Education in Extraordinary Times

From Vulnerability to Resilience

Pleasant morning to the Ministers of Education within the OECS, partners, well wishers and my fellow Caribbean people good morning.

My name is Ashfred Norris. Currently I serve as the Chairman of the General-Assembly of the National Youth Council of Dominica and I'm also a youth climate change activist.

After being announced as the Best Debater stemming from the OECS from Vulnerability to Resilience February 10th debate, and having the knowledge that I would be here today presenting before such an esteemed array of the highest ranking officials within the Ministries of Education across the OECS as well as partner organizations, there was only one thing on my mind- **don't mess up**. As a result, I immediately began my preparation process; which to my surprise was a bit difficult. You see ladies and gentlemen, when it comes to public speaking, debating and so forth, I am no stranger to the scene, however, admittedly this experience is quite different and I wanted to be as prepared as possible, therefore, I did what any other Millennial or Gen Z would've done in my situation; I went to the internet for answers and surprisingly you will be shocked to learn that I didn't find too many. Searching on youtube and google typing in "Young people from the Caribbean presenting or addressing ministers of government", to my surprise, I found little to no content on the subject matter which led me to think… Why is it so difficult for the average young person within the Caribbean region to engage with and address their governments? It's been quite sometime now that I made a deal with myself that whenever I get opportunities like these- which seem to be a scarce commodity, I would use them to represent and depict as accurately as I can the hardships that young people such as myself face inside our system.

I say this to say, Ladies and Gentlemen, that as I am about to present the most compelling and riveting arguments which arose at the OECS Education debate; an event, might I emphasize that took place a little more than a week ago, if are to see the changes reflected within our education system as our young people have observed it, the process doesn't end here but this is only the beginning. Youth voices matter and youth representation matters even more. Hence my gratitude for the heads of the Ministries of Education in the OECS for recognizing such.

On February 10th, 2022 at approximately 2pm at Eastern Standard Time, four (4) young people from the Caribbean regioning- originating from countries such as Monsterrat, Grenada, St. Lucia & Dominica were tasked with the responsibility to go head to head in order to sufficiently "squeeze out the juices", as we would say locally, of the topics that were presented to us with the hope of singling out the best out of the best arguments. Carina Blache, Jaeda Emmannuel, Travis Lay & myself, Ashfred Norris. What happened, rather, wasn't a clash of the titans or even a situation where we went 'head-to-head' but instead we put our heads together because we

realized that if we were to get anywhere substantial we had to adopt a unified approach. This leads me to addressing the first thematic topic of the day- *Is a Multi-Sectoral Approach to Early Childhood Education necessary?*

At this point in a child's life you're looking at development on all fronts- cognitive development, interpersonal development, psychosexual & psychosocial development and the list goes on. This is the point where the education system should be looking at physical health milestones, mental health milestones as well as educating parents in order to increase the sustainability of the child's development both in and out of the classroom.
National ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) policies are multisectoral and they usually include the following sectors: education, health, nutrition, sanitation, and protection. (Policies on Early Childhood Care and Education: Their Evolution and Some Impacts Emily Vargas-Barón 2015).

Many risks to early childhood development already exist. According to a study by Dr. Aisha K. Yousafzai on the Implementation Research, Practice & Partnerships: Informing a Multisectoral Approach for ECD in 2018 she noted that Biological factors such as • Malnutrition • Low Birth weight, Intrauterine growth restriction • Infectious illnesses • Environmental pollutants as well as Psychosocial issues which consists of • Inadequate stimulation and early learning opportunities • Poor quality responsive caregiving • Maternal depression • Institutional care • Exposure to violence- which you can then of course correlate these findings with similar research and I can only imagine would compile an even more exhaustive list. Therefore, I think it would be a gross mistake to assume that Early Childhood Education ISN'T an 'All-Hands-On-Deck' situation.

Now, when you ask "Which other sectors can most support Early Childhood Education and how can they do so?" I think there are a few questions we need to ask ourselves which can be taken from Dr. Yousafzai's presentation. "What are the socio-cultural caregiving practices pertaining to health, nutrition, safety, and development?", "What platforms exist for integration of early childhood interventions? What is the readiness for integration? What are the structures and processes we need to consider for designing a scalable package?" "What are the best practices to help caregivers navigate multiple services and programmes?"... I mean there are so many questions that need to be sorted before we can reach a resolution.

We cannot just come and agree that "okay, this looks like a job social services, the ministry of environment, the planning division- I mean some of them do go unsaid ofcourse like for instance the Ministry of Social Services should be in on it to assess whether the children are treated properly at fairly at school and at home, the planning division must come in to ensure that the school's infrastructure is one which promotes a child friendly environment, the Ministry of Health to monitor the children's developmental milestones- I mean, we know this.

