

mr/d/11/PNQ

Debate No. 11 of 29.05.2001

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

EDUCATION SECTOR - REFORMS

The Leader of the Opposition (Dr. N. Ramgoolam) *(By Private Notice)* asked the Minister of Education and Scientific Research whether, in view of the fact of a growing resentment to the many shortcomings and weaknesses in the education plan, namely the inequitable grading system, the doubling of the number of examinable subjects, the reduced weightage and importance of English and Mathematics and the inevitable fall in standards, amongst others, he will, reconsider the plan whilst -

- (a) continuing the construction of quality secondary schools;
- (b) assisting in the upgrading of private secondary schools, and
- (c) replacing ranking by an improved grading system.

The Minister of Education and Scientific Research (Mr S. Obeegadoo): Mr Speaker, Sir, on Government side we are, of course, in total disagreement with the hon. Leader of Opposition as to the alleged growing resentment to the education plan. In fact, without repeating what I stated in response to last week's PNQ, it is obvious that despite the attempts of some to stir up opposition to the plan to the extent of disrupting normal school activities in some schools, there is widespread and growing popular support for this Government's intention to democratise the structure of the educational system. Allegations of shortcomings, as Members of the House have noted, do not come from educationists, but, from a few parents and teachers of the so-called star schools supported by the political Opposition.

To understand the reform process, and in particular, the altogether different role attributed to the CPE within the new scheme requires a fundamental shift of our mind frame, a mind frame moulded by decades of immobility and stagnation in educational thinking. Therein, lies the problem.

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As at present the CPE examinations are the end point of free compulsory schooling. It becomes thereby a life or death issue for parents and their children in that it determines who is entitled to go into secondary education and who isn't, it decides once and for all the academic potential of the student, it decides the admission or otherwise to a State secondary school and access if relevant to a star school according to a rigid hierarchy of preferences. Within such a system attribution of precise marks, number of subjects studied, weightage of different subject for marking and decimal point ranking assume dramatic importance. To give, but one example, the last child to obtain admission to the QEC rankwise last year obtained 817.04 marks whereas the next in line who did not obtain QEC got 817.00, .04 difference in marks. Such is the degree of arbitrariness and unfairness of the system. Can such a system by any stretch of the imagination be said to serve any pedagogical purpose? It has no parallel in the whole wild world of education, to my knowledge.

The grading system has been described as inequitable by the Opposition because, as argued, a child, under the new system, with 3 As and 1 B could theoretically obtain more marks than another with 4 As. This leads some to argue in favour of the status quo while others have called for a grading "*plus serré*". We disagree, because according to the Mauritius Examinations Syndicate, students, obtaining 75% in any one paper, have reached the level of desirable learning competences, hence the threshold for an obtention of an A in the proposed system. In any case a grading '*plus serré*' could only serve for streaming as between institutions thereby preserving star schools, the present educational system à 10 vitesses and boils down to preserving the same degree of competition as at present in which case we might just as well preserve CPE ranking as it exists.

It is noteworthy that, at present, only one out of three candidates at CPE are ranked; the others obtain a grading system which is *moins serré* than the one which we are proposing, because as at now it is 70 to 100 for an A.

(mr/dt1/PNQ etc...)

Doubling the number of examinable subjects in 2004, as proposed in the curriculum renewal project for primary education, represents, in the words of the MIE, a broadening rather than a deepening of the curriculum, with a view to providing a more relevant and all round education to our children on the basis of international best practice. Existing subjects will be reorganised to render them more appealing and accessible to our children. The only new subject, Information Technology, by its very nature, will not constitute an additional burden for the child. That is why, you will have noted, Mr Speaker Sir, that all professional educationists have expressed themselves, not against, but for the curriculum renewal project.

Issues of individual subject weightage at CPE become utterly irrelevant, and indeed redundant within the new scheme. If the CPE is no longer the end point, but merely a half way mark within a process of eleven years of free and compulsory schooling; if the CPE no longer has, as its prime objective, selection for star schools, but becomes instead a pedagogical tool for assessment of students or rather of the learning process itself; if the CPE follows six years of effective schooling incorporating modern tools such as standard achievement tests, a national literacy and numeracy strategy, close monitoring of individual school performance and value added together with timely remedial education, why, oh why do we need differential subject weightage at CPE?

Accordingly, the whole reform process is based on Government's commitment before the people of this land to open up access to education while waging a relentless campaign to raise standards of educational achievements in all schools and for all children. As stated time and time again, the structural reform now being proposed is, but a stage following introduction of prevocational streams and primary curriculum renewal and, in turn, will be followed by the secondary curriculum renewal project, review of status and training of teachers and a pedagogical rethinking.

