

Friday 9th October, 2009, Tobago - TTUTA's PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT DAY

Theme: 30 years united, resolute and growing – managing diversity

Leela Ramdeen's Feature address

Good morning brothers and sisters. It is indeed a privilege to be able to share my thoughts with you today on the theme: *30 years united, resolute and growing – managing diversity*. I congratulate TTUTA for staying the course over the past 30 years. And I congratulate you for your commitment to professional development. I pay tribute to all of you as you are the pillars of education. You open the doors to a better world for the nation's children.

As one of our past scholarship winners (2003), Nalini Maharaj, said when she credited her teachers for contributing to her success: "If you have a teacher that motivates you, you can get anywhere."

One of the aims of TTUTA is to promote and protect the professional, economic, spiritual and social well-being of its members. The development of any quality assurance system must include ongoing, high-quality professional development for the members of any organization.

This is particularly critical for the teaching profession if teachers are to keep abreast of developments in education, deepen and broaden their knowledge of content, and improve their practice thus enhancing the teaching and learning process and raising standards in our schools. It is important that we build the future by investing in teachers now.

We can support the creation of quality teachers through initial and on-going professional development which must provide opportunities for teachers to reflect critically on their practice and to develop new knowledge and beliefs about content, pedagogy, and learning. We need to have a vision of professional development as a lifelong, inquiry based, and collegial activity that requires a corresponding shift from policies that seek to control or direct the work of teachers to strategies intended to develop schools' and teachers' capacity to be responsible for student learning.

I want to say from the start that I recognize the fact that today's schools and teachers face enormous challenges in the face of an increasingly complex society and a rapidly changing, technology-based economy. Inter alia, economic, social and cultural changes impact on your profession.

However, I urge you to keep your eye on the ball and deepen your commitment to the nation's children. Your goal must remain the promotion of integral human development – that is, authentic development which promotes the development of the whole child, in all his/her dimensions, and of every child. We should aim to ensure that no child is left behind.

I know that it takes a lot of planning, careful implementation, monitoring and evaluation to promote the spiritual, moral, social, cultural, mental, emotional and physical development of students and to prepare them for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life;

to help them to become critical thinkers who have developed the skills for moral reasoning, successful learners, confident individuals, responsible, productive citizens and so on.

Many educators and researchers still debate which school variables influence students' achievement most. Variables that play an important role in what students learn include: the child's background and general social context; class size; school size; the school environment; teacher qualifications/attitudes/expectations/behaviour; school/classroom organization and management; the quality of the teaching and learning process; subject matter knowledge by teacher; the quality of leadership in the school - at all levels; the intended, the offered and the received curriculum; the quality of resources available, equality of opportunity for all.

I know from my years in education that, together, the family, the community and schools matter and must forge effective links to enhance the teaching and learning process. If we do not believe that teachers and schools can add value to children's lives, then we should close up shop and go home.

Research demonstrates that schools can make a difference and a substantial portion of that difference is attributable to teachers. I believe that one of the most powerful factors in students' success or lack of success is their access to high quality teachers. In other words, teacher quality, including training, qualification, and participation in high-quality targeted professional development - both in and out of school - have a significant impact on students' outcomes. I believe that teacher quality is **the** most important school-related factor influencing student achievement.

This has major implications for teacher education and for the way in which new teachers are inducted in our schools. But teachers operate within a hierarchical system and the quality of leadership in a school has an impact on the quality of teaching within that school. Effective leadership is vital to managing diversity and to school improvement.

Inspirational leadership ensures staff loyalty and dedication to a school and encourages teaching excellence. Good leadership and management of teachers and other school staff are essential if schools are to improve and sustain high achievement by pupils according to a 2004 report by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) UK. ***Leadership and Management: managing the workforce*** focuses on the different ways schools can make the best use of staff to raise standards. (see Ofsted website for the report: www.ofsted.gov.uk/).

