

I consider this to be one of the greatest honours to have been bestowed on me in my few years on this earth. When I was first informed about the theme

**“Reassessing the role of education in these challenging economic times”**, I thought to myself what an interesting and appropriate topic. I must commend the person or persons for having the sagacity or foresight for choosing such a topic. It is timely, and, hopefully much positive and constructive discussion will be generated after my discourse here tonight.

My approach to such a topic will be to dissect it; examine the role or roles of education, the challenges which confront us in these harsh economic times and offer suggestions as to how making some readjustment to the role/roles of education can bring about some positive change to meet and address these challenges. First of all, the topic assumes that there are roles of education and more specifically, roles of education in times when we are not confronted with economic challenges or difficulties. In other words, we cannot reassess something that does not exist. Therefore, ladies and gentlemen, it is necessary to examine some of the major roles of education so that we can conduce which role or roles we need to reassess. What are some of these roles of education.

Let me establish up front, that I will not be dwelling too much on the educational jargonize as espoused by the theorists or functionalists such as Durkeim / Parsons.

I do not intend to befuddle you or myself with such theories of education, set in antiquity and, for some, appear to be cast in stone. Rather, I just want to examine these roles in a realistic and practical way.

**1<sup>st</sup> Socialisation** – Training the whole child in areas such as honesty, fair play, consideration for others, sense of right and wrong and, more recently how not to be a bully.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Transmit central knowledge** – facilitates the cultural transmission in all societies – beliefs and skills, religious values, morals and society's rules etc.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Reformation of attitudes** – correct those false attitudes / beliefs which children have.

**4<sup>th</sup> Team spirit** - Build team spirit while at the same time instilling a sense of responsibility.

These can be classified as some of the social roles which education plays in our society. I don't see the need to reassess these particular roles. What we need to do, however, is to reinforce them even more at this juncture in our development. So you might be wondering then which role or roles should we reassess.

**5<sup>th</sup>** To teach children to pass the Common Entrance and by extension, to get scholarships. This role may not be found in any educational manual but it is one which has surfaced and assumed a prominent role or the number one role, in our educational system in Barbados. We have sat back and watched helplessly, as parents, media, both print and electronic and society as a whole, foist this role on our educational system. Indeed, I am sure that if you were to ask parents of primary school children why they send their children to school, the overwhelming majority would tell you to learn so that they can pass the Common Entrance for a "good

school". I would be surprised if they mention the other roles which I have previously referred to.

We have allowed society, more or less, to hijack our system and attach more significance to the passing of the common entrance than to anything else in education. Certainly the two most important days on our calendar, surpassing independence, emancipation day and even Election Day are the Common Entrance day and the day that the results go back to the Schools. No other days generate such hype, debate, discussion, passion and interest as these two days, followed closely by the two days after the results where parents proceed to throng the Ministry in hundreds, seeking transfers for their children. Certainly, these events and actions by parents demonstrate clearly that they see the main role of primary school education is to pass the Common Entrance. Every parent wants his or her child to go to a good school and become a doctor or lawyer – a thought which originated in the 1950s / 60s and one which still dominates and consumes us up today in 2012. A thought whose roots and branches have been allowed to grow and spread so deep and wide that it has become a part of our culture. As far as some parents and some members of wider society are concerned, those other roles of education pale in comparison to that of educating children to pass the Common Entrance. We have to ask ourselves if this is a legitimate role of our education, and if it is, should it be accorded such eminence, ranking above all other roles in our educational system.

There is another role, however, ladies and gentlemen, which I must draw to your attention; one which has been submerged or buried under those other roles that I have mentioned. One which we now have to reach under, extract, dust off, breathe new life into it and use it otherwise we will sink further into the economic mire. Ladies and gentlemen that

role is the economic role of education. It is a role of education to provide the economic needs of society. The educational system is responsible for the state of a nation and this state is conditioned by the quality of the educational system. Educational planning must anticipate and understand the needs of the future. It must be responsive and be effective in creating programmes to meet the needs of the future. It must be proactive. Educational policy should never be static but should be flexible, be willing to bend and go in the direction of society's needs. This, ladies and gentlemen, is not happening now. Educational planners should ask two questions. What are the problems facing society and what can we do to help solve these problems? The answers to these two questions should inform our future educational planning.

We cannot isolate the needs of our society and bury our heads in the sand while puffing up or beating up our chest about how many or who is going to the top schools while ignoring the challenges that we are facing. Having examined the roles let us now look at the economic challenges that are confronting us.

What are these economic challenges that we are facing?

1. Unemployment – 11.5%;
2. High food import bill of nearly \$600 million per year. Dr. Chelston Brathwaite reported that if we do more we can cut that bill by \$100 million and generate about four thousand jobs;
3. High energy bill – 500 million a year. Together food and energy bill total \$1.1 billion per year;
4. High cost of living;

5. High wage bill;

Ladies and gentlemen here in lies the conundrum. Which role or roles can we reassess to help address these economic challenges and how? I posit the view that we have to resuscitate the economic role of education, attach a greater level of significance to it and point it in the direction of those challenges which I have just mentioned.

