

**Task: Read Evans' Inside Jamaican Schools and write a report that discusses two ways that your school matches her descriptions of Jamaican schools and two ways that it does not. In your conclusion discuss the significance of this book to today's Jamaican schools.**

It is interesting to note some of the points that Hyacinth Evans covered in her book, Inside Jamaican School. As an educator, I found the book quite interesting and very informative. She described activities that take place in the classroom or school setting on a daily basis. Though she conducted her investigation and came up with these arguments, I must acknowledge that I can relate to some of the theories, given the fact that they are evident in the school that I work. However, some, I believe, may be inconsistent with my personal and professional experience.

One critical point that she stressed was that of 'streaming' in the school setting. This topic was so important that an entire chapter was dedicated to it. The practice of 'streaming' still exists and dominates the majority of grades in the school where I teach. The only grade that is not streamed is Grade 1 and as soon as these students complete the 'End of Year Examinations' they are streamed for Grade 2 based on their test scores. The students with the highest test scores are placed in the "first" stream, while those with the lowest are placed in the 'last' stream.

I can attest to Evans' theory that streaming by academic ability can allow students to be labeled as bright – A or dunces – C (pg. 90-91). I have noticed that students in the first (A) stream often think they are better than the students in the fifth (last) stream. Some parents too, get a bit agitated when their children are placed in a certain teacher's class, because it is said that, that particular teacher always teaches the slow stream or as some would say, the dunce children.

Even though I agree with many of her findings on streaming I must disagree with the point that more school resources are allocated to the first stream. Based on the Ministry of Education's mandate of 100 per cent literacy by 2015, the focus has shifted now to the perceived 'slower' streams. Schools and their personnel have been working assiduously on sharpening the skills of their slower students, and pumping resources, man-hours, special literature, and other tools into the slow stream to get those students on par with the other students in the top or middle stream. Hence, at my school, the technological devices, and resource tools are bought and employed with the slow stream in mind. The aim of administration is to at least get these children to master the Grade Four Literacy Test, as this result defines the school's literacy rating.

Another similarity is the use of a common curriculum. Evans stated that some schools have centralized curricula, while in some countries, individual schools are permitted to develop their own curricula.

The fact that we are a primary school and are governed by the Ministry of Education, we are given a common curricula by the ministry to guide us in carrying out our lessons. We refer to

this curriculum on a weekly basis during a common planning time to pull out the concepts required to be taught to the students at their various grade levels.

In her book, Evans argues that apart from the explicitly stated formal curriculum, there is an informal curriculum. She further pointed out that one way this can be viewed is by the number of hours spent on particular subjects, which demonstrates the importance of the subject. This is particular true in my setting as Language Arts and Mathematics are taught for at least one hour daily, Social Studies and Science are taught twice weekly while Drama, Physical Education, Music, Visual Arts and Religious Education are taught once per week or sometimes not at all for the week. This is especially so if a teacher did not get the chance to finish a Math or Language Arts concept, then that concept will be taught during time usually allotted to the subjects deemed to be of less importance. But Math and Language Arts must be taught daily, that is mandatory, and when examinations are on the horizon, then it is highly advisable that they are taught twice daily.

I can recall a parent having an issue about her child scoring low in Physical Education and the teacher told the parent not to worry because Physical Education is not a Grade Six Achievement Test (GSAT) subject. That response from the teacher sent a clear message about 'hidden curriculum' to that parent.

Some sections in chapter 3 led me to wonder how long ago these researches had been carried out and the schools these researches were conducted in. One particularly troubling section is that where Evans pointed out (p.48) that students from middle and upper-middle class families are more likely to be accepted by and receive more attention from teachers. She went on to say that the colour of a student's skin may influence the teacher's response to him. I find this theory preposterous – at least it most certainly does not happen in my school setting. Social status or skin colour does not influence how we relate to our students or parents for that matter. The rules apply to everyone and no one is exempt, however discretion can be applied to anyone depending on the nature of the situation. Our students are grouped according to test scores, not according to skin colour or socio-economic status. They are punished for inappropriate behaviours, not because they are poor or dark-skinned. Hence, whether they are upper, middle or lower class – black or white they will be streamed based on their test scores and will be punished if they exhibit any undesirable behaviour.

As a matter of fact if one should look deeply into what happens in my school, it would be the total opposite of what Evans pointed out during her research. In my school setting, the poorer students are usually the ones who teachers empathize with. Teachers go the extra mile to facilitate the students of poor socio-economic backgrounds. We usually buy them books, so that they are able to complete tasks; give them lunch, so that they do not have to sit in class hungry; uniforms are solicited for them in order for them to be in their correct gears. The parents who are present are encouraged and congratulated for trying even though they have many challenges.

A second finding that does not match my school structure is her claim that ‘the children of Rastafarians have been excluded from schools based on their hairstyle and headgear’. She said that they would have to get a haircut in order to be granted entry to the school. This does not apply in my school setting as there are currently several Rastafarians admitted to the institution. They are not forced to wear a headgear and if they desire to wear one, they are not stopped, discriminated against or penalized.

These Rastafarians are accepted by the entire school community and go about conducting their daily school activities without being stared on or provoked. As a matter of fact, quite a number of students, especially girls lock their hair. The wearing of locks currently in Jamaica is viewed as trendy and sophisticated, so locks would be admired now in schools, rather than be seen as a badge of shame.

Though the book gives a fairly good concept of the Jamaican school setting, one can argue that it needs to be updated to be more relevant. Many practices that the author pointed out are insignificant given the fact that they are no longer evident or are non-existent in the Jamaican school setting. For example, she repeatedly mentioned examinations such as Common Entrance and SSC. She also stressed programs that no longer exist such as ROSE Program and Cost Sharing. However, one cannot blame her given the fact that the Ministry of Education tries to employ a new program ever so often. It can be assumed that by the time she publishes a new research it might seem insignificant as new programs and new policies would be in place.

The book, despite its inaccuracies and anachronisms, remains a relevant and interesting teaching tool. As an educator, I was a bit perturbed when I read chapter 4 which compared the two teachers mentioned. The first teacher Mrs. B who used the Aesthetic Approach and transformed her classroom into a beautiful environment, while the second teacher Miss R, did not seem to care about the children’s learning. I think teachers should use their imagination and creativity more like Mrs. B to carry across their lesson.

The study on Creole and Standard Jamaican English in the secondary classroom is very useful. That is an issue that has been plaguing educators for decades. Jamaica is a bilingual country, our mother tongue is the Creole also known as the Patois. However, all our examinations are in Standard Jamaican English (SJE) and if we do not communicate in SJE, the society, as a whole, frowns. Evans gave teachers some useful and innovative ideas to curtail this problem in the classroom, thus, making our classroom a beautiful learning zone where courage and strength will replace fear, weakness and timidity.

*Good report. It occurs to me that some of the changes you point to in Jamaican schools (the anachronisms) might have been caused by people reading the Evans’ book, and saying to themselves, this needs to change. Is that possible? Your grade is 4.*