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Jamaica, Factor 16: Education

Jamaica: Educating for the future

Every year, about one million people vacation in the small country of Jamaica. Located in the Caribbean, Jamaica can be reached by cruise ship or airplane. Once on the island nation, perhaps in Kingston or Montego Bay, a vacationer can lounge in one of the comfortable hotels and later head to the ocean shore for swimming or sun tanning. For souvenirs, visitors can browse the various shops with authentic Jamaican wear such as t-shirts, bracelets, and sandals. If one gets hungry, there are many restaurants to choose from that can provide a wide variety of foods. All this tourism is good for local Jamaicans as well, not just the tourists. Tourism employs ten percent of the population, and a good tourism season means a better economy. Local Jamaicans and visitors differ, however, in the way that vacationers can pack up and leave whenever they want, and most Jamaicans cannot. Tourists are also different in that they do not see the country that the locals do. They rarely venture from the safety of their beach hotels into the inner city streets where the scene is not quite so appealing. Those living in urban Jamaica have a much less enjoyable stay than those who can come and go as they please.

In Jamaica, the average family has 2.8 members. This family unit usually consists of a single mother and her government-recommended number of two children. The father is rarely present in his children's lives, and if he is, he often has an abusive relationship with them. The family will usually eat traditional Jamaican meals with food bought in the city. However, processed and fast foods are becoming more and more commonly available, and an increasing number of families are purchasing those types of foods or eating meals outside of their households. Unfortunately, many families are unable to purchase any food at all. If the family has no income, then there is little chance that they will be able to purchase anything of nutritional value. Even if the family has a source of income, the head of the family, again, often a single mother, may not know how to spend his or her meager income wisely. Thus, the parent still may not be able to provide for his or her children due to lack of knowledge. The parent's lack of knowledge is most likely due to his or her poor quality education. For, while he or she may have completed the typical twelve years of schooling, there is a very good chance that he or she went through the system learning very little and may even be among the 13% percent of the population that is illiterate (Central).

Because of this lack of education being passed down from generation to generation, children in the family are at a greater risk for undernourishment and other disabilities that could further inhibit their learning. If this happens, the sick children can be taken to a government hospital where the health care is free. However, hospitals in Jamaica are overcrowded with other sick children and cannot supply the overwhelming demand for medication and treatment. If a family is desperate enough, they can take their children to a private clinic and pay the doctor with what little money they have, contingent upon having any money at all. Unemployment and educational issues are two of the major concerns affecting Jamaican youth, according to the Jamaican National Youth Policy in 2003. Unemployment is at 13% for adults and 26% for youth. The average salary in the country is \$7,400 (Average Salary). More than a million

Jamaicans make less than \$25 per week.

The fortunate families with sources of income have limited shopping options for food. There are the large Jamaican chain stores which carry local and imported foods from the Caribbean and more distant countries such as the United States. The imported foods, however, are more expensive and are frequently under-stocked due to shipping delays. There are also privately owned stores sprinkled around the cities, which carry a smaller variety and fewer imported products than the chain stores but are cheaper. These businesses may be underdeveloped due to the fact that Jamaica has the slowest growing economy in the Caribbean and is therefore unattractive for entrepreneurs. A few fortunate families have home gardens on the tops of their apartment buildings, but they can supply food for only a few families. The others in the city, including poor families, pregnant women, the elderly, and those with illnesses, suffer from malnourishment either from lack of access to food or inability to purchase what little is actually available.

Due to poor quality in education, even the few who graduate from the system may be illiterate and have few employable “blue collar” skills. Thus, single mothers and other impoverished caretakers who are unemployed have a very hard time finding jobs in the city and earning wages for their dependents. This situation has existed for many generations. Illiteracy has led to an unproductive workforce, which is reflected in the economy. However, nothing has changed in response to this recession, and the situation is not improving. Machines are taking over the few blue-collar jobs that the illiterate masses in the workforce can perform, and the literacy demands in the work field are increasing. There are not enough jobs and too many workers who need them but are unable to fill the positions. No employment means no income, and no income most likely means no food. This unskilled workforce and slow economy have made the food market unstable and expensive. Poor parents have limited shopping options to provide nutrition for their children, and this often leads to holes in their diets. Hungry children do not do as well in school and have a greater chance of being illiterate, which continues the cycle.

