Constructing Childhood
By Cynthia James

Allison and Adrian James' *Constructing Childhood* (2004) might be a good sociological read for planners presently involved in restructuring our education system. For one gets the sense that we might not only be on the road to taking the last ounce of joy out of school, but that we may be also diminishing the cultural returns of education.

But before an explanation of what I mean, first a summary of what the Jameses say. Looking at "the cultural politics of childhood," they point out that policy-makers use the terms "childhood," "the child," and "children" interchangeably, glossing over individual differences among children, among them, differences of class and developmental age and stage. Policy-makers do so, not with Machiavellian intent, but the result is convenient holistic regulation and ultimate control. The Jameses examine the agencies and social policies that construct childhood in the UK, such as the law, education, and the family and argue that however much society tries to protect, regulate, and oversee the growing of children, children are not passive factors in their construction. Children take agency in their own constructing in overt and covert ways. Thus the push and pull of child-adult relations control the evolution of what it means to be a child; all this with specific reference to the UK.

This oversimplified summary of the Jameses' argument does not do justice to their discussion. But it provides a context for some of the factors we should consider as we tinker with our education system.

Three burning targets in our present education reform seem to be: (1) to protect children so that they will benefit from the educational period of childhood and not be exploited or turned, to their everlasting disadvantage, into force-ripe adults; (2) to improve literacy, not only to provide skills for later employment, but also to promote their social well-being; and (3) to improve social conditions of children during their learning years, thus lessening the conditions under which some children are called upon to perform.

Our sociological approach to this has been an unconscious education welfare-ism such as book vouchers, book rentals, and meals. The jury is out on what educational and societal improvements these have brought, but we are now considering even more inclusions such as homework centres and breakfast clubs, all of which can be subsumed under the concept of "extended school."

There is nothing wrong with extended school per se and there is no one model. Some models embrace joint management structures, whereas some use separate staffs for "formal" and "informal" school. Extended schooling aims at involving parents and community in holistic contexts of education. Benefits include sharing skills not on the curriculum. Whatever the model, bonuses include supervision of children and, of course, employment for adults.

But in Trinidad and Tobago, especially in the secondary sector, where school populations are stratified and not networked to communities, we run the risk of developing the deficit, pathologising model.

The overriding context for our consideration of extended school is that "Many parents can't see after their children," "Everybody's working . . . parents don't have time." An associated euphemism gaining ground with these dilemmas is the misapplied saying: "It takes a village to raise a child."

The ironic result is that, increasingly, parents and children are being de-franchised from developing the familial networks and responsibilities of wider perspectives on education. Increasingly, learning is being institutionalised. More dangerous is that the most vulnerable children locked in these "orphanage" systems can become recipients of lasting unhealthy messages.

A society cannot blame parents for lack of responsibility when it de-franchises responsible parenthood. Parental responsibility is not nurtured by taking parenthood out of the hands of those who seem unable to cope. One can't blame young people who are encouraged at home and in school to eat ready-made meals from boxes, which they don't have a stake in preparing, and which they will later not be able to afford, for thinking that food comes in boxes to which they are entitled. Thus cushioned from reality from ages 5-16, we had better be prepared for more culture shocks than we are experiencing now.

We have to find more value-laden ways of helping parents who need financial, emotional, social, and psychological support. It seems to me that we have to reshape the concept of work, parenting, and adult education along more social and psychological lines, simultaneously, and as intensely, as we engage in reform of education for the young. If not, the majority of parents will continue to remain on the fringes of our education system; not being able to really contribute to any kind of schooling offered to their children, even if it is extended school.

At the risk of being charged with the same kind of foreign adaptation that I seem to be suspicious of, again I cite the Jameses and their book *Constructing Childhood*.

One of the book's theoretical concerns remains "not just with the fact that childhood is socially constructed, but with the precise ways in which this occurs in any society and the specificity of the cultural context to that construction." The book notes that "with the globalization of law in general, and in particular of child law, . . . the tentative emergence . . . of a global childhood." For the Jameses, however, childhood is an "inter-generational continuity." In shaping their own childhoods, children ensure that childhood is not "solely the outcome of sets of discourses produced by adults, seeking to preserve and recreate the childhoods they remember. Nor yet is it simply a function of the cultural determinants associated with, for example, class or kin relations."

Perhaps at this juncture it is opportune to invoke, alongside the treatise of the Jameses, the seminal education dissertations of our own Caribbean Dr. Bird, in particular "School

Days," with its insightful mischief of learning about sex and social responsibility, and camaraderie, derision, and brutality in those "happy, happy days" of longtime school. There is no mistaking that times have changed. But in the context of a relevant shaping of the continuum of Trinbagonian childhood, perhaps in our sociological adaptations we should pay more attention to cultural factors.

For if the Jameses are right, rest assured, individual children will continue to find ways to have their say in the construction of their childhoods. They will be agents of subversion of our best intentions.

Reference: James, Allison and James, Adrian L. *Constructing Childhood: Theory, Policy and Social Practice*. UK, NY: Macmillan Palgrave, 2004.