Inside Jamaican Schools.

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An educational system gone sour

The education system in Jamaica is in crisis. The fact is that it has always been, but some recent developments have increased concerns about its future. The problems range from indiscipline, to poor performances at the examinations level, to the recently announced emigration of hundreds of qualified teachers to schools in North America and Europe.

Hyacinth Evans, senior lecturer at the Institute of Education, University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona, and her research team used interviews and participatory methods to create this constructive expose of the system and his faults, as well as providing some recommendations for improvement.

One fine example of the issues raised by her in this book is the matter of streaming, or the act of grouping students in streams according to various criteria. This, she notes, is an important aspect of the structure now intricately connected to the competitive academic curriculum.

Students are sorted into categories, according to the student`s knowledge of aspects of the competitive curriculum - knowledge that reflects the existing social structure and social and economic opportunities.

She says that once the students are categorised and streamed, they are likely to remain in that stream for the major part of their school career.
Students remain in the low stream because of the initial gaps in their knowledge, the failure of many schools to address those gaps by means of meaningful remedial work and the absence of teaching methods to accommodate different learning styles, she says.

Disturbing effects

She goes on to reveal other very disturbing effects of this system, that the students remain in these streams because they rarely get the encouragement, motivation or opportunities to do better: They are not expected to do better. And the attitudes of teachers and peers and the very nature of teacher/student interaction rob them of this motivation, a sense of empowerment and self-esteem.

She adds that streaming has had a significant and long-lasting effect on the students` access to knowledge and achievement, their self-esteem, aspirations for the future, the formation of social categories and relations with other students.

It serves to bind many students to their social class origins and to withhold from these students the emancipatory promises of education, she says.

She is convinced that the educational process is being distorted and that educators lose sight of the goals articulated so well by Minister of Education Senator Burchell Whiteman, because the dominant aim of education and schooling has become the passing of examinations. This leads to schools emphasising streaming and teachers emphasising preparation for examinations using primarily lecturing and note-giving methods.

Obvious problems

It is hard to disagree with her assessments because the problems all seem so obvious. Her suggestions are equally valid, for example that because the process ignores so many important aspects of education related to student development, it leaves behind a sizeable proportion of
students, who often receive less but who really need more attention, encouragement and resources than the average or high-ability students to make the grade.

The ROSE (Reform of Secondary Education) programme, now instituted in Grades 7-9, advocates mixed ability groupings, which would minimise streaming at the secondary level. But, she observed, there is evidence that teachers are finding it difficult to carry out the integration process, because of the challenges it poses, as well as their subjective views about how the schools should be run and how one organises for teaching.

The huge gap in literature on education in the region needed to guide strategies for improving the system, ought to be significantly closed by her revelations. In the past, students and teachers in the Caribbean have had to rely on ethnographic research from North America to enrich their understanding of life in schools and classrooms, but the emergence of Ms. Evans collection of ethnographic research articles, providing a close-up look at Jamaican schools based on actual experiences, should herald an era of closer internal scrutiny.

**Hyacinth Evans**

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The book is essential to the body of educational texts being used in the Caribbean for undergraduate and post graduate students, teachers and anyone with particular interest in schools and education.

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