

My Amazing Students

I was taught so much

Reading Adrian Green's thought provoking 2019 article, "*Set in Colonial Consciousness*" in the Barbados Nation, made me realise similarities over the years in the British educational system. However, I do not intend to analyse Green's interesting piece which deserves to be more widely read, nor write about my years in London schools. Instead I will share my experiences of teaching in a Jamaican primary school.

I first went to Jamaica on a teacher exchange scheme in 1983, which saw twelve London teachers work for a year there, while twelve Jamaican teachers went to teach in London. I enjoyed a great year working at primary school in a rural area of St. Catherine where Linstead was the nearest large town. I met many wonderful supportive people, both among the teachers at the school and the community at large and above all, met my future wife. Having fallen in love with a Jamaican and her country, I very much wanted to return and live there. This happened seven years later and I was fortunate enough to be allowed by the Jamaican Ministry of Education and the principal to work at the same school.



David Horsley - Author and educator

I was concerned about my unfamiliarity with the curriculum for year six children who would be sitting the common entrance exam, would mean I may not do justice to the students in my class. When I explained this to the principal and informed her of my years of experience in London with children with special needs, a decision was made. I was overjoyed when I was asked to have the remedial class of year six. It was agreed that I could adapt the curriculum to the abilities of the students without worrying about the exam as most of them could not read or write very well.

Facilities in a school built for 1,000 but with a population double that, meant many classes shared rooms, as indeed I had during my teacher exchange year. With space at a premium, I was allowed to take over the large verandah of an unoccupied house on the school campus as a classroom for the year.

My new students were welcoming to me but overaware of their lack of academic abilities. My immediate task was to make them conscious of their abilities in so many other areas and boost their self esteem as year-six students. Many of the children were unsure of reciting the letters of the alphabet and their sounds, so we immediately set about making 26 pictures with both lower and upper case letters of the alphabet. The students and I discussed how we would do this and we agreed to use what they could bring into school. I proposed that they bring indigenous Jamaican things into school and describe these to me. So, A was for ackee with a student drawing it and then writing the word. Each of them did this on pieces of paper until we had twenty six pages for an alphabet that they later helped me stick to the walls of the verandah.

I encouraged them to practise the alphabet and use the pictures to learn the sounds and for a short period at home every day do the same with the little alphabet books they individually made as well as dictionaries they all had as part of their school books. Every morning we would spend some time having different students say their ABC so that over the course of time all the

children did this. I encouraged them to do this praising all attempts, failed or not and encouraged their classmates to applaud all the efforts. Over course of time, the children improved these skills to differing degrees due to them taking it seriously and showing great diligence.

Time was spent on discussions, with the students telling each other personal, local or international news they had heard. I did this to encourage them to feel confident at speaking to the other members of the class. Gradually, even the most reticent were successful at doing this. I explained to the children that I lived in London where we did not have experience of the countryside. As we were in a rural area, the students had skills I did not possess. They were not only familiar with all the trees, plants and fruits of Jamaica but they also fed and looked after animals their parents owned as well as planting and harvesting a variety of produce.

Their knowledge and skills were numerous and my task was to make them aware of how gifted they were. The discussions we had proved positive with even children who rarely spoke in front of others feeling valued as they shared thoughts and experiences. When the children were busy I was able to circulate and ask them individually about themselves and their daily lives, which included me asking them about things that I explained I had little knowledge of. This encouraged them to express themselves, as I told them I was learning from them.

All the students were capable of cooking and after gaining permission from the principal, we chose a day to go into the bush on the school grounds for a cookout. With another teacher, we carried a pot, bowls borrowed from the school kitchen and of pieces of yam, Irish potatoes, cho cho, green bananas and seasoning the children had brought in. We had collected money days before to buy chicken as the final ingredient and on the appointed day, found a clearing where I watched in awe as the students collected twigs and broken pieces of branches to make a fire. Using a box of matches, the small fire began and using knives borrowed from the kitchen, they proceeded to cut up the chicken, prepare the rest of the food and the, with water we had carried, the cooking began. Those children not involved in the cooking, had brought exercise books and pencils and I asked them to draw and write anything they could see around them. When the food was cooked, we found places to sit and the children lined up to receive portions of the food and ate with spoons each child had brought in. After eating, we put out the fire with children explaining how important that action was to avoid a big fire. After returning to school, the students washed spoons, bowls and the pot. This was a most successful day with the children not just cooking but doing their English lesson.

On other occasions I was able to bring the children out of our verandah classroom to a clearing on the school grounds to find places to sit and ask them to tell a short story, sing a song or recite a poem. I remember vividly, a boy who could barely read or write, recite the whole of Michael Smith's "*Mi Cyaan Believe It*" by heart, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-RFv7WqpcQQ> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-WvHCpLc81E>. He recited it several times over the year to the delight of the class who applauded with gusto. At other times, I would tell stories and on return to the classroom, the students would retell the story in their own words and pictures.

We did work on the Jamaican National Heroes and the students made books on them in words and pictures. Also, they made separate pages on the heroes which we stuck on the walls. They particularly thrilled to Nanny of the Maroons who led her people to resist the British troops and a return to slavery. I read Evan Jones "*Song of the Banana Man*", which they often asked me to read again and again. See <https://youtu.be/a9LpPRWWNQ>. The children learnt the earlier part of the poem by heart and joined in with gusto on the chorus. It resounded so well because most of them came from a similar background as the banana man in the poem. They felt proud because Jones's poem is a wonderful tribute to Jamaican rural workers, as the man in the poem declares with great pride "I will live and die a banana man".

Of course, I taught all subjects as required but I have given examples of the ways I was allowed to work with the students, especially in language work emphasising reading, starting where the

children were with the basics and from the beginning assuring them they were not doing "baby work". I did not use books intended for six year olds and explained continually the necessity of the way they were learning. I also was able to meet the parents both at school and on occasional home visits and explain how important it was to be patient with the children, encourage them and read with them. I must say this was met with appreciation by those parents. I emphasised the importance of them praising the children's efforts.

These are some of my experiences in the early 1990s with my year six class in our verandah classroom which was festooned with pages of the student's work proudly on display. With occasional visits by the principal and senior teachers who talked with the students and asked them about the work they were doing, my students responded well. I was most fortunate to have the backing of the senior staff to be able to work in the ways I have outlined with my class. Over the year, the children made progress and their self esteem improved so much, but they were children with outstanding skills and gifts.

In over thirty years of teaching in London and in Jamaica, the memories of that year with these amazing students is one of the most memorable that I have in my career as a teacher.

David Horsley

Teacher, lecturer and author of, amongst other writings, *Billy Strachan, RAF Officer, Communist, Civil Rights Pioneer, Legal Administrator, Internationalist and ABOVE ALL CARIBBEAN MAN.*

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