I am pleased to note that the Opposition is now supportive of the plans of this Government for an unprecedented programme of construction of quality secondary schools, for a package of incentives to promote upgrading of private secondary schools and replacement of ranking by a grading system.

(mr/dt1/PNQ etc...)

I also note, of course, that the request of the Opposition is no longer for the freezing of the reform plans, but for the reconsidering. Such a commendable attitude, together with many other voices outside lead us to conclude that 90% of our reform proposals are almost unanimously supported whereas a few issues are still being debated within public opinion. We have requested and expect that the private confessional authorities will heed the voice of reason and fully integrate the reform project in a matter of days. That would allow for the debate to return to where it belongs, that is, in the educational and pedagogical domain.

Let me recall that the abolition of ranking, implementation of grade system and the reshaping of the structure of the education system does not begin before the end of 2002 or January 2003, which allows ample time for the exchange of ideas, debate of pedagogical issues and formulation of suggestions or proposals as appropriate.

Mr Speaker, Sir, there has been no fundamental reform in the structure of our educational system for several decades whereas all experts agree that the State of Mauritian education is an important, if not the most important constraint to sustainable economic growth, to promotion of employment opportunities and to social integration of the poor.

This Government has now assumed its responsibility under the guidance of the Prime Minister in coming forward with a comprehensive plan for the abolition of CPE ranking and the democratisation of education. The issue is so vital to the future of our children and to that of the country that there can be no place for arrogance, for ego trips just as there can be no justification for divisive and demotive campaigns to reap political dividends. We have always been, and we remain open to dialogue, open to ideas and suggestions from all quarters in order to better, if possible, the reform proposals if these allow, and only if these allow, for the abolition of CPE ranking and the democratisation of education.

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PNQ (contd)

Dr. Ramgoolam: Mr Speaker, Sir, again you have seen that the Minister has taken quite some time in answering the question. So, I will ask whether he will allow me to make two comments on what he has said. First of all, it does not do anyone any good by burying our heads in the sand and by saying that there is no problem. There are lots of problems and growing resentment to the plan. And I purposely listed some – amongst others – of the weaknesses and shortcomings. If I have listed all of them it would be very long. And, of course, you will say that there are too many words. So, I have listed some of them.

Secondly, I have not asked the Minister to freeze the plan for the simple reason that twice he has said he will not freeze the plan. I would have preferred to use “abandon” the plan. Obviously, the Minister would have objected to the word “abandon”, so we are saying “reconsider” to be more equitable towards him, if I may say so.

Thirdly, we are not supportive of the Government plan about construction of new schools. We are saying to continue the programme that we started in 1995. That is what we should have said.

Having said that and as the Minister has said that there is no place for arrogance we are very happy about that, because he has been very arrogant twice last week. Can I ask him why then he has rejected the proposals of many educational experts about narrowing the width of the grading system?

Mr Obeegadoo: Mr Speaker, let me explain once again. This plan is not my plan; it is the plan of Government; and it is the plan of Government which has not been worked out by political heads. This is the fruit of deep thinking by the best brains within the Ministry of Education and all specialised institutions and taking on board the experience of all plans and reactions to plans that have come since 1995. This is the latest realistic formula to do away with the abolition of CPE ranking. I have said it before; we have assumed our responsibility; if the Opposition, if anybody else can come up with an alternative plan which would allow us to abolish CPE ranking, which would allow us to democratise access, to regionalise education, then please do so. We are open to ideas, but then we have assumed our responsibility without losing any time within seven months of assuming power. We have come forward with the plan as per the commitment taken towards the people of the land; we are now open and if anybody can provide better ideas to do so, but, of course, we have been waiting for many, many years.

D11P02CO2
PNQ (contd)

The Prime Minister: For four and a half years ...

Dr. Ramgoolam: The Minister himself said that we do not live in an ideal world, this is why at the first time I asked questions I said repeatedly that we know that it is a difficult problem, that we do not want to impair any kind of progress, but the way the Minister is going about it is not acceptable to many of us in this country. The Minister said that there were experts who decided, but the very experts that he mentioned had themselves recommended in the past that there should be a narrow grading system. Can he say therefore how these experts now change their minds?