Jamaican students start their education very young. Basic or Infant School starts as early as two years old. When children turn six, they graduate to Primary School, which lasts until grade six, when students are about 13. This is where the government ceases to fund their education. After their second level of education, students who wish to further their learning must find their own funding, either out of pocket or with help from scholarships, which can be a problem for the 70,000 children who live in poverty. Getting access to the system is not the major problem, however (Little-White). Of those who get into a high school, nearly 50% are below their grade's reading level, and many are illiterate (Jamaica Education). These students are not at the academic level that they should be, and yet, many of them will graduate regardless of their literacy or capability, producing an uneducated generation of people who cannot contribute to the workforce and cannot support themselves financially. Just 20% of graduates actually qualify for jobs or upper levels of schooling. The other 80% do not. This is one of the reasons why Jamaica consistently ranks as having one of the highest levels of crime. Jamaica also has one of the world's highest murder rates per person, *the* highest in 2005 (Jamaica Crime). The offenses are mostly drug-related, and the violence is typically towards other Jamaicans, but it does not do anything good towards attracting wealthy tourists.

Jamaicans are graduating high school and supposedly getting an education, yet crime and illiteracy rates

are still high. The cause of these problems is deeper than high school. In order to bring around positive, real change, one must look back at Jamaica's basic and primary schools. These government-funded schools are overcrowded, underfunded, out-of-date, and simply ineffective. One Jamaican school room may have 45 students from several grades with just one teacher, a teacher who may not speak Standard Jamaican English, but, instead, the local dialect of Jamaican Creole. The students use mostly paper and pencil still; computers are expensive and rare privileges, which can only be utilized when Wi-Fi is available. Textbooks and other basic supplies are scarcer than they should be too. The schools also usually are unable to supply food to their students, many of which come from poor families that cannot feed them enough at home. In addition, the schools have no ability to accommodate gifted or special-needs students.

The problems with Jamaica's schooling system are reflected in their standardized test results, such as the Caribbean Advance Proficiency Examination, where the pass rate decreased two percent in 2014. However, despite the school system's unaccommodating circumstances, some students are learning and improving. Jamaica's Ministry of Education reported that scores from 14 out of the 35 subjects showed improvements in the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate exam in 2014. In mathematics specifically, the pass rate was 55.5%, an improvement from 42.2% in 2013. In English Language, the pass rate increased by two percent, moving up to 66%. The Ministry of Education chalks up these improvements to their new initiatives. The Tablets in Schools program is one such initiative. The program first distributed 25,000 tablets to teachers and students in 38 education institutions and trained 1,200 teachers in tablet computer use. It later extended to 25 more schools. This project has been somewhat hindered, though, because of a lack of access to Wi-Fi. One of the ministry's newest initiatives' goal is to enhance teaching and learning of mathematics in public schools and was launched in February of 2015. The ministry is not the only organization dedicated to Jamaica's education system, though, and cannot claim all the credit for their pupils' accomplishments. The Caribbean Education Foundation (CEF) is empowering the Jamaican community and transforming the world by educating one child at a time. CEF gives scholarships to students who need financial support in order to attend school. It also issues meal grants to students for breakfast, lunch, and afternoon snack. In order to increase computer literacy, CEF also donates computers to schools and hopes that every school in Jamaica will have at least one educational computer. In order to increase literacy and overall academic quality, the education system needs to start reform from the bottom up. Problems in the upper levels of education will lessen if students receive a quality education in their first 13 years. Reforming and improving Jamaica's education system will put a literate generation out into the workforce. It will create a generation of thinkers and problem solvers. These graduates will be able to contribute to their society and back to their school system.

Increasing the quality of education has been shown to have many positive long-term effects. Crime, which is a major problem in Jamaica, decreases. Health and mortality rates improve, unclogging the overcrowded and under-supplied health clinics. The economy will have a more capable and productive workforce, of which Jamaica is in dire need, and poverty will decrease. Better education can also decrease population growth in Jamaica, which was at .69% in 2014. Urbanization is also increasing, with 70% of the population projected to be living in urban areas by 2030. More people are going to be born into and more people are going to move into areas where there is already not enough food, schools, or jobs. This

can be prevented, however, by educating the population now to prepare for and handle the future.