And this is what we're not here to talk about today. We want to know about those partners whom we've never actually thought about. Today we're here to achieve maximum efficiency when it comes to debating educational issues and asking questions with answers that we're already aware of will not get us too far. Therefore, I can suggest that yes, the planning division, ministry

of health, the ministry of environment, child protective services among other are necessary for a multi-sectoral intervention to education but if we want to know specifically what works for us- what works for the OECSc sub-region then I have a few questions which I could propose where we look at these areas much more integrally to see what's missing and what is still required.

Secondly, **has COVID-19 forced the changes that were long needed in the Education system?** Yes. Have regional governments paid sufficient attention to the Digital Literacy imperative? No. It's a harsh reality but it is our truth.
We've grossly underestimated the importance of technology in Education before the onset of the pandemic.
Necessary attention had not been placed on the adoption of technology in education preceding the pandemic and even after the pandemic struck, the process seemed a bit chaotic. Right now, we're seeing governments working to provide devices and increasing access to online platforms in order to get students back in the classrooms; even though it's virtually, but I'm a firm believer that we're only doing it because the rest of the world had to take that drastic turn.

The Caribbean region is not new to grappling with situations that impact our education. We are at the risk of battling with natural hazards and natural disasters every year which should've opened our eyes a long time ago. The recent passing of hurricane Maria, hurricane Irma & Hurricane Dorian should've shown us that we needed to adopt a more sustainable solution and adapt.

In a UNICEF article which detailed the experience & concerns of a Dominican student in 2017 entitled Hurricane Maria aftermath: Children's education on hold in Dominica stated, "Deltin is in his final year of secondary school education, preparing for examinations in nine subjects. He worries the prolonged school closure will defer his and his classmate's dreams.

He stated, "It's very worrying because I want to finish school and move on to college and make a life for myself, but school is at a standstill and I don't know when we will be able to get back on track," he says. "I would really like school to be rebuilt fast or they find temporary spaces for school."

In an OECS Education Sector Response and Recovery Strategy to COVID-19 by the OECS Commission it stated that, "• Due to school closure, students are unable to access essential learning. • Disadvantaged students have limited access to the nutritional support that they usually receive., • Disadvantaged students have less access to online learning opportunities • Limited capacity to transition to online learning due to the absence of a harmonized solution. • Administration of National and Regional Exams • Unfavorable Parent-child interactions due to heightened stress • Limited technical and financial resources across the region to support the response to COVID-19 crisis."

This shouldn't have been this way. If we were interacting with technology in the classroom before the pandemic in the way we were supposed to then half of these issues would not have arisen as a result of COVID-19 and the impact it has had on our education system. The

Presentation at the Council of Education Ministers

Caribbean region is prone to Natural disasters and natural hazards all the time. Even recently the newly appointed President of the Caribbean Development Bank Dr. Hyginus "Gene" Leon at the Africa- CARICOM Summit of the Heads of State & Government stated that "Natural hazard events have repeatedly resulted in adverse environmental, social, and economic consequences. Projections also suggest that our two regions (referring to the Caribbean & Africa) will face more exaggerated climate risks for the remainder of the century. This poses a serious threat to our attainment of the sustainable development goals.

This should force us to ask ourselves the question, if not COVID then what? If not hurricane Maria, Irma, Dorian or whichever superstorm is preparing to make landfall in generations to come, then what? Our priorities right now should be on increasing the broadband penetration in our region & upscaling our digital literacy efforts.

A report from Connected Society Digital inclusion in Latin America and the Caribbean by GSMA Intelligence stated, "For the full social and economic benefits of the investments in mobile broadband infrastructure to be realized, governments, development organizations and mobile operators need to join forces to make the internet available, affordable, useful and understandable for everyone. Given that mobile is the main means of internet access in the region, and that 3G and 4G coverage will reach similar levels to 2G, we believe that mobile will be key in improving internet access and adoption if supported by the right policy environment. Governments have a big role to play in addressing the digital literacy and local content barriers. By providing funding and support to promote ICT usage and learning in schools, governments can be instrumental in up-skilling the digitally illiterate population." (,came out in 2016)
The report also noted that, "More than 300 million people in the region still do not subscribe to mobile internet services and the penetration is even lower for mobile broadband (3G and 4G), with nearly 7 in 10 people lacking a mobile broadband subscription."

All in all, if we are to overcome our issue of digital literacy then we must adopt more purposive training methods as Ms. Blache alluded to in the debate. Training needs to occur across the board for teachers, students and parents alike. Students are often left out, as stakeholders automatically assume that because students are digital natives, they know how to effectively utilize the technology. There has also been an oversight with regards to training for parents. They too need to learn how to maneuver online learning platforms in order to effectively supervise their children and ensure that they stay on course with assignments. More emphasis should be placed on parents with very pre-primary and primary school children.

