

Visiting Guyanese Schools

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We left Guyana in 1962, when I was only seven. I returned on a personal pilgrimage in January 2011. The Georgetown house where I spent many hours with my beloved Granny welcomed me back. Brickdam Cathedral—the place of my earliest memories—brought a flood of emotions. Forty-eight years later, I found a strong connection to this country where I was born.

I was eager to visit schools in Guyana. In Canada, I had taught grades seven to thirteen and recently retired after twelve years as an elementary school principal. How were my experiences working in education different from those of my Guyanese counterparts? What problems did they face? As I encountered teachers and students in Georgetown, on the Pomeroon, and at the Cyril Potter College for Education, I learned about the Guyanese education system and its difficulties—difficulties with deep implications for the nation's future.

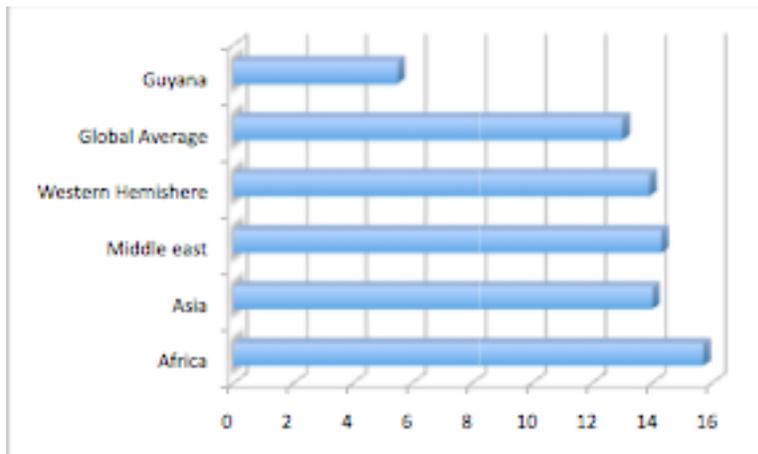
I'd made contact with St. Stanislaus College before leaving Canada, through my cousin Clive Perreira, an alumnus of the school. Paula Merell, the head teacher at St. Stanislaus College, welcomed me warmly. It was clear that Mrs. Merell is very engaged with her school as she easily interacted with teachers and students on a tour of the facility. There was a sense of respect and care although their interactions are much more formal than ours are in Canada.



Mrs. Merell proudly showed off the computer lab and library. Do not imagine anything remotely close to the facilities at a Canadian school. My small elementary school library in London, Ontario with over six thousand books dwarfs the St. Stanislaus collection, and their computers appeared outdated.

The students *might* have better access to computers soon: in this election year the government promised a laptop for every home. But a lack of infrastructure, including limited or no access to electricity and the Internet may cause this grand scheme to end in failure. The plan does not seem well thought out. Looking at St. Stanislaus's lab, I wish they would simply give these resources to the schools. After all, the percentage of Guyana's budget for education is well below the global average.

Expenditure Review for Education



Developing countries' education spending as a percentage of total central government expenditure, 1989–1992, according to Guyana's 1996 National Development Strategy. In 2008, the figure for Guyana had improved slightly to 6.1 percent (<http://www.guyana.org/NDS/chap20.htm>)

Mrs. Merell asked me to give a “motivational talk” to the students. I was unsure what motivation they needed and how someone from Canada would provide it but I accepted the task. I later came to understand that the dropout rate is high and the subsequent unemployment rate for dropouts is as much as twice the national rate of 12%. What happens to these young people?

Some of my young relatives in Georgetown did not find school engaging or relevant. After primary school, they simply stopped attending. They seem

to subsist on odd jobs and have developed skills in welding, mechanics, or carpentry on their own. There is always talk of working in the bush mining gold, but this is difficult work that no one seems to do for long.

Guyana's 1996 National Development Strategy (NDS) estimated that only 68% of school-age children were attending school. In some areas, this dropped to 50%, contributing to poor literacy in the country. (<http://www.guyana.org/NDS/chap20.htm>)



Paul, for example, works for my uncle. He is in his fifties, scrupulously honest and hard working. As I interviewed him, I innocently asked him to spell his name. His apologetic response was, “Me don’ know for read... Never go school.” He explained that his mother died when he was five years old. “We was plenty. So we fatha can’ maintain all we for send we to school. He can’ prepare meal for all ah we.” So Paul and his siblings went to work: “We go out. We loose sheep. We loose fowl, feed ‘em, go an garden. Go on rice land. Look after rice. Rice land now if rainfall, combine can’t cut it. Ya got take grass knife an cut it. Go’ thrash em with yo’ foot. Yo go’ drug ‘em on yo’ back. Bring it. Kite an soak it. Dry it. Mill it. Then yo’ get money.” Paul’s ingenuity, spirit and work ethic are impressive. He can transport bags of cement and small appliances on his bicycle. In addition to his odd jobs, he farms chickens and ducks. Unfortunately Paul’s story of



poverty, child labour, and lack of schooling continues today. The Guyana Bureau of Statistics’ Child Labour Survey (2005) suggests that these problems are

growing in non-urban regions. Even for children who do not drop out, truancy is a significant problem.

Each morning by 7 AM, the five children who live next door were dressed smartly in school uniforms and a taxi was waiting to take them to school. Their single mother was off to work. Returning home at 5 PM they do homework and chores, and have little time to play. This would be a long day for anyone let alone primary aged children. It is no wonder they look for opportunities to dodge going to school.



I outlined three points for the students I addressed at St. Stanislaus College.

