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### RE-ASSESSING TEACHER PREPARATION: A CONVERSATION WITH PROFESSOR HYACINTH EVANS

The Jamaica Partners for Educational Progress Community of Practice (CoP) Facilitation Team had the pleasure of sharing some time recently with the accomplished and affable Professor Hyacinth Evans. We spoke with Professor Evans about her work in education and, specifically, her career in teacher training, her assessment of the effectiveness of teacher preparation in Jamaica, and how teacher training has changed over the last 30 years.

Professor Evans has spent all of her professional career in the field of education and recently retired from the University of the West Indies (UWI) as Professor of Teacher Education after joining the Institute for Teacher Education in 1979. During her time with UWI she coordinated the education programmes in the teachers' colleges, including the practicum, and was responsible for professional studies. She also taught students at the graduate level where she emphasized the importance of continuing professional development.



#### TRADITIONAL APPROACH

Professor Evans noted that in her experience, while student teachers are taught using the traditional pillars of teacher education in the Caribbean, very often, the instruction does not translate into classroom practice. A contributing factor to this phenomenon is the fragmented way in which teacher preparation has taken place. While teachers were instructed in their content areas, in general and professional studies, and were also required to complete a practicum, these four areas that make up the traditional pillars of teacher education were not always integrated or brought together to create a clear vision of 'teaching' as a profession.

#### INTEGRATED AND UPGRADED

Gradually, this has changed over the years as the Joint Board of Teacher Education took steps to upgrade teacher education, particularly professional studies, which is much more integrated and broadly focused. This move, Professor Evans notes, has been accompanied by an upgrading of the content and the overall skills now taught in teacher's colleges. Teachers-in-training are now expected to not only deliver content in prescribed ways, but to innovate, implement new approaches, and document the outcomes for further modification and application.

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Figure 1 Teachers in Training

## WELL STARTED NOVICE

Despite the improved standards and rising expectations, Professor Evans still sees the newly minted teacher as a ‘well started novice’. When students graduate from Teacher Training institutions, they are only just ready to ‘try out their teaching’; almost a continuation of their practicum. One of the most crucial tasks for a new teacher is understanding the relevant class curriculum, knowing how to sequence lessons, and how to assess and address their students’ conceptual gaps. This type of guidance is available to the student teacher during the practicum, but once a graduate, teachers enter the classroom where there is no longer any formal provision to meet those still present needs.

The real professional development of teachers, she believes, happens in the classroom. And, it doesn’t happen in a short space of time or even once and forever. Teachers, she is convinced, need continuous formal and/or informal opportunities for professional growth. She spoke of a Grade Three teacher she recently observed at work in a primary school. The teacher, a seasoned Grade One teacher, had only recently been shifted to Grade Three and was

struggling to handle her new position. Professor Evans noted that there were obvious gaps in the teacher’s knowledge, and further investigation found that the teacher did not have any training or any guidance, including exposure to the Grade 3 curriculum, prior to taking on the new role. The result, as described by Professor Evans, is a “struggling teacher, without the guidance to assist with the transition” from one grade level to the next.

While considerable improvements have been made in the training of teachers, Professor Evans believes that we have some way to go in terms of the practical application of the skills taught in training institutions. Ideally, she would love to see two semesters of practicum and a shift away from practicum supervision that focuses solely on evaluation towards an emphasis on student teachers’ professional development; more guidance and less judgment.

## INSIDE THE CLASSROOM

At the end of the day, the qualities of a good teacher are really manifested in the classroom and for this seasoned educator **the two most important qualities are:**

### QUALITIES OF A GOOD TEACHER

- **Comprehensive content Knowledge** as gaps in content knowledge impedes good teaching.
- **Good relationship with Children**; when teachers are caring they are often able to command respect from students and get students to function at a high level.



Figure 2 Teacher with her students

After years of observing classroom practices in Jamaica, she believes that the most damaging teaching practices are corporal punishment, insulting / disrespecting students, and teachers not mastering their subject areas.

For more on Professor Evan’s observation of classroom practices in Jamaica, please read **‘Inside Jamaican Schools’** for her vivid account of the Jamaican school experience.

*The teacher goes through different stages, each of which is characterized by a different way of thinking, different concerns and different needs. The teacher’s thinking changes over time. Their understanding of the subject matter deepens and their practical knowledge about classrooms and student learning grows. Experience, reflection on one’s experience, learning from colleagues and further education can all help the teacher refine knowledge about the various aspects of the work. Such development, however, is not automatic.*

*Inside Jamaican Schools: p.33*