The report highlights the importance of developing and managing the culture and ethos of the school, providing a good working environment, tackling excessive workloads, providing well-targeted staff development opportunities and introducing change with sensitivity.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools David Bell said:

"Strong leadership involves taking staff with you in the constant quest for improvement. Effective management involves listening, encouraging and supporting good work done by teachers, teaching assistants and other support staff. "

The report finds that effective school leaders create an atmosphere of openness among staff and promote clear and shared values. Team work is actively encouraged.

If you are to manage diversity and grow, you need to work as a team in your school – with your Principals - to produce a school development plan which would set clear direction to promote high quality teaching and learning. At the moment, do you have a compelling picture of where teaching and learning in your school needs to go?

In the theme for today, the use of the words ‘united, resolute and growing’ are important. They conjure up for me a number of issues. Are teachers really united around the same goals? Resolute means firm in purpose or belief; characterized by firmness and determination. The challenge is to motivate all teachers to have a resolute and unshakable belief that they can make a difference in children’s lives and in building our nation.

The word ‘growing’ also needs unpacking. Is TTUTA and its members growing stronger or weaker? Do members accept mediocrity or do you all strive for excellence?

And as for the term ‘managing diversity’, well one can consider this at different levels i.e. diversity among staff – including support staff – in terms of ethnicity, competence/capacity to undertake responsibilities, level of training; diversity among students, parents, members of the local community – who are all stakeholders.

So we see that although on first reading the theme TTUTA has chosen seems simple, it is not.

You will agree with me, I am sure, that education is a fundamental human right. The life chances of your students are at stake here. Yet, in many parts of T&T, and indeed, within many of our schools, quality education is still a lottery. There are a variety of reasons for this e.g. lack of proper infrastructure. Poor housing, lack of basic amenities, unemployment, poverty and other aspects of social exclusion put pressure on our children who want to do well at school. We must level the playing field so that all our children can have access to quality education.

Besides the infrastructure in our country, I don’t think that the current education system itself is designed to meet the educational needs of all our children e.g. those who are not academically inclined; those who are gifted etc. And how do we know how our schools are doing?

What quality indicators/mechanisms exist in our schools/country to determine how we are managing diversity and if there is quality teaching in our schools/classrooms; to help us assess why some schools are failing? How can we improve the performance of all teachers? Our rate of illiteracy is far too high – An ALTA survey (1994) found that 14.6 per cent of those involved in their survey were functionally illiterate and that part of the population which was completely illiterate was 8.0%. Today about 50% of our children leave Secondary School without having passed English or Maths.

How good is your school at evaluating and improving itself? Do you try to find answers to questions such as:

- How are we doing? Where are we now? – compared to where we want to be.
- How do we know?
- What are we going to do now? – e.g. to remove/modify barriers or inhibitors which prevent us from reaching our goals.
- How can we involve parents, students and the community more?

We desperately need internal self-evaluation quality assurance systems for schools and external, objective evaluation like the kind that exists in places like the UK e.g. Ofsted Inspections. Such evaluation will highlight which teachers/schools need more support. We must support teachers who may be struggling or failing and to affirm those who are doing well.

I am the Vice-President of the Education Discussion Group (EDG) in T&T. EDG suggested to the former Minister of Education that the UK OFSTED system should be used as a model for external assessment of schools. An appropriate sum should be provided in the Budget for preparation of plans to implement this proposal. As OFSTED says, inspection provides an independent, external evaluation of the quality and standards of the school. Inspectors tell the school what it does well and what it needs to do to improve. The published report and summary inform parents, the school, and the community about the quality of education at the school and whether pupils achieve as much as they can. The findings provide a measure of accountability and help the school to manage improvement.

Inspections do not have to be a terrible experience if it is linked to professional development. Teachers, students and the entire education sector will only grow if we address these important issues. Perhaps then we will realise that our schools and classrooms are not designed to meet the needs of 21 Century students.

Chalk and talk is still the order of the day in many of our schools. Are there any real opportunities e.g. for interactive work? We need to examine the environment in which the curriculum is being delivered. If we are to manage diversity, we need to create high quality teaching and learning environments. Are our planners and the Ministry of Education taking these issues into consideration?