Mr Obeegadoo: Mr Speaker, let me explain very clearly. Let us face the facts. Right now, 28,000 children take the CPE only a maximum of 9,000 or 10,000 get ranked. The rest are graded and they are graded according to a scheme for which the A is 70 to 100. Presumably when the Opposition is calling for a grading which is *plus serré* they are referring to the range of marks for A. This matter has been given careful consideration and the opinion of the experts which is reflected in Government's plan is that as from 1975 - as the hon. Leader of the Opposition might know - for CPE there were two levels of attainment: the essential learning competencies and the desirable learning competencies. The programme is framed, the examination papers set in order to evaluate children according to these two levels of attainment. Today the experts of the Mauritius Examinations Syndicate, which has the reputation it has throughout the land, say 75% onwards you have attained the desirable learning competencies. That is why after a thorough-going debate it has been proposed that there should be A as from 75 and not 80 or 85 and that there should be no A⁺ or A*. I repeat: I have heard no educational expert, any pedagogical expert coming to argue in favour of an A⁺ or A*. Once you do that, you are back to square one. Everybody will strive to obtain A⁺, whether 85 or above, everybody will take private tuition from 7.30 in the morning to 6 in the evening. And what will be the use of the A⁺? You then have to keep the star schools. The A⁺ will only be a means of selection - not attainment, there is no pedagogical attainment problem. The only motive for establishing an A⁺ or A* as from 85 or whatever would be to decide on two decimal marks who goes into QEC and who does not, who goes into Royal College of Curepipe and who does not, who goes into St Esprit for that matter and who does not. That is why we are saying that pedagogically there can be no reason, no justification for narrowing further the A range of marks.

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PNQ (contd)

Dr. Ramgoolam: The hon. Minister said that no pedagogical experts have said so. In fact, Mr Bissoondoyal who is here – I do not want to refer to him – has himself said that we should go for a narrower grade. We know the problem of decimal points and this is precisely why he mentioned narrower grade if one reads what he has put in his paper. But does the hon. Minister not agree that with the width of the grading system, the inconsistency that will happen with it and the unfairness that will go with it together coupled with the fact that the proximity of residence will play a key role in that selection – if I may use that word – and also parental choice will lead to further inconsistencies, further abuse and further unfairness?

Mr Speaker: I'll request the hon. Leader of the Opposition and the Minister to refrain from bringing the name of experts in the House. It is not proper. You can refer to a report, but you can't refer to Mr Bissoondoyal as an expert in the debate.

Dr. Ramgoolam: I meant the Bissoondoyal report, Mr Speaker, Sir. I will explain again if the hon. Minister does not understand. Since he is keeping a wide range – obviously, he himself has given the example of somebody with 4 As with 75 points gets 300 marks and somebody with 3 As and one B gets actually more marks than the one with 4 As. With that kind of wide range, with the fact that we will couple this with the proximity of residence to the school being taken on board, the fact that allow parental choice will be allowed, does he not agree, therefore, that those who live further away, having more or less the same grade, will be penalised, and therefore, he will put in, in the system now, a degree of unfairness, a degree of injustice and a dangerous allowance of people to interfere in the system and abuse the system?

Mr Obeegadoo: I have been very attentive to the points made by the Opposition outside the House and I have researched those points. Let me give one example about this issue of 3 As and 1 B. According to the results, the fruit of the research, as at present, this problem does not arise. The first boy to get 3 As and 1 B at the exams is ranked 1006 and the first girl 3 As and 1 B is ranked 1171, so that on the basis of the present grading system there can be no question of a child with 3 As and 1 B doing better than a child with 4 As and, therefore, gaining admission to a so called star school on the basis of an even wider range scheme as presently exists.

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PNQ (contd)

As regards regionalisation again, I mean, how can you do better? We have four wide regions, they are small enough not to make a child cross the country at the age of 10 to have access to education, but they are wide enough to provide a very fair degree of parental choice, choosing between a school in the countryside or in an urban area, between State and private, between private confessional and non confessional, I really do not see what is the problem. Now, again, Mr Speaker, very sincerely, if the Opposition can come with a better regionalisation scheme, please do so, we shall study it, we shall discuss it.

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Pnq (cont'd)

(Mr Obeegadoo)

But we have done our duty. We have proposed what is to us the fairest regional scheme; and I must say again, apart from my good friends of the Labour Party, I have heard no other voice outside questioning the regionalisation scheme.

Dr. Ramgoolam: I am not questioning the regionalisation scheme.

(Interruptions)

The fact is that we are not against the regionalisation programme. Let us get it very clear in our mind. In fact, we are for the regionalisation, but we think the way the Minister has enlarged the grading system, the way that he is allowing parental choice and flexibility in it, it is going to lead to abuse and probably also corruption. We are not going into that but it could well be. The Minister has given one example of 4 As and 3 As. There are many examples which we can give like this. We don't go by one example, but already we can see the difference. With this system when parental choice will be allowed, when residence will be taken into consideration, when the student who is nearer the school will, obviously, get to that school, can the Minister tell us that this will not lead to unfairness and injustice?

