UNDERSTANDING THE JAMAICAN CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

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FOUNDATIONS OF JAMAICAN CULTURE

• Jamaica has a rich strong and vibrant culture
• On the surface it seems to be homogenous, but the culture is actually very diverse
• We are going through a process of rapid social change occasioned by severe acculturation from the ghettoes of the north – Jamaica is a society in transition.
• The dominant culture which was promoted by the ruling class since colonial times was based on the British model where the values of the planter class prevailed
• African cultural norms were devalued and largely undocumented, but they survive today in a number of cultural art forms
CULTURAL INDICATORS

- There are a number of cultural indicators which help us to determine the cultural heritage and the cultural expression of a people, the major ones of these are
  - Ethnicity
  - Social Class
  - Religion
  - Education
  - Language

Jamaica’s national motto ‘OUT OF MANY ONE PEOPLE’ speaks to its diversity and it’s unity.
SOCIAL CLASS

- Jamaica is a ‘classist’ society where social class is largely determined by colour/shade, although there are poor whites in areas such a Seafort and German Town.
- The ‘Jamaica whites’ and near whites are at the top of the social hierarchy, they dominate business, banking and commerce.
- They have the better educational opportunities.
- The middle class are really the educated working class, they are darker in colour, have less wealth, but strive for education as a means of social mobility.
- The middle class dominates Government and Politics this is an example of the social transition resulting from political Independence.
RELIGION

- Jamaica, it is said has more churches per square mile than any other country
- There are remnants of African religions in the revivalist movement, kumina and obeah (voodoo).
- Religious expression is largely conventional with strong mainstream churches
- There is now a movement towards the more fundamentalist pentecostal churches and the Adventist church.
- There is all around a respect for religion if not a practice and religion is central in public life, it informs values e.g. attitudes to homosexuality, gambling
EDUCATION

- Education is highly valued among the middle and upper classes.
- The quality of education at the primary and secondary levels has deteriorated with the democratization of education and the lack of resources for funding teacher training and high quality educational programmes.
- The result is that persons at the bottom of the social pyramid show lack of achievement and preparation for the workplace, this perpetuates poverty and despair of ever accessing legitimate means of social mobility.
- On the other hand, the demand for tertiary education is growing as those who make it through the secondary level seek to make themselves more competitive in the labour market.
LANGUAGE

• Language is currently a ‘hot topic’ in Jamaica. Jamaican creole (patois) is widely spoken among the majority of people and is being promoted as an inextricable part of national identity.

• Many Jamaicans feel that to devalue their language is to devalue their heritage, linguists have put much effort into documenting and formalizing patois and promoting it as a legitimate language to be spoken in formal situations. (The Bible is being translated into patois)

• The big question is whether or not teachers should teach in patois with English as a second language – how do we standardize patois?

• Some educators feel that the devaluing of English as the lingua franca is directly related to low academic achievement and will make Jamaican graduates less competitive in the international marketplace – this is a politically sensitive issue
THE CULTURAL TRANSITION

• Jamaica is a society in transition where external cultural influences are shaping the cultural change
• The middle class who have been traditionally the purveyors of the dominant culture has been eroded through migration (brain drain) and the rise of the nouveau riche
• Most working class Jamaicans have strong links to relatives who live in the US, Canada and the UK their increase in numbers challenges the class structure
• Access to radio, cable television, DVDs and the internet expose the youth to the worst of the ghetto cultures, this feeds criminal activity and erodes traditional ethics
• There is a strong orientation to a culture of immediate gratification and consumerism supported by dance hall and the ‘bling’ culture
FUNCTIONING IN JAMAICAN CULTURE

• ‘Jamaica no problem’ accurately depicts the fun loving nature of a people who definitely support the old adage “all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy”
• In spite of the many difficulties the country faces Jamaican’s are naturally upbeat, engaging and outgoing.
• Educators have to make every effort to keep students focused on effort and excellence.
• Jamaicans are accustomed to an authoritarian structure where there is some social distance
• The norms for a more egalitarian approach in pedagogy are not yet fully worked out some amount of classroom control is expected
FUNCTIONING IN JAMAICAN CULTURE

• Jamaica moves at a slower pace than for example the United States. There is more bureaucracy and less of a sense of urgency to accomplish tasks.

• It is good to take time to listen to persons, to assess situations and to take advice rather than to assume that one knows how to respond. There may be many cultural practices and informal relationships that you are not aware of.

• Remember that there may be perceived social class differences between yourself and students, this may pose some barriers to relationships.
FUNCTIONING IN JAMAICAN CULTURE

- Jamaicans do not like a condescending approach, they don’t want you to try to be like them
- Jamaicans expect you to maintain your standards and your identity
- English is the official language of the country we should all try to speak it
- Speak slowly to ensure that there is mutual understanding
- Repeat what you have to say slowly if there is a problem
- Look out for the “Hs”
- Jamaica is a highly sexually oriented society, the family structure is complex, conventional marriage, concubinage, visiting relationships
‘Students are young, their values are still being shaped, they need role models, they need to be stretched, they need to understand that there are standards to achieve, they need to understand that they must aspire to be world class’