How much are we spending on education? First the question must be asked if we are spending enough on education to redirect along the path that it should now go.

A former governor of the Central Bank, while delivering a lecture at the Frank Collymore Hall noted that between 1966 and 2000 we spent approximately US \$15 billion (BDS \$30 billion in 34 years)

The late Prime Minister made mention of the fact that we spend close to half billion dollars annually on education. Between 1997 and 2003, the average spent of UWI education was between 50 – 55 million per year. Between 2010 and 2011 this figure rose close to \$127 million and I understand we owe the University close to \$150 million. So yes we are allocating adequate resources on education to redirect along that path. In other words, it is not starved for resources.

The question must be asked, how is it that we are spending so much money on education annually, and yet, if one of the main roles of education is to provide the economic needs of society, as mentioned before, we have the economy hemorrhaging in critical areas? Yet the only thing we are concerned about is how many children are going to a particular school, how many passed the Common Entrance and how many scholarships a particular school gets. Ladies and gentlemen, such should not be dominating our

thoughts at this time. What we should be more concerned about and asking ourselves are:

How can education help to stop some of the leakages in our economy? Are we providing the skills to plug these holes? These are questions that should be engaging our urgent attention at this time.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am not questioning rather or not we are spending money in the right or wrong direction. That is not for me to determine. All I am asking is if the time is not right for us to redirect or divert some of these resources into programmes targeting these economic challenges with the hope of bringing about some positive change. In other words, education needs to pay more serious attention at filling some of these ever-widening holes in our economy, namely unemployment, high important food bill and the high energy import bill. We cannot continue to sidestep or skirt these issues and hope that they disappear or that someone will wave a magic wand and they will vanish instantly. They are here and will remain here until we do something about them. In the meantime, it cannot be business as usual. So all those who think that the only role for education in our society is to pass the Common Entrance and see how many grade ones a school can get, must think again.

They must realise that education has a much bigger role to play.

Ladies and gentlemen, I did not come here tonight to sound off or to pour negative criticism on the roles of our educational system. In fact, our system has served us well and has fulfilled its original role or mandate as envisioned by our forefathers and educators of the fifties through to the eighties; namely that of supplying workers for the commercial banks, the civil service, the clerical field, the legal and medical professions. Is it time to say, in the words of a popular maxim, well done thou good and faithful servant, you have served us well but it's time to move on. This is the time to make changes, not wholesale nor cosmetic but real and practical

changes to the role of our educational system. This is a new era, fraught with many economic challenges. We need education now, more than ever, to chart the road ahead, identify the obstacles to prosperity and define what actions we can take that can return us to economic growth.

Ladies and gentlemen, as I have stated before, I did not come to pull down or tear down but to offer my humble suggestions for the way forward. These, ladies and gentlemen, are my suggestions to bring about some change in our educational policy that would reflect the economic challenges we are facing and how to meet these challenges head on. I propose that such a policy should place more emphasis on the following areas: Awareness, Agriculture, Arts, Sports, Entrepreneurship, Conservation and innovation.

### **AWARENESS**

We cannot implement change unless our citizens are au fait with events that are causing this change. We cannot assume that our citizens / students know about our challenges. Therefore it is the role of education to make our citizens aware of any challenges which we face. We must encourage our citizens to use the technology to research and seek information. It follows that every village / area in Barbados should have access to reliable internet / WIFI service and other electronic devices. E.g. India. We cannot keep our citizens ignorant about global events and how these events are impacting us and then expect them to embrace change.

The construction of three quasi or semi specialist schools which will feature agriculture, arts and sports.

### **AGRICULTURE**

With a food import bill of nearly \$600 million annually and climbing, clearly there is a need for a

much bigger role for agriculture and it should start with our educational system. I propose that every primary and secondary school should have a kitchen garden, even if it's only one bed. If there is no space, then have them use cans cut in half and car tyres. But every child in our schools should be exposed to agriculture. Every year group should have at least one garden bed in every school.

I also propose a quasi agricultural school to be set up in the country on good agricultural land and not rab land. This school should have about 5-6 acres of land attached to it. It should provide basic academics up to 3<sup>rd</sup> form and if the students show an inclination towards the academics then they should be absorbed in other schools, if not point them in the direction of agriculture, arts or sports. Conversely, if students in other schools, when they reach 3<sup>rd</sup> form show absolutely no interest in the academics, they can be transferred to one of these three specialist schools where they can be taught skills from a very young age. We send children to school from nursery until they reach 16 -17 years old. They leave school with little or no certification, after spending 12 -14 years in school, having a variety of academic subjects thrust down their throats, only to be told to go and work somebody's ground. You did not expose this child to a mango seed while he spent 12 – 14 years in school, but yet we say to him, go and work somebody ground. We fail to realise that it is not how long children spend at school but rather what they gather and how they will use it to benefit themselves and the country as a whole. In other words, longevity at school is not all that matters. I know, that because of our age old concept that education only relates to books and passing exams, that some parents will cringe at the thought of their children dirtying up their hands in dirt. Some will even go so far as to tell you that they did not send to school their children to "wuk nuh land". This, ladies and gentlemen, is where our educational system must take the leading role in transforming and debunking those ancient thoughts and perceptions. We must seek to demystify those myths which surround education and agriculture. We must not only put in place plans to revive our agricultural sector but execute those plans. In other



