

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

International Journal of Educational Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedures

Negotiating worlds (yards, shantytowns, ghettos, garrisons): Inequality maintained and the epistemologies of social factors Influencing stratification and education in Jamaica



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 February 2016

Received in revised form 27 April 2016

Accepted 16 May 2016

Available online 6 June 2016

Keywords:

Social factors

Poverty

Context factors

Educational policy colonialism

ABSTRACT

This article shows how social factors, such as poverty, and the education system have long been on a collision course with class structure in the Jamaica. There have been several studies done on Jamaica's education system. However, scholars have situated their work on the question of social factors and Jamaica's education system in either an examination of a particular policy or what happens in the classroom. There have been none that bridges several policy initiatives with history (colonialism) and situates the social stratification of the Jamaican society within the history educational system while engaging with different types of sources (Former Minister of Education and her cabinet). This study (which is part of a larger study) employed interviews and document analysis to collect data. Three requirements for the nation are discussed. First, this study shows that parental involvement in education is needed. Second, there must be an attempt to improve education and school facilities in impoverished areas. Third, the nation must begin to step outside the boundaries erected by historical legacies in order to address the stratification created in part by the education system.

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1. Social Factors Influencing Education

In 1980, a Jamaican educational foundation published a book to explain conditions in that country. The author, Grant, sums up the West Indies in this way: "Poverty, hunger, and poor health are acknowledged as national problems, which are in need of early amelioration. Poor children are exposed to poor food, poor sanitation, poor housing, and sub-standard medical care" (p. 3). Throughout these islands, Grant observed that living conditions were influenced by the climate, cultural tradition, and poverty. Houses were made of materials such as cardboard, straw, bamboo, and coconut palm. Almost half of these houses had only one room, despite the fact that in the period of the study, each household averaged 4 children. As a result, 3–5 children of varying ages and gender slept in the same bed, while the parents would sleep with the smallest child. In rural Jamaica, some people travel up to one mile for drinking water and clothes are washed in a river. Throughout the years since Grant's book, Jones (1985), Blair (1986), Coomarsingh (1989), Miller (1997), Evans (2001), Espeut (2007), and Chang (2010) all have concluded that poverty alleviation is critical to the improvement of the nation's primary education.

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Former Minister of Education Mavis Gilmour believed that a fundamental challenge to primary education is improving the ingrained social conditions of both parents and teachers.

Moreover, Gilmour stressed,

You are coming out of a system in which education was not a chief value of the parents of the children you are trying to educate. Therefore, you had to fight that in many different ways. I met a man drinking a bottle of beer and his child was at home and not at school. I asked him why his child was absent from school. He said he did not have the money to give the child. I said, “But you are drinking a bottle of beer at 11 in the morning. How can you afford to drink a bottle of Red Stripe beer at 11 in the morning and your child needs something to go to school?” (M1)

A stalwart of Jamaican education, Miller (1997) reviews policy-relevant studies of education. He writes that elements such as home environment, attendance, nutrition, and community relations greatly influence the effectiveness of the school system. He terms those elements *context factors*. He stresses that dealing with such factors is necessary for the efficient management of any school system. Yet, he says, education policy makers often ignore these factors. Miller also surmises that education researchers are driven more by gaps in theoretical framework than by the actual practice of education. Theoretical research, he suggests, seems to offer “little of value to education policy makers and administrators looking for practical advice” (p. xii). It is hoped, however, that this present study will influence policy makers because its focus is the voice of teachers and education ministers (actual practice of education).

The present study calls these problematic elements *social factors*. Such elements influence all levels of educational attainment in Jamaica—but primary education (grades 1–6), in particular, is hit very hard by social factors. Because education is inextricably linked to the development of any society (particularly a post-colonial society), understanding stratification and education is essential to developing a framework for addressing local, national, and regional challenges. It is also important to understand the history of social institutions. This historical understanding allows for the connection to the larger narrative of a society. It also helps to elucidate the present state of these institutions. As a result, this study also shows how Jamaica’s historical education legacy (its colonial period) influences modern Jamaican stratification.

The issues which the education system grappled with in the 1800s continued to challenge the system in the 1980s, and into the 21st Century: Inadequate facilities, overcrowded classrooms, low attendance, and inadequately trained teachers. This study uses qualitative methods as its research tool, to understand the social factors that continue to influence the stratification and the education system in Jamaica. This study is organized as follows. First, there is a historical review of social factors that influences educational stratification in Jamaica, and the study’s methodology. A discussion follows detailing the problems that the study’s participants identified as social factors influencing the educational stratification in Jamaica. Finally, a concluding section offers insights from the study as well as an analysis of the Minister’s thoughts about colonial education and its relationship to stratification.

2. Historical review of social factors

Brown (1979) says that in the 1800s, Jamaican primary schools encountered problems with staffing, sporadic attendance, and the maintenance of school buildings. Yet over 200 years later, the nation’s education system continues to grapple with these same challenges. Some of the studies cited in the present study was conducted over 30 years ago, this was intentional, since the same problematic social factors highlighted decades ago are present in major recent research such as the *Survey of Living Conditions: 2005, 2007; the Economic and Social Survey: Jamaica, 2003–2008*; Chang (2010), Evans (2001), Espeut (2011); and Thame (2011). Furthermore, in 2009, Jamaica unveiled a national development plan titled *Vision 2030 Jamaica*. The final draft of the education sector plan revealed that the education system is challenged by disparity in the quality of teachers, lack of required physical infrastructure, poor nutritional support, and inadequate parental support.

Traditionally in Jamaica, education is a major tool for one’s advancement. Yet in many communities, some students are marginalized because of race, religious beliefs, and social class (Evans, 2001; Foner, 1973). For example, teachers give preferential treatment to students who attend church. In another example, teachers think negatively about marijuana use. They see this habit as an aspect of poor parenting, and they view the practice as a barrier to formal education.

A comprehensive analysis of race is beyond the scope of this article. However, in Jamaica, one’s race is a critical factor to one’s access to education. In Smith’s classic 1961 research on relations in Jamaica, “The Plural Framework of Jamaican Society,” she sought to understand the local attitudes toward race. She sees the racial groups as White, Brown, and Black (this categorization will be discussed later in its present context). She believes that each racial group possesses its own unique characteristics. Members of the White group (the smallest group) are usually educated outside Jamaica. Whites own the majority of the local businesses, and they control a disproportionate amount of the resources. In contrast, the Black section (which represents the majority of the population) has retained some African cultural practices (such as religious practices and communal families). The Black group’s culture allows sexual relations outside of marriage. They have large families with a matriarchal authority structure. Further, Blacks follow religious practices that sometimes include spirit possession, magic, witchcraft, and sacrifice. The Brown group is a cultural blend of the practices from the White and Black groups.

Of the major characteristics in each group, Smith (1961) found that education is the most distinctive feature. The White group consists mainly of educated professionals. The Brown group is made up primarily of students educated at local secondary schools. The Black group has students who were either educated at local elementary schools, or who possess no

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