

**ADDRESS GIVEN AT THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE  
BARBADOS UNION OF TEACHERS ON MONDAY APRIL 4, 2005 AT  
ALMOND BAY**

**By**

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Distinguished Guests

As a practicing member of the education community, I am indeed grateful for this opportunity to address the annual conference of the Barbados Union of Teachers in an era of global education reform. While by the theme for this conference it is obvious that you are concerned about violence in school, a phenomenon that you would like to see eradicated, I believe that your primary concern is about the promoting and enhancing learning at all levels of the education system. Hence, you would not be disappointed if I do not confine myself to your theme and make short detours into other areas that impact the delivery of education and, ultimately, student learning. I believe that you are concerned with all factors, but one needs a concentration in any conference, and with the apparent rise in school violence this ought to be the concentration at this time.

I believe, Madame President, that even as we contemplate this you are pondering the social fall-out of the recent events surrounding our correctional facilities at Glendairy. You must be wondering what are the economic and social costs to the education system and the wider community of any disruption of a social entity that is an integral part of the

system to maintain social order. I am sure that we will hear the social commentators from the regional university and the community university, often referred to as the call-in programmes.

But first I will address the issue of school violence. The first question that comes to mind is, “Is the apparent increase in school violence real or imagined?” If it is real, in what areas are the increases taking place? Student on student, student on teacher, teacher on student, or parent on teacher? Where is the data to support the assertion? As usual, we have not been accumulating the data, neither have we been conducting the research. As I tried to uncover the data, I found that there was none. Of course we then go to the jurisdiction where we are sure to find data and we try to extrapolate. However, due to the differences in culture, structure of systems and size of community, great caution would have to be exercised in extrapolating available data from other jurisdictions to the Barbadian context. In spite of the penetration of our cultural mores through travel and satellite television, it may be argued that we still retain some aspects of our culture that make us uniquely Barbadian.

Despite the absence of empirical data, much has been said about violence in schools in Barbados and the English-speaking Caribbean. According to the Barbados Advocate of 4 March 2005, “[Mrs.] Wendy Griffith-Watson, Chief Education Officer, suggested that dysfunctional family structures are at the root of problems with drugs and violence in the islands secondary school. ... She further stated that the home situation impacted greatly on a child’s behaviour and children who lived in violent situations found it extremely difficult to deal with. She stated that most violent children have problems at home and that neither the children alone nor the school alone can deal with it.”

According to the Caribbean Net News, Guyana’s Minister of Education, Dr Henry Jeffrey, believes that violence in schools is part of the overall problem of violence in society and that a valid violence prevention strategy is to encourage improvement in the academic achievement of students and young people as a whole. Dr. Jeffrey contended

that school is the ideal place in which to implement interventions designed to reduce the problem of violence in the society. The Caribbean Net News also pointed out instances of extreme violence in schools in Antigua, Trinidad and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

However, while pointing out extreme cases reminds us that we have to implement measures to reduce whatever incidences of school violence that do exist, it does not necessarily present evidence of an increase in violence at schools. We have to be aware of the perceptions. It is interesting that the incident that heightened our awareness was a parent on teacher one. Those kinds of incidences are probably not nearly as frequent as student on student violence, which is the one that may be causing us the most concern.

Someone said that the common entrance examination is the cause of all the problems at the secondary school. They said that for two years the children do two subjects (English and Math) then they are thrust into situations where they have to cope with eight subjects and the frustrations cause all sorts of unsavory behaviour. My friend said that if we carry a full curriculum of English, Math, Science and Social Studies throughout the seven years of primary school, children would make better transition to secondary school and fewer problems would emerge.

Of course you know that that is a very simplistic view of a complex issue.

Is it any consolation that the majority of students will never experience school violence?

Reluctantly, I go to the research conducted in the USA, not to tell you what the data says about the frequency of occurrences, but to tell you how students feel about the issue. Edward Gaughan and Jay Cerio, in *Lethal Violence in Schools: A National Study Final Report* noted that:

- Teenagers say that revenge is the strongest motivation for school violence
- Students recognize that being a victim of abuse at home or witnessing others abused at home may cause violence in school

- Students have access to weapons
- Only half the students would tell an adult if they overheard someone at school talking plans to be involved in violence
- Better relationships between teachers and students are one way to stop violence in schools.

These findings ought to be instructive to the Barbadian education system.

