

Tackling early childhood education [JM]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

We commend the Government on bringing legislation to Parliament for the establishment of a commission on early childhood education and we particularly applaud the contribution made by the Hon. Edward Seaga, Leader of the Opposition, to the debate on Tuesday, January 14.

A bi-partisan approach to correcting the weaknesses of the present system would be a consummation devoutly to be wished.

An agenda for dealing with the problems of early childhood education has already been suggested by Dr. Ralph Thompson in a series of carefully researched articles published in this newspaper.

Dr. Thompson is a member of the National Council on Education and his analysis reveals that past neglect of early childhood education is largely responsible for 78 per cent of the total secondary school population finding themselves in non-traditional secondary schools (so called upgraded secondary schools).

Last year, the pass rate in the CXC examinations as a per cent of the total student cohort in these non-traditional secondary schools was four per cent in Mathematics and 11 per cent in English, even at Grade III. Each year, in these non-traditional secondary schools, some 14,000 children are judged a priori to be incapable of even sitting the CXC examinations and end up in some kind of "no-man's-land". Of those taking CXC, some 19,000 fail mathematics and about 17,000 fail English.

There are 1,632 privately-run community basic schools with a population of 160,000. These schools are unlicensed, often with inadequate sanitary conveniences, no insurance in case of fire, no legally enforceable monitoring of teaching methods, curriculum or class size. Teachers in these pre-primary schools are usually untrained and paid at the minimum level for domestic helpers.

Yet it is between the ages of three and six that a child's character is formed for better or for worse and his or her potential for further advancement determined. It is at this stage that children should start to read and the process of bridging the gap between patois and Standard English begin.

The proposed commission will face a burdensome task and can easily lose its way in political infighting. But if it can bring order and imaginative administration to early childhood education this will almost automatically correct many of the problems now being faced in our primary and secondary schools.

It will remove the necessity for remediation in the system and go a long way to putting the children of the poor on an equal footing with the children of the affluent.

-Reprinted from the Jamaica Gleaner.

Region: Latin America and the Caribbean^[2]

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