Periodic external inspection should be complemented by continuous internal self-evaluation which is informed by OFSTED's inspection Framework/template – as follows:

- **A description of your school (context in which teaching and learning is taking place)**
- **Overall effectiveness of your school**
- **Leadership and management:** Each of you is a leader at a different level in your school e.g. a classroom teacher is a leader. Each of you is a change agent, but Principals have a greater responsibility to act as change agents and to ensure that the following are addressed:

- Setting and communicating direction – through team work – inter/intra-departmental : Vision, mission, goals, policies, systems – school development plan/strategic plan, lesson plans
 - Creating an inclusive organizational culture; promoting the morale of teachers and encouraging innovation and creativity among staff and students
 - Empowering, influencing and enabling staff, support staff etc.
 - Ongoing professional development: To assist schools in managing diversity, it is essential that each school has a school development plan in which there is a professional staff development plan which aims to enhance teaching and learning. Too often teachers are allowed to go off during school hours on a frolic of their own and attend courses that have no bearing on their teaching. I am not saying that teachers should not pursue interests other than teaching, but a balance has to be struck or we will fail to meet the needs of our students. So, there must be a balance between allowing teachers to have time off for studies that have nothing to do with the development of the school, and school-based and school-related professional development. Staff should be able to attend externally-run courses related to the needs of the teacher/school.
 - Reflective practice: Professional development also means taking time for ongoing reflection on your practice as a teacher. I found it very helpful just to stand in my empty classroom sometimes and reflect on the way in which I had organized my class, the amount of time I spend with each child and what this teacher time was for – to praise and encourage, to discipline students etc.? Examine the way in which you mark students' work and the kind of feedback you give to them– verbally and in writing. As an inspector I learned a lot about teachers by examining students' books and reading teachers' comments. You can motivate or break children's spirit by the kind of comments you write in their books or by what you say to them.
 - Effective communication systems within the school and with parents/community.
 - Policies and practices for marking, record keeping, assessment, monitoring and evaluation: see school self-evaluation processes – for classrooms, departments etc – we must promote reflective practice
 - Quality of classroom planning/lesson plans.
 - School and classroom organization and management.
 - Assessment procedures – systems for tracking and monitoring students' progress – are these consistent across the school? Are they used as diagnostic tools?
 - Intervention strategies.
 - Resources – human, material, technological – use of technology in teacher and learning process – computers etc. Deployment and use of resources – including human resources. Capability of teachers/support staff to use resources effectively.
- **Achievement and standards** - outcomes (see gender breakdown) e.g. academic performance, community work, extracurricular activities. The problem is that in TT we have no set standards. We need a quality assurance system – including standards: a description of a level of performance in various areas- what students need to know and be able to do- standards assist teachers in preparing lesson plans.

- **Personal development and well-being** – care, guidance and support for students (pastoral support).
- **The Curriculum:** network of planned learning opportunities – made available in a wide range of learning environments – formal and informal. Curriculum frameworks should be sufficiently flexible to provide for the needs and aspirations of all students. Teachers should know the content of each area of the curriculum that they are teaching and should know how to make content accessible to students through learner-centred teaching practices.
- **The Hidden curriculum:** Vital to the **morale** of school staff is the **quality of the school building** and surroundings. Reflect on the ethos of your school, school/classroom design, physical infrastructure, and environment (cleanliness, health and safety issues), displays – which students’ work do you display? Check relationships in your school - at all levels. Do you have whole school policies for behaviour/discipline? How do you deal with bullying? What policies exist in your school for marking students’ work and for rewards and sanctions? What’s the ratio of teacher-time per student in your class – what’s the nature of this contact? Who is invited to speak in the school? Check completion/dropout rates by students, class size, attendance rate – by both students and teachers. Are teachers good role models in your school – ethics, morals, values? Do you have high expectations of and positive attitudes towards students? Do you create a welcoming and stimulating learning environment for all of them or only for some? Do you really dialogue with/listen to your students, and if you do, does this inform the teaching and learning process?
- **The quality of provision** – teaching and learning: breadth of experience, balance of opportunities, relevance, coherence, continuity, progression in the curriculum, differentiation.
- **Home/school/community links:** If you are to improve the quality of parental/community involvement in your school, you need to have some means of knowing the nature and extent of your relationship with them. The views of learners, parents and other stakeholders are important and should be solicited as part of your ‘plan, act, review’ process.

