

EDUCATION: HAITI'S ELUSIVE DREAM

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It's early. The quiet wretchedness of Poste Marchand neighbourhood in Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, is not yet cloaked in damp heat, dust, and exhaust fumes. The women who sell fruit and secondhand clothes spread out the contents of their baskets before squatting down on the sidewalk of Borgella Street.

As the neighbourhood comes to life, it is a morning like any other — except for six-year-old Jacques Cadet who has just come out of a narrow garbage-strewn passageway.

This morning Jacques Cadet is starting out on a new life — one month later than other children his age. He is finally going to skirt the debris of Borgella Street, walk a little further, and go to school. His mother was a little late coming up with the CA\$65 needed to cover registration, the first month's school fees, and the cost of the uniform (two shirts and two pairs of pants), book bag, lunch box, and school books. She still doesn't have the \$10 per month to cover the rest of the school year, but she is optimistic: "I'll get it. I'll manage somehow." Excluding lunches, the total cost of sending Jacques to school for one year is about \$150, almost half of Haiti's reported per capita annual income of \$325.

In Haiti, public schooling is free, except for school supplies. Why, then, should Jacques, the oldest of three Cadet children, go to a private school, the cost of which is exorbitant for a single-parent Haitian family? "Because I want him to succeed" is his mother's answer. In a country where only 4 percent of the children registered in primary school ever finish their studies and only 2 percent get through high

school, such a hope seems unattainable, an elusive dream.

Haiti is a cruel caricature of the problem of school failure in the French-speaking Caribbean, something which since October 1985 has been the subject of research partially funded by IDRC. Four institutions are cooperating on the project: the Université d'État d'Haïti, the Martinique and Guadeloupe campuses of the Université Antilles-Guyanas, and the Centre de recherches caraïbes at the University of Montreal.

Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere and 80 percent of its people are illiterate. By contrast, Martinique and Guadeloupe, which politically are part of France, have a literacy rate of 90 percent and France continues to provide large sums of money, particularly for public education.

Is any comparison possible? "The problem of school failure comes up in different contexts, but we hope to find a common denominator," says Dr Chavannes Douyon, a psychologist and professor at Université d'État d'Haïti.

"So far, we are only discussing hypotheses," says Dr Douyon. "The objective data on school failure have still to be compared; the interviews with parents, children and teachers are only just beginning. Still, our hypotheses are beginning to prove out."

First there is the culture gap hypothesis. As in Martinique and Guadeloupe, the schools in Haiti are resolutely French, despite a number of attempts in Haiti to make them more Creole. Everything about the Haitian children's life is Creole except schooling. Classroom instruction in French, sometimes repeated impatiently in Creole, is difficult for the children to understand.

Schools nevertheless place the speaking of good French above all else. This bilingualism, or linguistic dichotomy as the experts call it, clearly favours the children of the Haitian elite which has undergone acculturation.

The lower rate of failure in the schools run by the clergy and attended by the Haitian elite supports this hypothesis, according to Dr Douyon. The French system prizes rote learning rather than genuine understanding of a language and values.

Jacques Cadet's mother gets angry if people talk to her about schools where classes are taught in Creole. "I've had to put up with enough because I don't speak French properly," she complains. School, even if it is "foreign", is highly prized in the Francophone Caribbean. It represents the door to social and financial success.

However, there are a great many failures. This is what gives rise to the socioeconomic hypothesis of which Haiti, once again, is an extreme example.

Public schools are free and parents are obliged by law to send their children to school.

Life, though, isn't free and the law is never applied. If children are to fail in school, they must first get into it. For the rural population this is a challenge. Where schools do exist, they are often a long way off. And given that rural annual incomes average only CA\$156, school clothing and supplies are simply out of financial reach. The oldest or most promising children may go to school, but at a late age, sometimes 14 or 15, when another child becomes available to take over their work in the fields or the marketplace. Only 14 percent of school-age children in rural areas of Haiti attend classes, all of them in primary schools, none in secondary.

School is an obstacle course. If the daily distance barrier can be overcome, then there are money and language problems to cope with. Another obstacle is the low level of cultural stimulation that can be offered by families in which four out of five members are illiterate.

The results of research into school failure in the French-speaking Caribbean are somewhat predictable. Even if the researchers were to examine only that part of the Haitian population which actually attended school, the failure rate would be higher there than in other islands because of the country's socioeconomic problems.

Each of the teams has been obliged to come up with its own approach. In Martinique and Guadeloupe, the official presence of France is evident in the substantial administrative and financial contributions, and private schools play only a minor role. The research teams on those islands will therefore focus on social disparities, social adjustment problems, and cultural problems when gathering qualitative data, that is, personal impressions and anecdotes of interviewees. They will also keep in mind that Martinique and Guadeloupe have technical and trade schools which can soften the impact of school failure.

The Haitian team has a heavier task. Quantitative data (such as numbers and ages of children enrolled in school) aren't centralized and the schooling problem itself comes up at two levels. First, there are schools that simply can't accommodate the number of children they are supposed to. Then, within the system itself there are high failure rates among pupils.

Despite these hurdles, the Haitian research team hopes its report will help to restart the rather timid school reform begun a few years ago. "But it's a reform which can't be effected unless there is reform of the social and, above all, the socioeconomic structure of the country," says Dr Douyon. "One can't separate the problem of schools from the general problems of the community as a whole." ■

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Photo: Robert Landry

