Challenges to Caribbean Education

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Caribbean people are not homogeneous. We have different cultures and histories, speak different languages and dialects, and have different cuisines and rhythmic beats. However, in spite of these differences, our societies are characterised by similar races and ethnic groups—Caucasians, African and East Indian descendants, Portuguese, Syrians and Lebanese, and Chinese.

Alarmingly, most of the young people who have emerged from this diverse flow of humanity seem to demonstrate and enact values that originate from the USA. America seems to be our modern coloniser—this time it is more cultural than military or political.

If we wish to argue that education is the main vehicle for socialising a people—particularly the young—then our education systems are failing miserably. Clearly, this suggests that educators in the region have to come together to ascertain how we can: 1) create, promote, and sustain a vision and ideologies for Caribbean people to cope with the imperatives of the 21st century and beyond; 2) ensure that these ideologies eclipse and replace American cultural imperialism—an imperialism that continues to sap our strength as a people; 3) design education systems in our islands that will facilitate the type of socialisation our young people will need in order to respond positively to the challenges they now face, and will continue to face.

The question now to be posed is: What exactly are these challenges? My research in the English-, French-, Spanish-, and Dutch-speaking Caribbean over the past three years confirms that different types of education systems exist in these islands—all fashioned after their respective metropoles. Also, the problems that plague these education systems are all found on a continuum with varying intensities. My research findings, however, suggest that the English-speaking Caribbean—Jamaica and Trinidad in particular—has been most adversely affected. Problems affecting the Caribbean include deteriorating values, a declining work ethic, a lack of creativity and innovativeness, and an increasing propensity for imported consumerism, which, if studied carefully, may help to explain the tendency for crime among many of our young people—boys in particular. Another persistent problem, which has assumed international proportions, is the twin evil of underachievement in our schools and the trend of declining interest in studies supported by a new anti-intellectualism.

Unfortunately, while I have identified these problems, I see no clear-cut solutions for them. What I do know is that we—collectively and separately—cannot continue the way we have been going. I also know that aping and replicating what developed countries have done and are doing is not necessarily the way to go. They themselves continue to experience similar problems. I see little use in continuing our pilgrimages to observe what they are doing with such initiatives as charter and magnet schools. Instead, we have to pursue reforms in keeping with the imperatives of our cultures and problems. We have to begin with needs analyses and research. We have to understand how we have descended into this quagmire over the past decades—particularly since the 1970s.

Also, we must seriously examine the impact of the dynamics of our families, school cultures, churches, media, and art forms on our youth. We cannot continue to ignore the need for new approaches to leadership in these institutions.

Although the Caribbean is a small region, I have no doubt that we have the human resources to address our problems. However, we need to exercise the will to create education systems whose ultimate goal must be economic and social participation by all.

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