

Monday, 4 September 2001

**BOFESETE National Conference
Conference Presidential Address 2001
Palalpye, Kgolagano Centre**

Theme: Towards realisation of the Educational Goals of Vision 2016

Progress, Problems, Constraints and the Way Forward of the Federation

Salutations. Directors of Ceremonies, Honourable delegates, Distinguished Teachers, it is my recurring pleasure to dialogue with you on the occasion of the Congress of delegates, the first of its kind since we made constitutional amendments that call on only the delegates from the regions to attend. This is indeed a historic occasion since this is a test of that constitutional change. The constitutional change itself is indicative of the development of the Organisation.

It has been a year since we last met at the previous Congress and a lot has happened which we have to dialogue with you on. The Presidential address is nothing but a progress report, highlighting successes, failures, achievements, vision on the way forward between now and the Congress.

The Conference happens at a time when the country and the Education system are presented with a number of challenges and opportunities. There are a lot of political developments internationally, regionally and locally. The global developments are bound to impact on our work both positively and negatively and it's important for all of us to be prepared for the changes.

At the same time there are even more fundamental changes, reforms, developments, some retrogressive, some beneficial that are taking place in the wider public service. These developments challenge us to change our ways of acting, our ways of thinking. We have to come up with strategies that can proactively and positively address themselves to the changes in the Public Service. We need to develop capacity to rise up and face the challenges. We need structures that can address immerging issues. I am specifically referring to the need to have standing committees that can do research, think, investigate issues and then inform the executive on the course of action to take.

Take the case of the Tsa Badiri Consultancy on the Conditions in the Civil Service as a example. When the govt instituted this study, trade unions were caught off guard, because was a departure from the past practice of appointing salaries commissions. We know that with public commissions, interested stakeholders are usually invited to take part by presenting submissions. When the Consultancy was finished govt asked us to then make our comments. We were presented with a highly technical report that referred to concepts that we were not familiar with. To the credit of the Public sector Unions we came together and engaged consultants to inform us on the report. We spent approximately P60000 on the study (we were lucky to have been met halfway by Fredrich Erbert Foundation). My point is don't we have expertise within the Teaching service that can at least do the spadework of that exercise? The Teaching Service has teachers with some background in some of the commercial and business disciplines. Perhaps its time to harness that rich pool of expertise on a permanent basis to inform the Executive.

Currently we are faced with the Early Exit Scheme, which we have to respond to. There is also the new pension scheme, Leave Encashment, etc. All these developments make demands on the time and the intellectual capacity of the Federation to consider and respond to these initiatives.

The Federation continues to enjoy growth and development. We are now recognised, friends and foe as a force to reckon with in the education system of Botswana. We are not only known, but we are also respected, and looked at in a positive light even by our former detractors. We are slowly but surely being recognised not only as important stakeholders, but also as movers and shakers in the education system. This does not imply that we can overturn and overrule the Ministry officials on anything that we do not like. What we are saying is that people care about what we think and we are able to influence decisions and policies. This is not a total process, but we are getting there. It is important to note that in this process we do enjoy the ear of the honourable Minister of Education. We are able to present our issues to him and if he thinks we have a case he takes the senior officers to task about their actions and inactions. This is perhaps the single most important weapon in our struggle for teacher's rights; we can appeal to the political leadership, which is sensitive to some of our plight. We make the directors to account for their sins.

One of the most serious constraints that faces the Federation is the absence of a Chief Executive Officer at Headquarters. This issue has become more urgent than ever before. We need to have somebody in place sooner rather than later. Members of the Executive have other commitments to their schools to attend to. We need someone to be on a full time basis attending to the work of the Federation. The Executive should be coming up with plans and the Executive Secretary implementing them. We need a person who can go around recruiting members in the schools. We have already appealed to the Minister to second a teacher to the Secretariat. The response from the Minister is non-committal, we have been asked to write on this issue. Part of the reason to tell you is to help us in the identification of such a person if our request is accepted. It would however be foolhardy to bank on the Ministry of Education attaching a teacher to us. We should rather focus on our resources or on other alternatives, like a volunteer from some organisations like Skills Share. I would like to get feedback from you as to what course of action to take from here. It has to be remembered that whatever option we take will have financial implications. Even with an attached person or volunteer the Federation would remain liable to certain expenses like accommodation, subsistence, travel and other expenses. We already have a vehicle, which we obtained from Japan (not China, and it is therefore not a Fonkon, but the real thing). The vehicle has already made it feasible for the Executive to send a delegation on a tour of the country. We look forward to many projects for the vehicle to undertake.