Education starts with teachers. Without properly trained and knowledgeable teachers, it is extremely difficult for students to learn. Teachers need to know the material and how to teach it. Jamaican teachers need to know Standard Jamaican English so that their students learn a language that can be understood outside of their home communities. If teachers fail to do this, they need to be held accountable. Principals also need to take responsibility for their students' performance, and if they cannot meet reasonable standards, then their contracts should not be renewed, giving them some motivation for reform. Principals should also lose their power to appoint senior teachers; this responsibility belongs to the Ministry of Education, which already appoints the principals. This system should only be installed, though, after educators are given the proper tools for teaching. More schools, teachers, and supplies, including food for students, will do this. These things can be bought with funding or gained through donation by organizations such as CEF. Teachers are not the only people who need to be active in their pupils' education. Jamaican parents, alumni of the current system, are not very academically encouraging. Few read with their children, and many have minimal involvement in their children's school activities. Engaged parents will be more likely to hold the schools and the government branch in charge of them accountable for poor performance. One way to engage parents would be to have school websites that they could view from their homes. Such websites could include informative advice as to how parents should raise their children to be able to reach their highest potential. This is necessary because, as previously mentioned, many guardians have poor parenting skills simply because they know no other way or are financially incapable of better methods. This would only be possible after schools receive their own computers and gain Internet access, which more are as time has passed, making the movement to the Internet increasingly relevant. In 2003, there were only about 54 personal computers for every thousand Jamaicans and less than a quarter of the population had Internet access. By 2010, over half of the population were considered to be Internet users, though the Population and Housing Census of 2011 showed that nearly 70% of the population did not own computers and not even 20% had Wi-Fi in their households. By 2013, it was reported that "133 [Community Access Point facilities had] already been established across the island up to the end of April" and "a further 47 projects [were] in progress" (Reynolds). These facilities provide computers with Internet access for little to no cost, making a school website an open door for parents into their children's educational journeys.

Students, of course, are, in part, responsible for their own education as well. Students are responsible for their academic achievement, but they can only be expected to reach their full potential when they are in the proper physical and mental condition. This means they need physical and mental care. Schools can provide this as well as education. If schools can provide food for their students, the students will perform better. Expanding school health programs to include immunizations, emotional counseling, and personal hygiene practices will also help. To help with this, the Malnourished Children's Program from the Tropical Metabolism Research Unit of the University Hospital in the West Indies should be expanded. This program has outreach programs in Kingston for previous patients, where psychosocial stimulation is enhanced, and toys can be borrowed from a mobile library by children who were hospitalized for malnourishment. Such measures are taken as precautions towards preventing readmission into the hospital (Little-White). This approach was tested with several case studies in the 1990's which, according to

Christine Powell from the Tropical Metabolism Research Unit of the University Hospital in the West Indies, “showed that teaching child development activities to mothers in a home-visiting programme was successful in improving their children’s development in the short term and had some sustained benefits (Powell).” She found these intervention programs to be helpful to children and, due to the inadequate schooling system, recommended a child continue the program through their first year of primary school. A major problem with this kind of care was, of course, funding. There are some variations of this study that are less costly, though. Jamaica’s government runs something similar known as the Early Stimulation Programme. Located in the country’s capital, the organization strives to improve the learning experiences of disabled and extremely poor children. Like the Malnourished Children’s Program, it provides early intervention and training for parents (Early Stimulation). International and local funding has made it a successful benefit to many children in need.

In February of 2015, Jamaica's government allocated \$700 million to the Tablets in School project. The money will help with equipment maintenance and replacement and continued teacher training and professional development. For the project, about 30 new administrators will receive training, some will refresh their training, and 2,000 teachers will receive professional development. Education is already the largest portion of Jamaica's government's spending after debt servicing. To improve the current system, where this money is spent needs to be monitored closely so as to deter and catch corrupted spending. Continued funding will help keep the system going in the meanwhile. The Ministry of Education needs to take on a more active role in the system, appointing teachers and principals, monitoring their performances, and making sure they deliver. Unfortunately, a generation has been lost to Jamaica's current faulty system. This uneducated and illiterate generation has not been very fostering of their children’s academic growth. Additionally, many are impoverished and abusive. They are not supplying students with healthy home environments. Getting parents involved with their students' schools will hopefully get them more interested and make them more supportive. This problem will eventually go away after the new, educated generation becomes parents.

Few are drawn to Jamaica for the poverty and the failing education system. Visitors prefer to stay in fancy hotels and lounge on clean sandy beaches, and, honestly, who can blame them? The current state of the rest of the country is not very appealing. It is not a place where many wish to stay for extended periods of time. However, with some reform and continued funding, Jamaica can become known for more than Montego Bay and steel drums. Jamaica can become a nation recognized globally for its highly educated people and abundant wealth. Jamaica can become a place where people come to stay, not just to visit.

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