

PERSPECTIVES

WHY TYPES OF HIGH SCHOOL MATTER?

BY PREM MISIR

The entire Stabroek News' Editorial of May 8, 2004, focused on my article 'Loss of talent through SSEE', published in the Guyana Chronicle of August 9, 2004. I made a response to this Editorial, which was carried in Stabroek News as a letter on October 14, 2004.

The title of this response was 'Social Inequality Related to Educational Achievement' which was altered in Stabroek News to read as 'Dr Misir clarifies that elimination of class distinction is not a major goal of education'. I was not clarifying; I was invalidating several erroneous comments in the Editorial. This response to an entire Stabroek News' Editorial of my article was not only published as a letter, but also was placed as the 'end' item in the Letters' section. My response was not a letter. Given the prominent status of an Editorial and the fact that the entire Editorial was on my article, clearly then my response should have been significantly placed as the Editorial was, and indeed, not at the end of the Letters' section.

The Editor issued an editorial response to my rejoinder on October 14, 2004. Let's examine what the Editor presented.

SES not a test of SES

The Stabroek News said: "Contrary to what Dr Misir suggests, the editorial accepted that children from better-off homes are more successful at SSEE. However, it does not follow logically from this that the examination itself is a test of socio-economic status."

I never said the SSEE is a test of socio-economic status (SES). The SSEE tests for English, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. The fact of the matter is that we have elite and non-schools like in many parts of the world. If Bacchus' finding still holds, namely, that students whose parents were in a high socioeconomic status, performed excellently at the common entrance examination compared to students from low socioeconomic status parentage who performed poorly, then clearly, high SES students would have been attending senior and junior secondary schools in relatively greater numbers than low SES students.

Under the rubric of Bacchus' finding, then, differential resources available to students during the 'preparedness' process would largely determine success/ failure at the SSEE. In addition, students with very limited resources in preparing for the SSEE would more likely be students from families with low SES, and vice versa.

Differential resources due to class position or SES

The Guyana Chronicle article said: "The early selection process through the SSEE, allocates students to various types of schools, largely according to their socioeconomic status." This happens because of the level of resources available to a student in preparing for the SSEE. It is the child's SES that would complementarily shape his/her educational development through the level of resources the family can command in the 'preparedness' process in pursuit of the SSEE. The Stabroek News' Editorial of October 8, 2004, fails to 'sus' out the serious implications of educational outcomes for 'low SES children' who are largely experiencing secondary education

in the SDPS. Many of these children may not have presented themselves for the SSEE. Clearly then, SES is a significant factor in earning a secondary education.

Secondary school placement

Stabroek News' Editor said: "Similarly, he argued that using the availability of places as a "criterion" for allocating children to secondary schools "conceal[ed] the class policy of selection to these varied types of school. [Our italics]" Stabroek News does not believe this is true. Stabroek News is dead wrong and needs to get real.

There is a perceived stratification of the school system that has been with us since the beginnings of formal education in Guyana. Are Lodge Community High School and Bishops' High school at the same level and have similar status? How about West Demerara Secondary School and Queen's College? And perhaps, Bartica Secondary School and St. Stanislaus College? Clearly, students at SSEE are allocated in a stratified high school system.

This inequality in high school education was more pronounced in the PNC era. With regard to traditional general secondary education, only 46% experienced it in 1980, 49% in 1983/84, and 67% in 2000/2001. Over the last decade, however, the PPP/C Administration significantly reduced student numbers by more than 50% in the Secondary Department of Primary Schools (SDPS), enabling more students to experience traditional general secondary education today. It is clear that today many more students (55%) do present themselves for SSEE compared to the PNC era when only about 38% actually presented themselves for the common entrance examination. However, the majority of non-SSEE candidates and this is a huge number, were mainly placed in the secondary departments of primary schools.

The secondary school placement mirrors inequality in education through the stratified high school system. By definition, these stratified schools will have unequal amounts of scarce but desirable resources, producing unequal life chances for students, and unequal social influence. Keep in mind that the labor market still favors 'outcome' skills from elite schools, thereby placing students from non-elite schools at a disadvantage. Clearly, people's life chances are still determined by their SES or class position vis-à-vis the stratification system in education, inter alia. At any rate, the presence of a stratified high school system implies a significant intermediary role of SES and class in placement, albeit perhaps unintentional.

Nursery & Primary insufficient to address savage inequalities

Stabroek News said: "The editorial also stated that giving children from impoverished backgrounds a better chance in the education system did not require a "levelling down"...by abolishing an exam and having uniform secondary schools; what it did require was special efforts to be made at the nursery and primary school levels to even up the odds."

Tell Black America that inequality in their education can be corrected only through Nursery and Primary schools. Black America will scoff at such an outlandish remark, given the savage inequalities they experienced in education prior to the Brown v. Board of Education in 1954.

The people involved with this response needs to update themselves with the stratification literature on education. I have provided only a few in my initial rejoinder to Stabroek News' Editorial. No one would dispute shoring up primary and nursery levels. But we are addressing stratification in the high school system. Rutter et al (1979) in London found that some schools were superior to others where their students performed and behaved better than students at other schools. They found that a good school comprises of how teachers taught, a strong emphasis on

educational achievement, giving regular homework, students' work meticulously monitored, students expected to master assignments, and rewarded for good performance. The Harvard School of Education (1981) and Kozol's (1992) documentation of savage inequalities among schools supported these findings. Types of school do matter and so is equality in educational opportunity and results.