

**Speech of Hon (Mrs) Leela Devi Dookun-Luchoomun, G.C.S.K.
Vice-Prime Minister, Minister of Education, Tertiary Education,
Science and Technology**

**On the occasion of
Five-Day Workshop programme
on
Nature-based Environmental Education Activities in Early Childhood
Education
13-17 May 2024**

Frank Richard Lecture Theatre, MIE, Réduit

**Dr Jayantee Naugah, P.D.S.M. Chairman, Mauritius Institute of Education
Council and Council Members;**

**Dr Hemant Bessoondyal, O.S.K. Director, Mauritius Institute of Education
& staff of the MIE;**

**Mrs. Maya Devi Soonarane, Director, International Relations & Strategic
Reforms, Research Evaluation and Pre-Primary Education;**

**Mrs Caroline Arekion, Director, Early Childhood Care and Education
Authority and staff of the ECCEA;**

Dr Yash Bhagwanji, Associate Professor, Florida Atlantic University, USA;

Teachers and School Managers;

Ladies and Gentlemen;

It gives me immense pleasure to be here in your midst today on the occasion of the holding of the workshop on ***'Nature-based Environmental Education activities in Early Childhood Education'*** at the Mauritius Institute of Education.

Over the last few decades, there has been a growing realisation of the value that needs to be attached to the issues related to the environment. We all readily accept that the environment sustains all life on earth; that nature is the foundation of our health and well-being, providing as it does to us the essential resources like clean air, water, food, recycling of materials as well as spaces for recreation. Sadly and lamentably, we are witnessing significant changes in the environment which are leading to various issues, among which the climate

change, air and water pollution, ocean acidification, land degradation, deforestation and loss of biodiversity on a global scale.

The environmental repercussions are now being felt earlier than predicted. Nowadays, not a week goes by when we do not hear of unbridled environment-related catastrophes—heatwaves and flash floods, sea level rise through shrinking glaciers and destruction of coral reefs. The causes may well be numerous, including rapid and, often, unplanned urbanization.

But almost all causes go back to a common root—inconsiderate, reckless and rash human actions.

Now, if we, humans, are unwittingly becoming the cause of our own destruction, then it is up to us to create the means for our redemption.

Et, Mesdames et messieurs, cela passe automatiquement par l'éducation, par un apprentissage lié à l'environnement afin de mieux gérer l'écosystème et surtout assurer un rapport équilibré entre l'homme et la nature.

Environmental Education plays a vital role in addressing the challenges I was referring to, a moment ago and that it does by enabling individuals, communities, and organisations to be equipped with the skills to explore and investigate their surroundings and empower them to make informed decisions about how they can contribute to its preservation.

We can't wait. Time is not on our side.

This seed of this education imperative has to be planted as soon as possible.

The earlier, the better.

Today, Early Childhood, spanning from birth up to the age of eight, is recognised by environmental education researchers and practitioners as a critical period for developing environmental literacy. Once the root goes deep enough and is firmly grounded, the impact is readily made manifest: research has shown that positive childhood experiences in nature consistently result in heightened environmental concern and engagement in environmentally friendly behaviours and actions in adulthood. These experiences also contribute to children's

physical, mental, and academic growth with enduring effects on their overall well-being.

This is where a workshop like today's is instrumental in promoting Early Childhood Environmental Education (ECEE) as a unique form of environmental education comprising various approaches and orientations. Such a workshop will, I am certain, lay out a rich tapestry of nature-based programmes and activities that will offer direct, nature-rich experiences to young learners, thereby promoting a genuine appreciation for the natural world as they grow.

Equally, play-based learning in ECEE extends the educational value of outdoor play experiences.

This, incidentally, should remind us all of the International Day of Play whose inaugural celebration is programmed for June 11 of this year. For recall, the International Day of Play is a call for action for adults and decision-makers like us to invest in our children's well-being by protecting their right to play—indeed, by providing greater openings and time for play, including in schools.

All of these approaches ultimately share the common goal of fostering environmentally active individuals through engaging, meaningful, relevant environmental learning experiences.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

You will appreciate that my Ministry has been pro-active in this venture. Recognizing the foundational role of early childhood education, my Ministry has been promoting Environmental Education and Education for Sustainable Development in alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Illustratively, we have impressed upon the MIE the necessity for the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) for Pre-primary education to emphasize the importance of building foundational skills and attitudes for sustainable development as from a young age. The NCF obviously aims at raising children's awareness about their actions and their impact on themselves and others, thereby fostering critical thinking and responsible behaviour towards the environment.

It is in fact conventional wisdom that children's natural curiosity drives their desire to learn about the world around them, a world that encompasses both living and non-living things-- humans, animals, plants, water, soil and objects made of different materials. It is also recognised that, through activities that encourage observation, exploration and questioning, children develop an understanding of their environment, technology, and the importance of caring for the environment.

Again, initiatives like the Gardening Project launched by the Early Childhood Care and Education Authority aim to sensitise children to their environment through project-based learning. This project involves schools, children and families in growing vegetables and fruits, thus fostering knowledge and skills for food cultivation. And this could be a small effort to ensure food security.

Friends, let us all agree that, for a proper rollout of ECEE in schools, there has to be a concerted effort, an active collaboration, with all looking in the same direction and doing their fair share. We have the schools, we have the community -- and then we have the MIE as an active participant in the venture.

Over the decades, this institution has been empowering schoolteachers through various teacher education programmes. The aim is to strengthen the capacity of teachers for them to successfully attain the goals and objectives set for the various subsectors operating in the schooling process. Overall, though, the training programmes empower Educators to create a scalable learner independence and foster an eagerness among their learners to engage in various activities across different areas of learning, including environmental education.

Today's workshop on **'Nature-based EE activities in Early Childhood Education'** takes precisely this high road. It aims to equip 40 pre-school teachers and 40 pre-school managers with the competencies to effectively implement nature-based environmental education activities with a view to nurturing pro-environmental behaviours and instilling lifelong stewardship values among pre-schoolers.

With the support of Dr Yash Bhagwanji, whom I warmly welcome, and whose expertise in both early childhood education and environmental education is highly commendable, the workshop promises to provide valuable insights and requisite expertise to benefit Mauritian teachers and school managers.

I accordingly wish all participants a very fruitful workshop and highly productive deliberations.

I now have the pleasure of declaring the workshop open.

Thank you for your kind attention.