Educational primer for Jamaica

by Michelle Hibler

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The causes of this sad situation are many. Although a national primary school curriculum has been in use in recent years, half of Jamaica's teachers — mainly in the rural areas — are not professionally trained. This poses great difficulties, as the instructional materials are mostly teacher-oriented and difficult to transfer to Jamaica. In the Philippines, for example, the project made use of a very strong family structure. The family structure in Jamaica is very different and has to be used in a different way as a motivating force. Also, primary education is now seen to be the total responsibility of the government. "The level of community involvement has to be brought back into the picture," explains Mrs McKinley, "we can't be optimistic enough to expect the same kind of assistance as in the Philippines from the beginning."

The rationale behind Project Primer, which stands for Project for Reshaping and Improving the Management of Educational Resources, is also somewhat different. Whereas in the Philippines and Indonesia Project Impact sought to use one professional teacher for managing many more students and consequently reducing educational costs, Jamaica is starting from a different perspective. "The government of Jamaica has affirmed that the improvement of the quality of primary education is a priority. Consequently, it is unlikely that expenditures on primary education will decrease. Rather, the government will seek to implement more efficient methodology and techniques to make it more cost-effective," explains Mrs. McKinley.

Despite the differences between Southeast Asia and the Caribbean, some of Impact's components can be applied. Perhaps the most important is the approach, Mrs McKinley was part of a delegation from Jamaica who visited the project schools in the Philippines. "We saw things there that we have seen here at some time or another," she says, "but never as a package, working together all at the same time."

And it is the "package approach" that Project Primer will introduce to Jamaica's primary schools.

Some aspects of Jamaica's schools lend themselves well to the experiment. For example, in some rural schools, only one of perhaps five teachers may be qualified. The professional teacher is assigned to a particular grade, but she is also needed to assist and supervise the pretrained teachers, to the extent that her own grade is often neglected. "We need to free the teacher from her responsibility for a single grade to assume a monitoring role", says McKinley. The teacher would thus become the equivalent of Impact's Instructional Supervisor, a role for which she now needs to be adequately prepared.

Project Primer will also make use of programmed materials. In Asia, Impact called on the older primary students, those in grades 4 to 6, to teach the younger pupils lessons in reading, mathematics, and other subjects. According to Mrs McKinley: "It will not be possible for us to put 12-year-olds to work with 7-year olds". But as many of the rural schools are "all-age" schools, the older, more mature students aged 13 to 15, as well as the graduates of these schools, can be trained to assist program teachers. "We may use a different level of pupil", says Mrs McKinley, "but without necessarily losing the important child-to-child contact."

In the more advanced grades, learning will be largely individualized and self-paced, using modules — simple booklets that cover the subject matter and that children can work through by themselves — as in the Impact system. Pretrained teachers already in the schools will work as tutors. Project Primer will also draw on community resources in teaching skills such as carpentry, agriculture or homemaking, where these exist.

Project Primer is expected to get underway by April this year, with IDRC support. The first 12 months will be devoted to developing learning materials, designing pre- and post-tests, and collecting and analyzing baseline data. Implementation is scheduled for the 1980 school year.

According to Mrs McKinley, the project should demonstrate that there could be significant improvements in student achievement without additional expense. "You can't expect a single project to solve all our problems in three years", she says, "but I am convinced that it can go a long way to indicating where our needs can be met more effectively... That a child has learnt to teach himself, to take responsibility for his own learning — he is better-off. You can't ignore that", she says.