- Know where you come from. You are ultimately a child of the Universe, gifted and capable.
- On your journey through life develop your gifts, imagination, dreams and hopes. Be curious, read, learn and try things and work hard. Slow and steady wins the race.
- Plan to serve your family and your community and at the end of your journey you will see that you have made a difference.

I enjoyed meeting these bright young people. They understood the challenges facing them and had a grasp on the politics of Guyana. It was surprising how influenced the students are by North American pop culture: I was asked at least three times if I knew either Justin Bieber or Avril Lavigne. Sadly I got the impression that leaving Guyana may be



part of some of their life plans. In 2009 the Guyana Bureau of Statistics accounted for 23,000 more departures than arrivals.

While visiting the Pomeroon I spent some time at Jacklow Primary School and dropped into Martindale Primary School. Martindale was founded by J.J. Da Silva and Dominic Da Silva, my great-grandfather and grandfather respectively. At both schools I found the children polite and well dressed. The schools are clean and orderly, though



they have no electricity or running water. The bottom level at Martindale is not usable due to constant flooding. A blackboard, some tattered textbooks, and teacher-created learning aids on bristol board appeared to be the extent of their resources. Classes are large, combining different grades.

The National Development Strategy notes that regions like the Pomeroon receive far less funding than other areas. In some years, this difference has been more than \$100 US dollars per student. “These regional inequalities,” says the NDS, “imply that Amerindian children, and also non-Amerindians of the rural hinterland, are given relatively less attention by the school system.” Continuing, it adds that, “The problem is exacerbated by higher rates of absenteeism on the part of teachers in hinterland areas.”(<http://www.guyana.org/NDS/chap20.htm>)

Teachers I met in the Pomeroon work all day without a break or any preparation time. They are also responsible for keeping the school clean, including the latrines. During recess times, they keep students in to prepare for National Testing. In addition to all this, they expressed a concern that many students do not bring food for the school day. After applying for assistance and finding



none, they have taken it upon themselves to prepare food for the children three days a week. They do all this for a salary of about \$45,000 Guyanese dollars per month (or \$225 Canadian dollars)

These teachers were clearly demoralized and feel blamed if students do not perform well. During my stay in January, this finger pointing was clear in the Guyanese news. The Minister of Education, Shaik Baksh, blamed teachers and head teachers for students' poor performance on the National Grade 6 Test. He claimed that head teachers were too casual with teachers. Teachers were



accused of passing students on without properly informing the receiving teacher. The minister demanded that they teach the curriculum in a lock step manner over the entire year and warned teachers not to finish the curriculum by January. These comments show a complete lack of understanding for the work of teachers. This attitude of seeking to lay blame needs to be replaced by one of shared responsibility and working as a society to increase everyone's chances for a decent life.

I met some of Guyana's future teachers when I was given the opportunity to lecture at the Cyril Potter College for Education. Vice-Principal Viola Rowe had asked me to focus on classroom management and assessment issues. I arrived early with my laptop in tow and was informed that the power was off and would not be back for hours. Blackouts



are common in Georgetown. We set up the microphone and data projector just in case and fortunately the electricity came back on. A white tablecloth was draped over a black board to act as a screen for the data projector, and I began my lecture while the resident dog slept in the corner. I modeled cooperative learning techniques that seemed new to the group of 200 third year students. We debated whether learning skills and achievement could be assessed separately.

These young teachers seemed eager and ready to begin their final placement. Many of them will travel to remote parts of Guyana. They are all guaranteed jobs. It is my understanding that they are obligated to work in Guyana for a period



of years to pay for their education. Recent projects aim to provide better training and support for these new teachers, as was recently noted on the Ministry of Education website:

...a top World Bank official who was at the time speaking at the launch of the Guyana Improving Teacher Education Project at the Cyril Potter College of Education (CPCE), said the government's heavy investment in the education is an investment in young people.

This, Dr Lee said is an indication that the government has been "walking the talk". She said that the children are the future of the country, and teachers have an important role to play in helping them to realize their full potential.

The education expert also commended CPCE and the University of Guyana (UG) for joining forces to address areas of weaknesses in the teacher education programme.

The programme zeros in attention on improving the learning achievement of students by advancing the quality and delivery of teacher education, placing strong focus on more effective performance of teacher educators and student teachers. (MOE website)

Many agree that the best way to create a better world is through education. The United Nations, CIDA, the World Bank and the Guyana Bureau of Statistics measures infant mortality, employment, educational enrollment, child labour, health care, etc. But these statistics in and of themselves cannot capture the character of the people and the challenges they face. Guyana is a poor “knock for knock” place.

The limited resources for schools are allocated unevenly. Examinations are used to sift students, opening opportunities, for those who excel, to attend an excellent school or opening the door, for those who are not academically gifted, to leave school. The emphasis on memorization and recall, required to do well on an exam, ignores the variety of gifts children have beyond the 3 R’s. Schools should help each child to develop their talents to better contribute and succeed. When a child leaves school feeling that they are a failure, we all lose. All schools should be funded evenly to be as good as they can. The ghettoization of schools does not serve Guyana.

I would suggest that the difficult-to-measure core values of life need to be a central focus for the school curriculum. In Ontario we call it Character Education. Character Education strives to engage students in good stewardship of the environment, critical thinking, and social justice issues to improve their community. Goodness should be as important as reading, writing, and mathematics. Guyana will thrive, when

all people work together to raise each other up, striving to live the National Motto (displayed in Martindale Primary School): One People, One Nation, One Destiny.