Mr Obeegadoo: I do not see the problem. Let me say it again, Mr Speaker. There are no selective examples. The statistics we have used are the MES' statistics. If there is any enlightenment sought by the Opposition concerning this matter of ranking, precise statistics, I am willing, in a spirit of consultation, dialogue, transparency to provide all data which the Opposition requires. There is nothing to hide; we are there to show all the figures to justify the stand which has been taken. I repeat, Mr Speaker, very sincerely, I do not see how the regionalisation scheme proposed can cause any injustice. If the Opposition has any concrete matter which it wants to raise, it can please do so, and we shall respond.

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PNQ (cont'd)

Mr Dulloo: Mr Speaker, Sir, I am referring to the question of Mathematics and English. The hon. Minister has been referring to his curriculum renewal about literacy, numeracy, information technology and the whole of Mauritius would like to see Mauritius become a cyber island. But is the Minister aware that now as it is, English and Mathematics represent 600 marks on 1000, that is, three-fifths of the weightage and, at the same time, this is reflected in the syllabus, in the load of work. But now with his introduction of eight subjects all at par, English and Mathematics would represent two of eight, that is, one-quarter by way of weightage. There was the question that EVS was too loaded at a certain time and it was offloaded. This would mean a drastic reduction of the time allotted to English and Mathematics, of the weightage of English and Mathematics, of the syllabus for English and Mathematics within the new curriculum renewal; and this is dangerous for an island that is aspiring to be a cyber island as Mathematics and English are very important for information technology. Is he aware of the danger that we are confronting with this?

Mr Obeegadoo: If only the hon. Member has responded to my many invitations to come and discuss, all that would have been cleared. Mr Speaker, Sir, what we are saying is that CPE is no longer the end point, it is only a half-way mark for 11-year schooling and in the process we have done what no Government has been able to do before, which is to give Asian languages exactly the same status as all other subjects. Today what we are saying is that all subjects taught within the primary curriculum are important for the development of the child. Look at what pertains in the United States, in England, in India, in Australia and everywhere where we do not have this absurdity of different weightage, different ranking, all that pressure on children of 10 or 11 years. That is unseen, unheard of, Mr Speaker. We have really to change our mentality to understand that henceforth CPE is just one step on the long route leading us to 11 years free and compulsory and comprehensive education for all our children.

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PNQ (cont'd)

Mr Dulloo: We must call off the bluff of the Minister on the question of Oriental Language which is very dangerous. With what he is advocating, the end result would be the elimination of Oriental Language in the school curriculum. Now with four subjects, the students are doing Oriental Language, but with the new curriculum, they have to do eight subjects and an additional ninth subject and this will, ultimately, result in the elimination of Oriental Language because of the load of work and also because of the fact that there is no competition whereby Oriental Language could be an attraction. With the elimination of competition, students would not take the extra burden of one additional subject after they have taken eight subjects. Therefore, this is clearly hoodwinking the whole population and this bluff should be called off at once.

Mr Obeegadoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, let me say it again. Load of work is not going to increase. There is only one subject which is new, it is Information Technology. Information Technology is creativity. It is not a stressful subject. It is not something that you can learn by heart and come and recite before the blackboard. Secondly, when the hon. Member says that there will be a problem because it is the ninth subject, it is because we are looking at it with the present mentality. It is a number of subjects that students should take for CPE, but if CPE is no longer the dramatic affair it is now, so where is the problem if students learn eight, nine, ten, eleven to twelve subjects as in all other countries? As regards Asian languages being the same status, we have said that, to the extent that certain schools have a higher demand than supply of seats available and that they have to exercise selection, they will be looking at grades and Asian language grade will count as grade in any other subject without any differential weightage.

Dr. David: In the grading system that the Minister is proposing, 4 As may be equivalent to 400 and 4 As may be equivalent to 300 as well. Is the Minister, therefore, agreeing that there should be classes of mixed ability in

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PNQ (cont'd)

the one same class, having students scoring 75 or plus and 99 plus, that is, between 75 and 100? Is the Minister agreeable with mixed ability classes?

