

**ADDRESS BY HON D. GOKHOOL,
MINISTER OF INDUSTRY, SCIENCE
AND RESEARCH**

**Workshop
on
“AN EVALUATION OF THE ZEP
PROJECT
EXPECTATIONS V/S ACHIEVEMENTS**

**Thursday, 12 November 2009
at 10 00 hrs**

**Conference Room, UTM
Pointe aux Sables**

Dr The Hon Rama Krishna Sithanen
Vice Prime Minister, Minister of Finance, and Economic Development

Hon V. Bunwaree, Minister of Education, Culture and HR

Representative of the European Union

Mr D.G. Fokeer, Director General, UTM

Distinguished Guests

Members of the Media

Ladies & Gentlemen

Good Morning and thank you for inviting me to to-day's workshop and giving me the opportunity to make an address.

I am extremely pleased to be associated with to-day's initiative as it concerns a project which has been and is still very dear to my heart---the ZEP Schools project.

As former Minister of Education and Human Resources, I have been closely associated with the on-going reform programme of the Education sector which was premised on a holistic, comprehensive and inclusive approach in introducing interdependent policy reforms on all fronts, from Pre-primary to Secondary, from post secondary to Tertiary, from Prevoc, ZEP Schools to Children with Special Needs.

Our vision is that no child should be left behind and our mission was quality education of international standards to all.

ZEP Schools project

The ZEP Schools project was created to address the problem of educational underachievement of children in less developed regions and their subsequent marginalisation or outright exclusion.

It is to be noted that there is a positive correlation between low school performance and delayed development of some regions. Evidence shows that social inequalities and lack of community support for schools do negatively impact on the overall school performance.

The project therefore defined the school within its own socio-economic and cultural environment and aimed at mobilizing all the resources to contribute to raising the standard of school's performance

More fundamentally, the ZEP schools project recognized that that pupils may learn in different ways and at different rates and that our children must be given opportunities to pursue a variety of avenues to success. Innovative pedagogy involving inclusive pedagogy, the practice of socio-pedagogy, value-based education, citizenship education and co-curricular activities.

Networking among the schools, the private sector, local communities and NGOs and CBOs, parents and international agencies constituted the main strategy for achieving positive outcomes.

The UNDP /Ministry of Education and Human Resources project 2006-2008 was conceived in this perspective and the action plan was multi-pronged and articulated along the following lines:

- ✓ Child centered inclusive pedagogy
- ✓ Capacity Building
- ✓ Empowerment of parents
- ✓ Bridging the Gap between Preprimary and Primary school
- ✓ Networking
- ✓ Monitoring, and evaluation of performance based on KEY Performance indicators.

The ZEP school project has been and still remains a very ambitious project for the future of our children. A lot of resources and efforts has gone into the project but there still remains a big gap between expectations and achievements.

Research

It is therefore imperative that we continue our efforts in the direction of finding the most appropriate solutions to the challenges posed by the specificities of the ZEP schools.

As Minister responsible for Science and Research ,I am particularly pleased that a new research project has been undertaken in this direction .

I must congratulate the researcher and her team for her research, Decentralised Cooperation Programme of the EU,the Ministry of Finance and Economic Empowerment,UTM.the Ministry of Education, Culture and

Human Resources, and other institutions which promoted and supported this piece of research.

I am happy that Rodrigues has been included in the survey.

Negative Branding

The topic concerning ZEP schools and more generally the failure of our pupils to attain a level of literacy and numeracy at the end of primary education has preoccupied governments for years and various measures have been taken to tackle the problems have not delivered fully the results we have expected.

Additional new measures have now been adopted to provide greater support to the sector, like enabling all children to have access to Pre Primary schooling.

The present research provides us with some insights and suggestions for improvements in the ZEP schools. In the workshop many issues will be discussed in greater depth but I would still plead for a more holistic approach in our research.

We all know that our children are educable and parents and teachers are doing the best to help solve the problem. Over the years a number of factors have been advanced ranging from economic, social, cultural, linguistic and a number of solutions have been advanced. But the solution has so far eluded us. This is a fact to reckon with.

To-day we all acknowledge that the problem is multi dimensional but our assessment has been largely impressionistic and there has not been high quality research to guide decision makers. Partly there is not enough high quality researchers on the issue and more often the debate has generated more heat than light.

In the process, the ZEP school experience, inspite of its being a unique educational experience, producing some good practices such as holistic educational approaches, socio-community partnership, active parent involvement, fund raising models amongst others, has become the victim of negative branding/labelling, thereby marginalising the value added it has provided to our education system.

I am happy that a beginning is made towards more focused research and it may be important to come with micro studies in some localities but for such research we need multidisciplinary teams and greater coordination between researchers and institutions, something which I understand Ministry is working on.

At present the main reasons advanced for underachievement in ZEP schools can be classified in terms factors outside the schools such as poverty of many pupils and families, lack of parental involvement which impact on capacities to learn, the absence of a mother tongue by many pupils or the pedagogical methods used . At school level there is a major problem competence for addressing the pedagogical problems of slow learners in

mixed ability classrooms Some years back, even in the confessional schools, there was resistance from teachers for mixed ability classes.

I must say that in terms of logistics in all our primary school we have done a lot and no school can complain generally of lack of resources. True it is that we have done a lot in terms of material resources. We have worked out input-output correlation, invested money, computers and other resources but very rarely have suggestions been discussed or thought of in terms of socio-cultural factors at the level of families, the spending culture of families, on life styles, or the cultures that operate behind poverty, decisions on budget allocation at household level and who gets what in view of scarce resources.

We need to identify the real factors which prevent children from taking advantage of the opportunities available, like the nutritional status of the pupils, parental attitude to education and schools, the impact of the family size on pupils' achievement .Up to now we have taken salary as a critical, determining factor for absolute poverty. But don't we have cases of success stories where the adversity of poverty has been overcome ?Why and how? Poverty is a very important factor to win or lose the battle of education but is it the one and only factor?

Research therefore needs to establish what are all those factors that affect pupil's performance and how do they impact educational achievements. Very often findings of a general nature from other countries have been applied to local context without any empirical research as such.

As long as there is no solid research, there will be no consensus on the diagnosis and of the prognosis of the problem. The result is that we tend to adopt solution we think are the real solutions and no wonder we are back to square one.

There is need for a holistic approach that takes on board issues both at schools and outside schools.

Some of the findings have been mentioned in the speech by the researcher and a more critical analysis will take place during the workshop and the conclusions will be integrated in the final report. This will enable us to develop new insights and formulate new strategies.

I will like to hear about your deliberations and I am sure that they will contribute to better understanding of the pupils in ZEP schools so that we can revisit the policies regarding ZEP schools and do much more for our children.

To conclude let me thank the research team once more and wish all the participants at the workshop fruitful deliberations .