Another useful link when considering how your school is performing, is the following:

The Malcolm Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence- see:

[Quality in Education: *Characteristics of High Performing Schools ...*](http://www4.asq.org/blogs/.../characteristics_of_high_perfor.html)
www4.asq.org/blogs/.../characteristics_of_high_perfor.html -

“Characteristics of High Performing Schools: There has been much research conducted in search of the characteristics of highly effective schools. A study out of the Washington state does a nice job of summarizing these components into 9 key areas (below). Not

surprising to continuous improvement proponents is the first characteristic which could be referred to in the Baldrige criteria as "setting and communicating direction".

1. Clear and Shared Focus/shared vision
2. High Standards and Expectations
3. Effective School Leadership
4. High Levels of Collaboration and Communication
5. Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment Aligned with Standards
6. Frequent Monitoring of Teaching and Learning
7. Focused Professional Development
8. Supportive Learning Environment
9. High Levels of Community and Parent Involvement

“The description of "Clear and Shared Focus" reads *"Everybody knows where they are going and why. The focus is on achieving a shared vision, and all understand their role in achieving the vision. The focus and vision are developed from common beliefs and values, creating a consistent direction for all involved."*

“Does your school exhibit the characteristics of effective schools? How do you establish clear and shared focus in your school or classroom? What do you think are the characteristics of ineffective schools or classrooms?”

“Effective schools and districts identify their leaders at each level and involve them in the process of setting and communicating direction. I believe that it is only when leadership is aligned from the classroom, to the school, to the district that real results in student achievement occur.

“The Malcolm Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence- category 1: Leadership encourages organizations to review how leadership is conducted. Educators need to realize that without effective leadership and clear direction, continuous improvement efforts will not bear fruit.

“Major findings from research on school leadership can be summarized in the following five claims (taken from E Lead):

1. Leadership has significant effects on student learning, second only to the effects of the quality of curriculum and teachers' instruction.
2. Currently, administrators and teachers provide most of the leadership in schools, but other potential sources of leadership exist.
3. A core set of leadership practices form the "basics" of successful leadership and are valuable in almost all educational contexts.
4. Successful school leaders respond productively to challenges and opportunities created by the accountability-oriented policy context in which they work.
5. Successful school leaders respond productively to the opportunities and challenges of educating diverse groups of students.”

**I was a teacher for many years – in both primary and secondary schools in London. I knew that chalk and talk would not have cut it with my students. Care and commitment were key ingredients that enabled me to meet the needs of students in my care.

I taught in one of the most deprived areas in London. Many of the children were of Caribbean origin and the suspension and expulsion rates were high. Racism was entrenched in the teaching and learning process. I was the only black teacher at the school. I asked the Principal if I could take in my class any student that she proposed to expel.

Eventually, mine was the only vertically grouped class in the school as I tried my best to save black children from being expelled. It was hard work to turn around the lives of disaffected youths and to motivate them to learn. I started to take them on school trips. Some of the parents came along to help supervise the large group. And even when they misbehaved on the trips I never gave up on them.

My aim was to keep trying until I found a way to get through to them. Eventually I realised that they were good at drama. That was my way in. That class produced the most amazing Christmas concert that I have ever seen. As you well know, sometimes the way in is to find out what the strengths and weaknesses of our students are - build on the strengths and address the weaknesses. Taking drama across the curriculum helped me to encourage them to 'love' Maths, English etc.

Within 3 years I had helped turn that school around from a failing school to one that was the pride and joy of the local community. Then in 1985 my life changed. The Swann Report: *Education for all (1985)* – the report of a Committee of Inquiry into the education of children from minority ethnic groups, was published. This 851 page report was the first Government report to admit that there was racism in the education system. The Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) was one of the first Authorities that sought to implement some of the recommendations of this report.