You are all aware of the suspension of PARALLEL PROGRESSION and the subsequent task force on the issue. That task force has all but finished its work. The task force members did their best to tackle the problems that affect the progression of teachers. Without braking protocol on these matters all I can say is that we have reason to be cautiously optimistic about the results of this task force. What is perhaps unsatisfactory is the level of responses that came from teachers. There was general apathy to the exercise, until the school heads were commanded to facilitate the work, that was when something came up. I have mentioned that we need to be able to rise to the challenges in a proactive way. We should be our own consultants on these matters. No one else will represent our opinions better than ourselves.

Leave Encashment for Teachers. Another major development that came from the Tsa Badiri Consultancy was the recommendation on encashment of leave for public servants. This is a very welcome development for which we need to applaud the govt. The problem was that TSM was caught with its pants down on this matter. For a long time we have been complaining about the lack of properly managed leave for teachers. Even on the matter of early Exit Policy for Public Servants it was clear that there are inadequacies in teacher leave because Early Exit Policy also makes provision for encashment of outstanding leave. When Public servants die in office the terminal benefits include leave owed. When teachers transfer to other departments they are assumed not to have earned any leave. This has been a historic injustice. With the advent of Leave Encashment, TSM knew that they now had to act quickly and hastily put something in place, hence a task force to this effect. I trust that the work of the task force will result in teachers getting their dues.

Computer scheme for teachers. Many people are highly impressed with our initiative for a computer scheme for teachers. I have received enquiries from people outside teaching like colleges of education and the like. So far only about 10 teachers have subscribed to the scheme. This is a disappointing figure. Teachers should utilise the scheme more. The buzzword nowadays is Information and Communications Technology. Computerisation is not just a passing fad or a fashion but it is a reality of the present life. Every teacher must have access to a computer not only at school but even at home.

Membership drive continues to be one of our important challenges facing the Federation. It is critical that the Federation should sign up a significant percentage of teachers nationally. The current membership stands at 3000+-. We need to register more than 50% of teachers to improve our political credibility. The Conference must come up with concrete strategies to boost membership. During the UB Vacations we sent 2 (Mr Hunyepa and Mr Botsie) members to the Kgalagadi and Maun Districts to address teachers and register as many as possible. They registered a total of new teachers.

Membership is not only important for political representation, but it is also important for financial reasons. We are financially constrained.

Financial Constraints. The more successful we seem to be in other things, we seem to need more money for our plans. Our subscription stands at P10.00. This is inadequate to meet our financial commitments. As at the moment we won't be able to meet our financial commitments with respect to members' travel and other expenses. WE NEED to seriously review our subscription level. We need more money for our operations either for special ones or the day to day running of the Headquarters. There is so much that we can and must do as an organisation.

Grievance board is not working as expected. The board has not met as regularly as expected. This is a major weakness because in a way this is a major part of our mandate.

Promotions and progression continues to be a major source of concern. Lately TSM has put in a condition of acting appointment as a condition for appointment rather than being an additional advantage. We have challenged TSM on this in a meeting with the Minister of Education 2 weeks

back. We got them to admit their error on this matter. They conceded that it was wrong for them to have worded the advert in a manner that they did.

Professional Issues in Education. The big question being asked nowadays is whether teaching is a profession or is it a semi profession. There are a number of issues that define professionalism. A couple of issues that impact on our work need to be looked at carefully.

Autonomy, high degree of skills, high public trust, concern for the interests of the clients etc. We should see investigate or research the extent to which teaching meets some of the basic tenants of a profession.

Should we as professionals still be condoning and be involved in practices like corporal punishment? Have we stopped for a moment to critically think about the impact of such practices and the dangers that such practices pose for our clients and ourselves? There is a report in the papers about a teacher who is facing a legal suit arising such a duty as beating students. Are we a service or are we a force? Is corporal punishment not a form of abuse? Is it not violence against students? Does such violence on students not teach students to violent in their adult life? It is an established fact that children who were abused in turn abuse children when they grow. Perhaps it is time for us to critically examine the practice and do away with it. As a progressive organisation we should lead and advocate for a change in the status quo and reform the education system. We should organise symposia on such pertinent issues.

