

**Speech of Hon (Mrs.) Leela Devi Dookun-Luchoomun,
Minister of Education and Human Resources,
Tertiary Education and Scientific Research**

**Launching of Mauritian Collection of
Ducere “African Children’s Stories”.
Monday 22 FEB at MGI Auditorium**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me immense pleasure to be present today for the launching of the “*African Children’s Stories Project*” in our country. This is, as we well know, an event associated with the promotion of reading and the development of writing skills among our student community.

I am even more thrilled to be here today in the company of Hon Julia Gillard, Chancellor of Ducere and former Minister of Education as well as Prime Minister of Australia from 2010 to 2013. For those of you who do not know it, Ms Gillard is a person who has always been in the forefront of several battles, including the fight against conditions that compel children to miss out on their right to education.

She is equally reputed for being strongly outspoken on the gender issue, always alive to the personal and professional challenges women face in their daily lives and fighting for and encouraging them to smash glass ceilings and transform glass ladders into iron ones.

Welcome to Mauritius Ms Gillard and I also extend a warm welcome to Mrs Di Fleming, Executive Director of the Ducere Foundation and her team.

We have gathered here today to launch the Mauritian collection of stories that form part of the “*African Children’s Stories Project*”.

The Project is meant to enable learners to let loose their creativity through a variety of stories.

But not just any story.

These learners, coming from a few primary and Secondary pilot schools, have written stories that truly symbolize the various colours of our rainbow nation. These stories are thus a reflection of our culture and traditions which have been passed down to our young generation by our forefathers.

This is a great initiative taken by the Ducere Foundation – and I am happy to note that it is one of the initiatives of the Foundation for the African Continent that relates to the dissemination and sharing of the intangible cultural and literary heritage.

Quite understandably, then, several Africa countries are already actively engaged in this project including Botswana, Rwanda, South Africa and Kenya.

The twin objectives of the Project make it worthwhile: the preservation of the oral traditions of local African communities, on

the one hand, and the provision of culturally appropriate reading materials to African children on the other.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is common knowledge that the African Continent is particularly known for its oral traditions: much of its diversified cultures and much of its knowledge even, have been transmitted throughout the ages in oral form from generation to generation. It may well be for this reason partly that the culture of reading books is not very deeply anchored in the African psyche.

But things are changing in Africa. The African Renaissance is indeed on.

An in the context of this Renaissance, I am happy to note that ***African Children Stories Project*** falls squarely within the precincts of Agenda 2063. This is the African Union's Pan-African vision of the Africa Africans want for themselves and their future generations.

One of the Aspirations highlighted in this document-- ASPIRATION 5-- reads thus, ***“An Africa With a Strong Cultural Identity, Common Heritage, Values and Ethics.”***

It is also stated there that, and I quote,

“Pan African ideals will be taught in all school curricula and Pan African cultural assets (heritage, folklore, languages, film, music,

theater, literature, festivals, religions and spirituality) will be enhanced. The African creative arts and industries will be celebrated throughout the continent and the diaspora and contribute significantly to self-awareness, well-being and prosperity, and to world culture and heritage. African languages will be the basis for administration and integration.”

Unquote.

This is part of the New Africa that we subscribe to and that is now at the heart of the Continent as it re-invents itself.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

This ideal of unleashing the creative capabilities of our children is also central to the concerns of the education system in Mauritius.

Ms Gillard, you should be aware My Ministry is engaged in the implementation of a number of education reforms that cut across the different sub-sectors, from the Pre-Primary through to the Tertiary and Technical and Vocational Education.

One of the pillars of this systemic reform is the introduction of Nine Year Continuous Basic Education, which is here commonly known as the Nine Year Schooling.

This is an inclusive programme that, among other things, provides the conducive environment for learners to enjoy a harmonious and holistic development.

Purposeful learning, I believe, acts as a facilitator for our children to make their way into adulthood and behave responsibly in society. Hence basic literacy and numeracy skills have to be complemented by an awareness of digital literacy, communication and creative skills as well as a whole set of other skills—the 21st Century or Deep Learning skills, as they are commonly known today.

And here, I will lay emphasis on be the importance of creative writing in this equation.

I believe we all agree that creative writing plays an important role in a child's literacy development. It certainly helps to develop the cognitive and communication skills of children. It also stimulates the imagination, clarifies thinking, and develops the powers of expression, empathy and critical reading and thinking.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The world of education poses a lot of challenges.

But it is also rewarding in many ways-- you just need to bring in a zeal, a passion.

And the task becomes even easier when you are supported by like-minded supportive committed and zealous persons.

Here I must have a special word of appreciation for HE Mrs Coles, the Australian High Commissioner and her team.

Her Excellency has always made it a point to go the extra mile so as to support us in our educational enterprise. Her partnership with my

Ministry and the institutions operating under it is remarkable. The Mauritius Institute of Education, the primary Curriculum Development and Teacher training institution of the country, has especially benefited enormously through its linkage with the University and Institution in Australia, a special word goes for Edith Cowan University whose trainee teachers have always done a great job in facilitating the use of English language by primary school pupils.

Plenty of Book donations to pre-primary and primary schools have also evidenced this strong support and the Post Graduate programme for professionals goes a long way towards building and consolidating professional capacity in Mauritius.

And now we have the facilitation of the ***African Children Stories Project*** by the High Commission. I need hardly stress the significance the Project will also have in encouraging our children to use the English language in a creative manner.

I will not dwell long today on the decline in proficiency in the use of English language among our students. Suffice it to say that one of the root causes is the backseat that reading has taken among the young persons. I strongly believe that a culture of reading books and encouraging writing skills at a very early developmental stage of a child reinforces her future growth.

Hence encouraging reading and writing since childhood at primary level and the provision of appropriate reading materials are the way

forward to address this downward trend in the mastery of English language.

This ***African Children Stories Project*** , when extended to other schools as well, will, I believe, also bring its contribution to the edifice and will supplement the actions my Ministry is undertaking to promote and encourage reading in schools.

Let me end by congratulating all the young writers for their contribution. My special thanks go to all the schools and educators for providing the support and encouragement for this noble project which will definitely encourage our young generations to read and be more prolific in the creative field.

Finally, I would like once again express my deep-felt appreciation to the Ducere Foundation and the Australian High Commission for this project. If ‘Ducere’ means ‘to lead’ in Latin, then I wish you well in leading many more projects and programmes that will make illiteracy a thing of the past.

All the very best to you then in your future endeavours.

I thank you for your attention.