The ILEA's Inspectorate appointed me as Director of the Primary Curriculum Development Project. I led a team of teachers focusing specifically on addressing racism in the system and on raising standards among students of Caribbean origin in the ILEA's 788 primary schools across London. I later joined the Inspectorate as an Inspector of Schools. When the ILEA was abolished, I was appointed Deputy Director of Education/Head of Quality Assurance in a London Borough. Today I continue to fight for the right of each child to high quality education.

As a teacher, I found that it was a real challenge to **manage diversity** and to ensure at the same time quality teaching and learning for all students. I knew that 'one size' (in terms of my approach to teaching) could not fit all as not all children are alike. The range of abilities in my class was wide. There was no way I could expect the students to study the same things at the same pace and in the same way at all times. I needed strategies for managing diversity. My first priority was to find out what their needs were. I discovered these from a wide range of sources – including the children's own writings, by developing links with their parents, by observing them in the playground, by listening to them and dialoguing with them.

To manage diversity a teacher must be student-centred and must be prepared to create different learning experiences for different students – in different contexts e.g. school trips, local visits e.g. to places of interest. Managing diversity requires teachers to use a rich variety of resources to enhance the teaching and learning process e.g. the media, music, inviting role models to address the students etc.

There is diversity in age and learning styles; cultural, linguistic, religious, ethnic, and gender (male/female) diversity, diversity in terms of values, ethics (including those of staff), class - the socio-economic backgrounds of our students and teachers – see the impact of social exclusion on the teaching and learning process; there is diversity in terms of physical and mental ability: those with learning difficulties, special educational needs e.g. hearing and visual impairments (example of boy in Gonzales), gifted children and so on; and of course, there is diversity in terms of the quality of the learning environment in which teaching and learning takes place – infrastructure, organizational culture, geographic location.

Do you know the extent of diversity in your school/classroom? Is the organizational culture in your school inclusive or are there stereotypes about certain students that adversely impact on your expectations of them? I recall a time when I invited a black Bishop from the Caribbean to address students at Assembly. Both the Bishop and I were stunned when students greeted him by laughing at him. And what was the reason for their laughter? They did not believe that he was a Bishop because Bishops, they said, are not black! What was sad was that even the British-born black students present joined in the laughter. Do not underestimate the power of stereotypes to undermine the self-esteem of your students.

Do you know what support you need to help you manage diversity e.g. student support, remedial teachers etc? Is TTUTA championing your cause to get the support you need?

If we are to manage diversity effectively, the powers that ‘be’ must recognise the desperate need to provide our schools with more guidance counsellors, remedial teachers, social workers and so on. One of the teachers who was a member of EDG spoke about the challenge she had to teach science when many of the students could not read or write properly.

As a teacher the only way I could meet the needs of my students was by a differentiated curriculum. There are many definitions of the term: differentiation. Differentiation can help us manage diversity.

Ofsted, UK, defines differentiation as “the matching of work to the differing capabilities of individuals or groups of pupils in order to extend their learning.” This approach can assist educators in managing diversity among their students. It means adjusting the teaching process according to the learning needs of students. It can be aimed at: a whole class, groups within the class, or individuals.

Another definition is that it is the “recognition of and commitment to plan for student differences. A differentiated classroom provides different avenues to acquire content, to process or make sense of information and ideas, and to develop products. The goals of a differentiated

classroom are to maximize student growth and to promote individual student success (Greenfield School Community and Arts College, Durham, UK).

The Department for Children, Schools and Families, UK, (formerly called DfES) talk about differentiation:

by task: setting different tasks for pupils of different ability;

by outcome: setting open-ended tasks, allowing pupil response at different levels;

by support: giving more help to certain students within the group.

I must say that differentiation by outcome could be a ‘cop out’ for some teachers – particularly in a system where there are no agreed standards.

