



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES

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FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND EDUCATION

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Let Us Bring Back the Primary School

There is now greater public awareness that the genesis of violence in schools at the secondary level is partly due to the fact that a lot of children are not experiencing success in school. This can begin as early as the primary level. The lack of numeracy and literacy skills as well as the low self-esteem generated by early and consistent experiences of failure by some children simply reduces their capacity to perform successfully at the secondary level. Children in this failure/ low self-esteem track experience daily doses of violence in the school system since they cannot meet the demands of performance that are considered normal. Going to school reinforces their feelings of inadequacy on a daily basis. While there are serious adjustments needed at the secondary level I wish here to concentrate on the primary level.

It is my considered opinion that starting around the 1960's a number of factors combined to cause us to lose the power to socialize our children for humane living. The first factor is that with the advent of Common Entrance in the 1960's the primary school was emasculated. Secondly, due to the oil boom that followed and the materialism that ensued in a society without strong traditions of civic virtue we witnessed the unfolding of violence in all spheres of life. Children now grow up imbibing daily doses of violence. Thirdly, the advent of television and the increase in "child mother" and "baby father" family structures not to mention other global forces also meant there were more challenges to childhood socialization. With the weakening of the primary school we were therefore more vulnerable to fallout from these latter forces, since outside the family, the primary school was the most important agency of childhood socialization within the control of newly independent states.

However, the pre-occupation with expansion of the secondary sector immediately after independence, with the consequent neglect of the primary sector, led to a de-emphasis overall on civic virtues and personal development. In hindsight it seems we lost the socialization power of the primary school right after independence, in a society where there was need to strengthen social institutions and develop commitment of all to building a new society. We need to remember that after independence it was necessary to confront colonial legacies like transience, the tendency to seek escape from here, the lack of ownership of our space and the absence of self-knowledge to deal with the forces of the external world.

What was the primary school like before Common Entrance in the 1960's? The primary school was a place where the development of children was important. There were serious sports days, may fairs etc. Of course there were few secondary schools and primary schools had sixth and seventh standards. So

there was a longer stay for children at the primary school and there was a more mature population within the school. Cricket, football and netball teams from primary schools were serious business. Primary school events were community events and involved community participation. Teachers visited homes and took children to their homes. Of course this is not to say that all was well as old-fashioned licks were also a part of this tradition. But in the period up to the 1960's there was greater concern with habits, values, attitudes.

After the advent of Common Entrance the primary school became nothing more than a preparation for secondary. The main focus became completion of the SEA syllabus which reduced schooling to exam preparation and not necessarily in ways that developed thinking skills. Issues of health, values and social skills were not treated seriously.

This naked pre-occupation with exam preparation also went hand in hand with neglect of the physical facilities and resources at the primary school. From the 1960's to around 2000 the total emphasis was on expansion of the secondary sector. Primary schools took a backseat until the turn of the century when a reform programme entitled "Quality in Basic education" took place that led to the building of a few new primary schools and some attempts to improve the management and teaching capabilities. However, most primary schools today have the same basic infrastructure they had fifty years ago. Music rooms, dance rooms, lunch rooms, sufficient playing areas etc are not common features of primary schools although some teachers struggle to organize such related activities in spite of their lack of resources.

In the 1950's and 60's there was a different kind of personnel in the primary school sector. Teachers and school leaders from the early era had a different type of commitment to the job. Of course, the circumstances of the time were such that most people with talent and who were ambitious to educate themselves, were forced to use the route of primary school teaching. So you can say the best went to teach and to teach at the primary level. The system had a built in quality assurance system. After all, to become a monitor for instance, you had to be recommended by your principal. You had to pass three teacher pupil examinations. Then you had to pass the provisional certificate. You were then hired and waited for that golden opportunity to go to the Teacher Training College. This breed of primary teachers was also politically active and in fact became the backbone of the Peoples National Movement.

There were some phenomenal leaders in the primary school system. The names of these principals were latched on to some of these schools for decades in the mind of the communities in which these leaders operated. They were creative and they could have classes before the school day began for pupil teachers. They organized evening classes for adults in their districts. In the case of some denominational schools they were involved in church activities for the entire day on Sundays.

The loss of the socialization power of the primary school in the post-independence period was especially punitive to us as the rest of the century witnessed a loss of childhood globally. Media and television in particular meant that children were now exposed to all the realities of adult experiences without the supervision of parents. The socialization of children was no longer within the control of parents generally. Also, in our local context, children within some family structures were even at greater risk. Our own emphasis on Common Entrance and SEA also contributed to this loss of childhood locally as children were fed a constant diet of examination drills in and out of school.

We must aim at a restoration of the power of the primary school. The primary school system must resume the full role of child development. We need to take measures to restore the status of the primary school teacher. We should aim at putting teaching at the primary school on par with secondary and with similar salary arrangements. The facilities and structures of all the schools should support a full curriculum. We must demand quality leadership from primary school principals since their salaries are now competitive.

One byproduct of the hegemonic influence of the selection examination on the primary school system has been the way schools have been ranked in the public mind according to their success in the examinations. This has led to a ranking of schools in each community. Selfinterest and survival of the fittest have been the two forces at work in ranking schools into good and bad, weak and strong. Successful schools have sought to select children by the profession and wealth of parents, with children of poorer parents ending up in the weaker performing schools in the system. Educated and well off parents pursue the better performing schools. Over time this survival of the fittest model has led to weak schools getting weaker and strong schools getting stronger.

All have been complicit in this unhealthy evolution. The MOE under various administrations have not been able to make successful interventions. The Denominational Boards are also complicit since even among their own schools there are some consistently weak performing schools that have suffered. School leaders must accept some blame for this state of affairs as well, since they do not all seem to make the creative efforts to respond to the needs of the children in their care.

So the central problem of equity in primary schooling has to be dealt with. As a society we have to ask the question of how to arrange schooling to help children of the poor to achieve their full potential. This will involve improving facilities, leadership, parental education, teacher quality and commitment generally, but especially in the case of some marginalized primary schools. The big issue we all must confront is how to remove the competitive examination (SEA) completely or reduce the sting of the competitive examination on the educational process. Denominational Boards have to deal with this issue more deliberately and clearly in the present dialogue that the Ministry is encouraging. Simply expressing defiant claims to their legal and property rights in full page advertisements without dealing with this core issue appears almost ungodly.

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