words, no time for rhetoric. We must readjust our focus at this time. E.g. China in 1980 – 70% were in agriculture, in 2000, 47% - Why?) – make everything from gun powder to pencils. (USA, Japan, West Germany, Canada) all made rapid economic growth) – have one thing common – the important role of educational institutions). Brazil did it – 3 decades ago was a major food importer now Brazil is a food exporter utilising every square inch of land for agriculture. While we are using ours to grow lawns. Agriculture must play a much bigger role and every one of us must be involved. We must train or retrain our citizens to meet those jobs that are out there and definitely employment opportunities abound in this area.

### **ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

Like agriculture, we need a well thought out plan also as it relates to entrepreneurship. We don't need to flood the economy with one set of entrepreneurs e.g. 500 cosmetologists if the economy doesn't need them. We must find out what the economy needs and develop the entrepreneurs to meet these needs. I know that we teach entrepreneurship in Secondary schools and I know about the valuable role which YESS plays in our schools also. We have to get our students from very young, primary school, thinking about having their own business. Give them the areas that are available out there and point out and guide them in these areas rather than forcing them into areas of employment that are already saturated or over saturated. Being an entrepreneur is not limited to having a small office or salon but also means being self employed in a number of areas, using a skill or talent. What areas am I speaking about? The Arts – Drama / Dance/Acting/ Music/singing/writing/rhythm poetry etc. I propose the establishment of an arts school similar to that of an agricultural school minus the five or six acres of land attached to it. On completion, our young people can

market their talent while at the same time becoming young entrepreneurs or self employed professionals.

I also propose that we establish a Sports School, which will be managed along the same lines where there is an academic programme but placing more emphasis on the various disciplines in sports. It is time we stop making sport at sports and realise its true potential. Put another way, we need to diversify our educational product if we are to survive in these harsh economic times.

### **INNOVATION**

Ladies and gentlemen we have a high appetite for fossil energy - a five hundred million a year appetite which we cannot sustain for much longer. Some of our educational resources and training should be diverted to research renewable energy / alternative energy. We need to have greater inputs from our brilliant young people. We need to find a few “Steve Jobs (of Apple)”, Bill Gates in our midst but we must lay the foundation. We need to get our young people making or creating things that will cut down on our energy bill. We need to motivate them to be thinkers, creators, manufacturers and not just regurgitators. We need to let them know that life is not one big fete. Here are some areas that we can get our young people involved in and please leave out the lame excuses about raw materials etc. We have to find ways of getting around these obstacles to manufacturing or

making things in Barbados.

- Solar indoor lights (Solar powered desks and floor\_lamp) that capture light energy during the day and store in batteries;

- Outdoor lights;
- Solar chargers for electronics –\_cell phone, laptops,\_MP3 players, Ipads, Kindles
- Smart Meter Devices

## **Solar Ovens**

## **Solar garbage bins**

There are many careers that be found in renewable

energy areas – Wholesalers / retailers / engineers(Electrical / mechanical/ chemical) sell, manufacture / design / build / install / maintain etc. In fact there were 3.5 million people employed in this area globally in 2010, up from 3 million in 2009 and from 2.46 million in 2006. Most of these jobs were in small and medium sized enterprises with the most being in China, Brazil, Germany, India and the United States.

In fact, B.P. says that it is continually looking for talented, committed and ambitious people to work in its renewable energy programme and has invested close to 8 billion dollars in alternative energy. The point is that we need to teach or train or retrain our young people to work in these areas. Not only will we be lowering our

high energy bill but we will be providing employment for our young people.

Many countries have identified the promotion of renewable energy as an efficient way of addressing poverty by creating new jobs and new enterprises. What are we waiting for? I know the government has initiated a programme in this area for businesses but that would have the trickle down effect. We need to get our young brilliant people on board and what better way than through changes in our educational planning.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we can do it. Back in the late 1990's we did it when we reassessed the economic role of education and went the I.T. route with Edutech. We

spent close to \$290 million upgrading our schools to make them I.T. compatible. There is now a need for us to refocus or shift again to suit the needs of society. What I have proposed here tonight will cost a fraction of what was spent on I.T. and will go some way in helping the economy. Teachers and the ministry cannot do it alone. We need everyone to be on board. It must be a national effort and 30 mps can't do it alone. No one man or one party can fix it. The solution lies in our educational system and the collective participation of our citizens. Around this time, some of them will come with vote catching clichés and pie in the sky promises. We need to start now. If the curriculum in schools is over-crowded, then get rid of some of the excess and make room for agriculture / innovation/creativity and a new vision. We need to readjust and reassess that economic role of education which is crying out for resuscitation and redirect along the path in helping us to achieve some measure of economic growth. Education definitely has a role to play in these challenging economic times.

Herbert Reifer