Sadly, here in TT, we have no agreed national standards as to what children should know and be able to do in various subjects and at different ages – what concepts, principles and skills should they learn at different ages? How can we manage diversity successfully if there is no agreed national quality assurance system which would include national standards? This deficiency adds to the lottery system in the education sector in TT. Standards help us to address questions such as: What do we want students to learn? How will we know when students have learned it? How will we respond when students are not learning?

Also, how can we manage diversity effectively when our schools and classrooms are not equipped to meet the needs of our 21st Century students?

As Patrick F. Bassett said in *School design for 21st Century Schools*: “The current conundrum facing schools and their design is that we have Information Age kids trapped in Industrial Age schools: In a world where ideas and information are increasingly fluid and in flux, we frame (conceptualize) and construct schools that are fixed in time and space”. (talk about EDG and our Symposium on School and Classroom Design).

In 2004 and 2005 – before the budget making process, EDG submitted to the Minister of Education a number of proposals that we believed would take our education system forward: One recommendation was that “an item should be included in the budget for a consultancy to prepare plans and assess the cost of providing lunch rooms in all schools. A multipurpose facility can help to foster sharing, co-operation, appreciation, etiquette and polite behaviour while students eat.”

Another recommendation was that “a study should be undertaken of teaching resources available in schools for teaching various subjects, e.g. texts, manipulatives, models, laboratory equipment, software and accompanying hardware. The study should also establish capability of teachers to use resources appropriately for effective teaching and learning.”

Inter alia, such a study would enable us to consider the state of play regarding information and communication technology in our schools e.g. the number and age of computers in our schools,

student/computer ratio, the quality of computer hardware and software, the suitability of their location in schools, the ability of teachers and students to use computers for effective teaching and learning – how they are used and for which subject areas etc.?

As we renovate and build new schools in T&T, we would do well to read the 70 page report on school design issued in June 2006 by the **American Architectural Foundation and Knowledge Works Foundation, USA.** (free on www.archfoundation.org) This is a report on the National Summit on School Design which took place in the USA in 2005 and which “builds on the National Symposium on School Design that was organized in 1998 by then-U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley and the American Institute of Architects.” Each recommendation is accompanied by brief case studies and a list of resources.

More than 200 public, private and civic sector leaders participated in the 2005 Summit. The report states that “schools in the 21st century should feature more diverse learning environments, greater technology and better integration with their communities” **Ronald E. Bogle**, president and CEO of the American Architectural Foundation says:

“The successful schools of the future need to apply the research on how students learn and how the quality of our educational facilities affects student performance, health, safety, self-esteem and well-being.”

According to the report's findings, “critical components of successful school design must involve:

"a) **Designing schools to support a variety of learning styles.** Since not all students learn the same way, school facilities should support project-based learning, tutoring and mentoring, interactive classrooms and individual work stations as well as traditional classrooms.

"b) **Enhancing learning by integrating technology.** Technology must be integrated into the environment of any well-designed school to support learning and help schools operate more effectively.

"c) **Fostering a "small school" culture...**that fosters relationships and attachments by creating more intimate learning environments.

"d) **Creating schools as centers of community.** A growing trend is for schools to serve as the center of the community, where learning takes place for students and adults and where the facilities may also house recreational centers, health clinics and community meeting spaces. Schools as centers of community can be used all year and serve the intergenerational needs of a community-from pre-school...to adults.

"e) **Engaging the public in the planning process.** The school design process must involve the public in an open engagement process that includes school and community stakeholders and recognizes minority opinions.

"f) **Making healthy, comfortable and flexible learning spaces.** Good school design provides for adequate security, day lighting, ventilation, acoustics and other elements that impact the

health, safety and functionality of school facilities used by ...students, teachers and other adults daily...

"g) **Considering nontraditional options for school facilities and classrooms.** Underused civic, retail and cultural facilities can be adapted as learning spaces and can contribute to student learning by offering nontraditional opportunities to engage with academic subjects outside the classroom."

