

## **The Hon. Evarist Bartolo M.P.**

I shall highlight a few principal points on this subject that I believe is the responsibility of anyone involved with education. An important point I wish to stress is that if you succeed in the work you are doing in favour of children with epilepsy, all children will gain from it. We need to make our schools more humane not only for those children with particular difficulties, because if our schools become more sensitive to children with special needs or difficulties, all the children will benefit from it. Our schools must be open to all children. However here we have a problem. It is easy to say make the schools more humane, but basically we still face a big problem of the dominant scholastic model, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is an old model of 200 years ago.

The first schools, as we know them today were created by Bismark. As you know, countries had Ministries of war before they had Ministries of Education. Many times the education model we follow is the military camp type in which children and youth who used to go to these military camps went to learn obedience and becoming a soldier at war. We have to admit that their behavior and dress code, in fitting to that model of training camp, was very selective. Those not eligible for warfare were discarded. How much have our schools changed from that military model? We know that today, children who are not good for schooling, are set aside; we do not send them to the war front, but what difference is there between those training schools for war and today's schools that prepare students for the battle of examinations, and if they are not suitable for the war of exams, then the school is not their place.

We therefore need changes even in the scholastic model. Changes in which examinations and assessments become part of the education system and not the education system is there for exams and assessments. We need to see that even exams and assessments are educational tools to reach all children. It is useless to say that we have to have inclusive schools, inclusive curriculum but then design examinations and assessments in a way that excludes them. This way we have broadened the classrooms but the narrow door of exams remains the same. Assessments and exams must also become inclusive. I believe that we should make sure that the primary education instrument today should be the development plan of every school. A development plan in each school according to its reality and needs, a plan that is achieved democratically, with strong participation from protagonists in school and beyond. Why "and beyond"? An old Indian proverb "It takes a community to educate a child". We need the whole community to help in the education of our children and youth. We must do this in a practical way, because we will never get there if we think we can educate a child at school and only academically. Support must be from the whole community working together seriously not only rhetorically (which unfortunately is always our case), work together between parents, schools, Local Councils, Social Partners and NGOs such as yours. Work together in the fields of education, health and welfare. There is too much fragmentation and lack of co-ordination.

A serious problem in our culture is that we do not believe in preventive strategies and still less, do we use them. Our creed is that an accident has to happen before we take action instead of taking preventive action. In the fields of education, health and welfare we need to ensure preventive studies, because most times we end up solving problems when it is already too late, resulting in large sums of money spent without the desired effects. We need to strengthen the school medical service. We need methodical and systematical screening of our children from a young age. Many times we learn of problems too late. It is

pity in such a small country such as ours that this prevails. We need training, of psychologists and other people in the caring professions, facilitators, teachers etc. This training should be ongoing even for Heads and parents because the need is that every school should change according to the needs of its children and not that those who do not fit are discarded.

Even today, I still meet parents of children with epilepsy who tell me of their problem in convincing the head of school make the necessary changes to enable their children to achieve education. Changing the neon tubes for example or other things that are making their lives more difficult. Results are measured by the work we do and the action we take. Has action been taken on our requests or have we slept on it? It is becoming increasingly clear that success of a school depends on the cooperation between the head of school together with parents and teachers and assistants to understand and change according to needs. Students of schools that do not make the necessary changes fall behind. We have too many of these students in our system this is why I augured your success in the work you do.

The last point I wish to make before closing is the voice of the child. The children need to make their voices heard. People with difficulties in our country still do not stand to be counted. It is always someone else who is fighting for their rights and needs. They need to stand up to be counted, make their voices heard. A partnership and indeed a membership should be created between all those NGOs and social partners who work in the field of disability. Unfortunately our culture is one where we prefer to go it alone instead of getting together and provide a united front. There must be coalition building among the various Groups in order to increase pressure and support for the necessary changes to be made. Thank you.

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