There are calls to establish a body that will regulate professional matters of teachers, a kind of a teaching council. This is a type of body that certifies one to practise or not. This is particularly useful in a situation where we have a large number of expatriates, some from countries that do not even use English language. We also have our own people who are a disgrace to the teaching profession, such a body could deal with such miscreants, irregardless of whether they have won court cases or not. I am specifically referring to teachers who sexually abuse their clients. Such people should be debarred from teaching. Sexual abuse, I deliberately use the strong term of sexual abuse and not sexual relations, because that is what it is, abuse. There can be no consent between a student and a teacher. The teacher is not only older, He is in a position to demand, command and instruct the student to do certain things. Any situation where it is apparent that there was some attempt at sexual liaison between a teacher and the student, the only action to take against the teacher should be summary dismissal from the service. At the moment TSM is incapable and constrained from taking sterner action because of the legal niceties that have to be considered.

HIV/AIDS continues to be a source of concern to the nation at large and the Education sector in particular. The nation continues to bleed from the loss of human resources, especially the trained one. This is not to say that the loss of untrained or unskilled people is not a loss. The death of any human being is tragic. What is BOFESETE doing about the issue or what can BOFESETE do to help in the national effort to help combat the scourge? What we can not afford to do is to just watch as the nation perishes.

The first thing is to speak about it, followed by doing something about it. We must first question our practices; I have already spoken about sexual abuse of clients, which is an important first step. Next we should advocate for school-based initiatives. Of utmost importance is to give support to

NGO and CBO that are engaged in the war against AIDS The national executive should also develop an overall policy frame work on this. We already have a committee that is supposed to work on this matter.

Without an academic approach, I would personally recommend the following course of action, voluntary testing, and attitude change towards sex, use of antiretroviral drugs where appropriate.

An important aspect of the fight against AIDS is membership of medical aid schemes. It is a shame and unacceptable in the modern age to find Lekau or lekgarebe without medical aid. You cannot do without medical aid. This is not to suggest that medical aid can stop you from dying, but rather it reduces you or your dependents medical expenses in times of need be it accident or sickness, an our age group is prone to both. Medical aid should not be confused with the other speculative types of insurance, this one you are bound to use sooner or later.

The BOFESETE Funeral Scheme continues to function as we expect it. The scheme covers teachers, their spouses, parents and parents in law, children aged 21 and below. The scheme has up to now paid a total of 103 claims.

There are only 3 claims that have not been honoured so far, because some restrictions. It is important that we should familiarise ourselves with any restrictions that may be applicable like age of children, formality of adoption, the limit within which to make the claims.

School heads have to do their bit to help in the claims processing, by informing any dependents that the teacher had a policy from which they have to make a claim.

Loan scheme. We have at the moment not reached any deal with any micro lender for financial services. We wanted more favourable terms for the scheme, but this did not succeed. We are not in a position to recommend any scheme to you as a preferred partner. We will continue to investigate options in this regard. What is perhaps interesting is the feasibility of the FEDERATION offering such a scheme by itself. We have examples of such thrift societies in practise elsewhere. This is something that we could probably introduce for our members. All we need is a business studies teacher to volunteer to do the spadework for such a policy.

Gender. We have a gender committee or women's wing that has to advocate for women's issues. This committee needs to be encouraged and supported because its work is so important. We need to be sensitive and cognisant of gender issues in education.

As of now the Federation has not yet developed a strategic plan in a professional way. Perhaps this is why some of our things do not seam to be going well. We have worked with BOCONGO on this matter but the financial implications have dictated that we put this on hold for a while

International affiliation is something that is still proving elusive at the moment. The main organisation that we need to affiliate to Education International is proving rather dodgy on this issue.

In conclusion I wish to say that while we have major challenges, we have a lot of things going on for us. All we need is to get organised and harness the existing potential and take the organisation to dizzy heights. It all needs our commitment and dedication and a bit of sacrifice. The Congress is just around the corner next year. At this forum we will need men and women who have exceptional leadership qualities to take the Federation a step beyond. We should start scouting for leadership talent from our schools, because the organisation is becoming bigger, more professional and more challenging administratively.

We are otherwise on the right course and if we put our efforts to it we can pull off a major victory by coming up with an organisation that can not only represent teachers effectively but can take the leadership in the educational development of the nation.