Three sentences in the recommendations for improvement I found most appealing. *“We cannot continue to allow bullying and abuse as normal milestones of child development. We need to communicate the value of caring, and demonstrate that care. We need to provide alternatives to violence for problem-solving, to encourage more frequent, open, and genuine communication between students and the adults who care for them, at home, at school, in the community.”*

I believe this takes us back to the concept of the village raising the child. I don't think that we should relieve the village of that responsibility. Since we are all stakeholders in the community each of us has the responsibility to ensure the moral upbringing of the children. So the community also has a responsibility to assist parents in developing the appropriate skills for their roles as parents. I particularly like the admonition given to parents by developmental psychologist Robert Kegan to:

- Take charge of the family; establish rules and roles; institute a vision of family purpose
- Support the ongoing growth of the young, including their growth within and away from the family
- Set limits on children and on oneself to preserve and protect childhood
- Communicate well, directly, and fairly.

But who will provide the support for those parents who lack the skill and independence to be assertive enough to follow Kegan's advice? That is where the social agencies need to

come together to participate in the concept of the village raising the child. Educational institutions need to work closely with agencies such as PAREDOS to provide the parents with the requisite skills to enable them to complement the work of the schools.

At the tertiary level we are concerned about violence in schools because what happens in the primary and secondary sector soon makes its way into the tertiary sector. Although we have not been collecting the data either it does appear to us that we too are experiencing an increase of violence (mainly student on student) at the tertiary level.

I wish, however, to focus just a bit on the teaching and learning (scholarship) that takes place or ought to take place in our education system. I wonder whether we are doing enough to ensure that the majority of Barbadians are getting maximum results from the system. To put it another way, is the Barbadian public getting optimum returns from its investment in education? Despite the fact that we achieved 100% participation in primary and secondary education years ago, and that we have fully democratized tertiary education and are in the process of the massification of the tertiary sector, there are many among us who would wish to continue to perpetuate the elitist philosophy that scholarship can only emerge from certain corridors.

It is that elitist mindset that prevents our 9 to 11 year old children from having access to a full primary curriculum and restricts them to a diet of English and Arithmetic for two years when they could have the opportunity to expand their knowledge in the areas of science, social studies and the humanities. That mindset asks us to accept that there is equity in the system with the resources spread fairly among the schools but maintains a pecking order in the allocation of students. I believe that a good grounding in the sciences at the primary level would provide a solid foundation on which to launch a secondary curriculum. Hence we must move towards restoring the balance at the primary level so that the full curriculum is taught right through to class four. This may result in a reduction of the frustration students face in making the transition to secondary schools and, consequently, less disruption at that level.

We must not only implement support structures to buttress academic performance, but we must also implement systems for the physical and social development of the children. We must ensure that there are mechanisms that would permit needy children to be assured of lunch and bus fare. We must not permit our children to feel that they are not cared for.

People who possess the elitist mindset try to convince the general public that scholarship is only found in the traditional areas of study and that the technical vocational areas do not have scholarship associated with them. However, when we define scholarship as **the knowledge, methods, discipline and attainment of a scholar or scholars, that is, knowledge resulting from study and research in a particular field**, we recognize that it is achievable in any discipline and that those who achieve it are worthy of acknowledgement.

The institution with which I am associated is committed to the philosophy that there should be both quality and equity in education, and hence has developed standards to ensure that students across its comprehensive range of programmes are able to attain scholarship so that they may engage in continuous lifelong learning. The College does not concentrate its efforts on assisting a few to receive special awards, but rather on getting the students it receives from the country's 23 secondary schools to learn a method of inquiry and to learn how to learn. The emphasis is on the learning.

To achieve this, the college hires well-qualified staff, assists them with professional development and engages in continuous examination of its systems in its quest towards continuous improvement. It is no wonder then that the regional examinations body uses the BCC staff to be chief examiners and assistant chief examiners of most of its CAPE subjects. I am saying to you that the custodians of the BCC curriculum and examination system are also the custodians of examinations at CXC.

I support the position a lack of academic achievement may lead to undesirable behaviour, including violence. I also believe that all students are capable of success, not necessarily in the traditional academic areas. So we must try to find the areas that would permit our

students to taste success. A taste of success and recognition of achievement may lead to less deviant behaviour.

Madame President,

Ladies and Gentlemen

I thank you.

## References

Kegan, Robert. (1994). In *Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.