Barbados has at the moment some 160 orphans. Continuing AIDS education must, therefore, be on the front burner as an urgent curriculum initiative within our classrooms.

The Teacher

In spite of all the modern technologies that have invaded the classroom, the teacher remains the single most important key to the success of an effective school system. It is still the teacher that the student looks to for moral guidance and intellectual stimulation. It is, therefore, within this context that society must seek to safeguard the interest and well-being of the teacher. This is particularly so today when the teacher's job is more than passing on knowledge to his or her charges, but more of ensuring that they are brought up to understand the dangers of modern society in the form of drugs, aids and violence.

Acknowledging that the school continues to play an important role in the moral development of the child, the teacher's task will become more complex and foreboding. Teachers will most likely be asking for greater monetary rewards for their time, more affordable health insurance against stress-related illnesses, shorter working hours, opportunities for females to bring up their children and return to the classroom, increased payment for those who are effective workers but do not want higher administrative roles, and improved job security.

In conclusion, I would say that we in Barbados have enjoyed the benefits of a sound education system. It is a system that has produced the human resources that have contributed to Barbados placing number 30 (the first in the English speaking Caribbean) in the Human Development Report, 2000. Since Jomtien, Barbados' biggest immediate threat to its own educational success, in my opinion, will be the economic fallout that could come in positioning itself to maximize the full benefits of globalization. I have no doubt that our educational challenges at the onset of the twenty-first century will be addressed with our customary resolution and creativity.

Dan C. Carter is an educator with a special interest in the history of developments in education. He can be reached at the Ministry Of Education, Youth Affairs & Culture, The Elsie Payne Complex, Constitution Road, St. Michael. Barbados. West Indies.

References

¹ Education for All: Purpose and Context, xi.

² Final Report: World Conference on Education for All (UNESCO) 2.

³ Hilary Beckles, "New Path for Education," The Daily Nation 3 Sept. 2000, 8A.

⁴ The Barbados Advocate 12 Sept. 2000, 6.