Mr Obeegadoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, the previous Government abolished streaming at primary level. The previous Government introduced *dans les faits* mixed ability classes in all our primary schools throughout the land; and I congratulate them for doing so! This has not been contested and it is the right step. There was mixed ability in all our schools when the former Minister of Education, hon. Chedumbarum Pillay, was Minister. That was a very good thing. Now, what we are saying is that at the secondary level, there will be grading, therefore, this image of that in the same class, you will have 4 As and 4 Es or 6 As and 6 Es is not the truth. If you look at the plan carefully, you will understand. That is not possible. A fair degree of mixed ability is, indeed, desirable and pedagogically it makes sense. I have heard no pedagogical objection to that. We are going one step further. We are saying that, in certain secondary schools where it is the wish of parents and management, the Ministry will be flexible, will allow for streaming between Forms I to III whereas the previous Government abolished streaming between Forms I to III at secondary level as well. So, the hon. Member did not understand. Let me take this issue of the Action Plan again which was approved by Cabinet under the last Government. The Action Plan went much further. The Action Plan proposed not even grading, but continuous assessment in all subjects. So, I fail to understand really how the opinions of the hon. Member could have shifted round so far, so dramatically today.

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PNQ (CONTD)

Dr. David: Mr Speaker, Sir, is the Minister aware that both in UK and in France mixed ability has not worked and they are going back to streaming?

Mr Obeegadoo: Certainly not, Mr Speaker. As at present, the concept of comprehensive education continues to found the education system both in the UK and in France. The actual debate in France is what? It is how, within comprehensive education, within *l'école pour tous*, you can accommodate special needs. In England, it is exactly the same debate - whether there should be re-introduction of pre-vocational education, which we are now doing in this country. So, I've got to disagree with the hon. Member.

Dr. David: I am not referring to mixed ability in the same school, but mixed ability in the same classroom.

Mr Obeegadoo: Mr Speaker, again, I do not see the point. Mixed ability in the classroom was established by the previous Government in all primary and secondary schools.

Mr Dulloo: Mr Speaker, Sir, unfortunately, I have to come back to the question of oriental language because the Minister is misleading the whole Mauritian population on this issue. Is the Minister aware that, as it is presently, students are ready to take one additional subject, apart from the four subjects? Because the oriental language is competitive in the sense that there are reserved seats for those scoring good performance in oriental languages in the MGI or other good secondary schools, whereas, by eliminating this possibility for competition, the Minister would be eliminating altogether the taking of oriental languages at primary school level?

Mr Obeegadoo: Mr Speaker, frankly, I am not sure I understand the position of the hon. gentleman to be that of the Labour Party because what he seems to be arguing now is that competition as at present should remain. If the hon. Leader of the Opposition is saying yes to grading, then that would be completely contradictory to the position of hon. Dulloo. So, what we are saying, Mr Speaker, is that we are going further by ensuring that on the time-table Asian languages are accessible to all children of this country; that Government will fund free classes, free tuition for all children willing to take an Asian language and who have not done so before. We are taking every step, with the idea of creating

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PNQ (CONTD)

three/four little MGIs called by another name in each region to offer the whole range of Asian languages to all our children. I sincerely cannot see how this can be termed the way the hon. gentleman is saying.

Mr Ramgoolam: Mr Speaker, Sir, the Minister, himself, has made a plea that he is prepared to talk to people who disagree with the reform plan. Obviously, there is disagreement in many areas. Maybe an agreement could be found concerning some areas if we sit down because the disagreement may be caused by a misunderstanding or because we are speaking from two different angles. But there is disagreement not only with the Opposition here, by with people outside. If the Minister is sincere in his wish that there should be a consensus - and we are in a situation where he should have tried to reach a consensus - doesn't he think that the suggestion made by one of his own supporters in L'Express is good one, that is, to have a round table with the parties concerned and try to reach a consensus, especially as he, himself, has said that he is going to allow people to express their views?

Mr Obegadoo: Mr Speaker, let me stress again on the point that there can be consensus on educational reform. Otherwise, there will be no educational reform. There are too many divergent interests people are poles apart. However, I have taken the unprecedented step of holding parliamentary briefings, inviting everybody from the Opposition. I have spoken to the Leader of the Opposition, offering my interest in meeting to discuss all these issues. I am not competent to decide on a round table or whatever. What I am saying very frankly, very sincerely and very directly is that I am willing to meet with the hon. gentlemen of the Opposition any time, today, tomorrow or the day after tomorrow to discuss all these issues because, even if there can be no consensus, there should be some shared understanding on the importance and urgency of these reforms.

Mr Speaker: Hon. Members, I have been informed that PQ No. B/444 will be answered by the hon. Deputy Prime Minister at the end of question time.