If teachers are to manage diversity effectively, we need to take note of the fact that research has shown that school design/facilities can either hinder or promote teaching and learning. EDG held a Symposium on this subject earlier this year. We will further the debate about this issue by organizing a follow-up Workshop.

We hope to prepare a model of what a well-designed school should look like and to make suggestions to the Ministry of Education for re-modelling schools that are already built. We hope to bring together architects, planners, individuals from the Ministry of Education at the Workshop to address these issues.

Since school design matters, our Government's strategic plan must include an innovative approach to this issue. We need to develop some benchmarks for school design and inspire/motivate students, teachers and communities to achieve more.

If we are to manage diversity, we also need to consider seriously **theories of multiple intelligences** e.g. Howard Gardner – 1983 – Harvard Univ.:

1. Linguistic intelligence (word smart)
2. Logical – mathematical (number/reasoning smart)
3. Spatial intelligence (picture smart)
4. Bodily –Kinesthetic intelligence (body smart)
5. Musical intelligence (music smart)
6. Interpersonal intelligence (people smart)
7. Intrapersonal intelligence (self smart)
8. Naturalist intelligence (nature smart).

Gardner said that the traditional notion of intelligence based on IQ testing is too limited. He proposes the above 8 different intelligences to take account of a broader range of human potential in children and adults.

Of course, this brings me to 2 other key issues that TTUTA and indeed the nation needs to address. That is, teacher absenteeism and charging students for extra lessons. TTUTA is to be commended for calling on its members to address the issue of teacher absenteeism. I recognise that the Ministry itself adds to teacher absenteeism by calling teachers and Principals to various meetings – without providing cover in the form of 'supply teachers'.

I recall that there was a teacher who used to sign the book at school each morning and rush off to practise law in the local Court in Chaguanas. It took years before the Teaching Service Commission fired him. Some teachers sign on and 'run away' during the course of the day to

check on their private businesses that they run, or to drive 'PH' taxis – leaving their students without a teacher.

Not all teacher absenteeism can be justified. Unjustified teacher absenteeism is child abuse. Teaching is a noble profession/vocation and we should not let a few bad apples spoil it. To build a professional teaching service, we must weed out those who do not really care about our children. Our education reform efforts will be futile unless we address this issue urgently.

We must open our eyes to the spin-off effects of teacher absenteeism. It often leads to stress for those dedicated teachers who either have to cover extra classes or who pay the price of having to discipline students who were left unsupervised to wreak havoc in their classroom because the teacher responsible for the previous lesson was not there to teach the students.

While there may be only a small number of teachers who are not teaching from the heart, the number is significant enough to impact adversely on the system. I would be interested to know if teacher absenteeism is higher in low-income areas.

Children live what they learn – and vice versa. If we treat children with disrespect some will lose respect for those in authority. The stakes are too high for us to ignore this issue. The question that each teacher must ask himself/herself is: “How do I demonstrate my commitment to the children in my care – daily?”

There is also the issue of charging for lessons. I pray for the day when all teachers will try to complete the syllabus in school time or do as some teachers do, and offer pro bono service to those students who are in need of extra lessons. Where is the equity for those children whose parents cannot afford to pay the class teacher for extra lessons to cover topics that should be covered within the syllabus?

Each of you can make a difference to the lives of the nation's children. Respect and value them. Each one is a unique child of God with great potential. To manage diversity you must have high expectations and positive attitudes towards students – not only those in your care, but also those in your school, your community etc.

I urge you to take up the challenge to be good role models and mentors to our youths. We are our brother's and sister's keepers. In our present crisis, we have a greater responsibility to serve, to build community, to build our nation.

May God inspire each one of you to do what you know is right as an educator. May He fill you with wisdom and the knowledge, skills and ability you need to enable you to undertake your duties and responsibilities effectively and efficiently so that you will play your part in promoting the development of the whole child in all his/her dimensions and of every child in your care. Don't put a ceiling on children's potential. Let us empower them so that they will be able to achieve their potential. May God bless you all and guide you as you seek to manage diversity effectively.

Thank you.