Moving on to our next thematic area which speaks to the question of ***is there still a place for National and Standardized Testing in a 21st Century Education?*** Allow me to ask this question, who in here believes that standardized testing has failed them at least once or twice in their educational journey? For some of us, it may have been more. That moment when you've studied all night long only to sit in the examination room for 1 hour and 10 minutes- blank. And you want to know the worst part? The moment you leave the room, all the information comes flooding in. You see, my issue with standardized testing is its inability to capture and depict accurately the learning competencies and processes of the student. **Analogy of ruler and**

orange. ***We need a tool that will capture the creativity, innovation and learning competencies of the student.*** One way I believe this can happen is through the implementation of more project monitoring and testing techniques. Give the students a chance to apply their knowledge in an enabling and collaborative environment while monitoring the ways in which they utilize the tools and resources around them, the application of what they've learnt, their problem-solving competencies as well as creative maneuvers to difficult situations.Make school more of a center of excellence rather than a center of learning. Learning should be collaborative and not regurgitative. Believe it or not, standardized testing does still have a place in the 21st century; just not as in the high or prominent regard we've been holding it.

Bear with me ladies and gentlemen for we are shortly coming up to the end quite soon. Next, we speak on the area of "***Is the Regional Education Sector capable of providing the necessary skills and competencies required for 2021 and beyond?"***

Now, this is where we asked the question, "*What are the major ways in which the Education Sector and our Regional sector are aligned?"*

The alignment of our Education Sector and Regional sector were adequately outlined in the OECS Sector Strategy as Mr. Travis Lay outlined in his argument and stated that they recognized the following;

- Significant progress in some States in implementing universal early childhood education;

- A healthy increase in the expansion of primary and secondary school education; where now the compulsory age of education is more readily available to all members;

- An improvement in the social support services available to vulnerable and at risk students;

- Overall harmonization of the education system has advanced through the adoption of new National Education Bills in six of our member states.

What are the major ways in which the Education Sector and our Regional sector are MISALIGNED?

Our Collective Priority
- We need a proper framework as to what we each want for our local futures and then we need to discuss what we want for the OECS as a region

Locality discussion
- What are the jobs for the future?
- What are our core jobs and sectors which will stand the test of time?
- What do we need to incorporate for the outside world?

OECS Discussion (then a discussion at the OECS level)
- How do we strengthen our dollar?

- How do we develop education for our people?
- How do we ease travel costs to promote and encourage interregional travel?
- What kinds of workers is our future looking for?

Then when it comes to asking, what is the greatest failure of our education system? Simple, we inherited a system we didn't design. And what's our greatest success? We inherited a system that we didn't design but we made it work. Today the Caribbean region supplies the international market with a wide array of top professionals in various fields which does validate the prowess of our system however, we are of the firm belief that more can be done to even increase this further.

And lastly, Is Micro-credentialing, a more effective route than the degree route for the young person seeking self-advancement today?

Yes and no. Based on some of the points which my colleague Carina Blache raised, she stated that "they are more specific than a degree. Degrees are broader in scope and reach. One may gain an appreciation for certain aspects within a subject field, however they would lack proficiency in that area. Micro-credentialing is therefore a way to earn certification in specialized areas. This in no way suggests that we should forgo the degree for micro-credentials, but rather, micro-credentials can bolster degrees.

- It is a way for people to develop themselves and fill a gap in their own skills.

- This is an opportunity for young people to fill the void in the job market. For instance, there may be a shortage of job opportunities for the person who has a Bachelor's degree in Information Technology, however there may be high demand for persons specialized in networking or coding.
- Micro-credentials are not about knowledge acquisition but rather it is performance-based; certification is awarded based on demonstrated mastery/ competence of the subject matter, not based on attendance."

Conclusively, "In the words of Leonardo DiCaprio at the 2014 Climate Summit Speech "I stand before you, not as an expert, but as a concerned citizen..."…. We didn't come to present new information because as the experts, there's a higher than an 80% chance that you all were most likely aware of these responses. However, while my duty today may not have been to present any ground-breaking or revolutionary product, what I did rather was essentially state, hey, this is the way people are thinking… What are you going to do about it? I have provided you with an "outside-looking-in" perspective on the public's general understanding and consensus of many of the activities and events which may have been taking place in our educational system with the information that has been made public to us or is most prominently shared. What you do with this insight will mold, model and determine the type of leaders, businessmen and women, fashion icons, inventors & innovators, policy makers, **policy shakers**, human resource and overall the quality of a people which will be turning the gears of our Caribbean reality long after you are gone. So, I pose this question once more… "What are you going to do about it?"

Presentation at the Council of Education Ministers

I thank the OECS & the OECS U-Report team for making this opportunity available to young Caribbean people like myself so that we could've been here today to listen and learn from each other, a great thank you to my collaborators and advisors such as Ms. Beverly LeBlanc, Dr. Schuyler Esprit & Ms. Ashma McDougall from the Commonwealth of Dominica. My gratitude also goes to Nyus Alfred & Rahym Augustine from the OECS for being more than accommodating as well as to my fellow debaters- I look forward to being in the ring with you again and to everyone here today who work tirelessly to improve the quality and standards of our Education System. Thank you once again and do have a God blessed day.