

A School Waiting to Be Rescued

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School Days Were Happy Days

Some months ago the government called forth a commission to look into the state of affairs at the Vieux Fort Comprehensive Secondary School, where I attended secondary school a quarter of a century ago, when it was still called the Vieux Fort Secondary School. Having recently returned home to settle after two decades of absence in America, the commission of inquiry tickled my curiosity. What was so wrong about the school that it required a comprehensive investigation? Was it not governments and institutions like the SLBGA, LUCELEC and WASCO that required commissions? I decided to take a tour of the school, not only to discover for myself why we needed an inquiry but to reminisce a little. For pleasant memories the Vieux Fort Secondary School turn Vieux Fort Comprehensive Secondary School holds for me.

I entered the school compound. To my right, a creme-yellow brick and stone building, the school's headquarters, which wasn't there in my day. Straight ahead, painted blue and white, were the school's two original buildings, the way the school was when Dr. Kenny Anthony attended. The larger of the two buildings was a twelve-classroom, two-storey structure (the upper floor wasn't part of the original structure, it is a more recent addition), while the other, also two stores, used to be the library (upstairs), bathrooms and home economics (downstairs), but now, other than the bathrooms, it has been turned into staff rooms and offices.

To my left were three large piles of crumbling bricks. In front of the piles of bricks was a large, brown, and white, steel and brick building that housed the woodwork and mechanical workshops. Painted on the front-end side of the building was an inviting seascape adorned with mountains and clouds. This was yet another building that wasn't there in my day. In fact, part of the space it took up was once occupied by Mr. Dubois's biology lab and Mr. Renee's history classroom.

Although since my secondary school days I have spent another twelve years sitting in classrooms, as a teacher and a personality, Mr. Dubois is the teacher who has made the strongest impression on me. Alcohol forever on his breath, he was strong, quiet, and forceful. He never wasted a word. His vocabulary was as precise as a sergeant's scalper. He was a loner and he went against the grain. He did things his way, even at the displeasure of the principal. I used to see part of myself in him. The drinking aside, I wanted to be like him. This probably explained why biology was my favorite subject, what came most natural to me. Mr. Renee also left me with lasting impressions. His high-pitched, dramatic voice lifted history from the boring undertaken most students thought of to an active, breathing organism. To this day I remain a student of history.

Passing between the school's two original buildings, I stepped onto the playing field on which my football skills used to be always on display. Being able to play football at school was what had made school bearable for me. For I can never remember a time that I liked school. My first few years of school were the worse years of my life. I cried incessantly and nothing the nuns did—not powdered milk, not Shirley Biscuits, not guava jelly—would stop the crying. I took every opportunity to stay away from school: I hid in abandon trucks, I hid in cultivar hedges, I hid under houses. It was only after some serious beatings from my mother and older brother that I realized that like it or not school was there to stay. Later, when I had developed a love for football, I went to school to play football. Being the strict Seventh Day Adventist, my parents were, and afraid that Vieux Fort's children would corrupt us, they didn't allow us to go play ball on the town's play grounds, so school was the only place I got to play. Shy, timid, and unable to make any impression on the girls, this playing field went a long way to easing the process of me acquiring a secondary school education.

Unlike in my day the playing field is now surrounded by buildings. Facing me, on the river side of the field, were one and two-storey buildings. The one storey building was five classrooms. The first floor of the two storey building housed the library, the science laboratory, the music room, and the home

economics room. The second floor was more classrooms. At the left end of the field was another building, five classrooms, that wasn't there in my day. At the right end of the field, four wooden, cottage-like structures painted white, together housing fourteen classrooms. Beyond the wooden buildings was a new and inviting U-shaped two storey building that housed another sixteen classrooms.

It was at one of those cottage classrooms that Mr. Heaney, the American English teacher, kept his classes. Back then English was my most dreaded subject. Putting my thoughts on paper was a nightmare. My grammar has remained atrocious up to this day. The grammar and spell checks in WordPerfect and Microsoft Word have been God sent. Yet two occurrences in Mr. Heaney's English class continue to shape my thinking. They are *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, and *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller. In *Things Fall Apart*, I found for the first time a character that shared one of the traits that used to dominate my life—the fear of being seen to be afraid, the fear of being perceived to be weak. That this trait led to the character's demise made the story even more compelling.

The Crucible taught me that no matter who we were there was a price at which we could be bought, and a level of pressure or stress under which we would breakdown, granted, though, the price (or the pressure) that would lead to a sellout (or a break down) varies from person to person. *The Crucible* and *Things Fall Apart* had made English as enjoyable as football had made school bearable.

To get an unhindered view of the school's surroundings, I climbed to the second floor of the new, U-shaped building. To the North the land sloped into the Vieux Fort River. Beyond the river the land rose to Morne Beauséjour. To the East was the Beauséjour Government Farm. To the West the school's track and field grounds, the site of its inter-house, track and field meets, the meets at which I used to let it all hang out for Lewis but was never able to do better than third place. Beyond the track and field grounds were Derrière Morne and La Tourney. To the Southeast Moule-a-Chique came into view. I noticed that, as in my day, the land sloping toward the river was still covered with mango and guava trees and potato fields. But on the other three sides of the school, homes had encroached such that the school would have great difficulty expanding any further. The only open space lay toward the river.

I descended the building and walked to the river. I stopped under a mango Palwi tree, and after three attempts with stones I picked a ripe mango that I proceeded to ravish. The mango and the potato fields reminded me of Ma Dan and Pa Dan, because it was their potato field that we used to trample to get to the mango trees. Ma Dan and Pa Dan, both now deceased, came to St. Lucia as part of a Barbadian Settlement Scheme in which due to a paucity of land in Barbados, Barbadians came to settle in Vieux Fort, which then for the most part was wide-open country. In the middle of this resettlement, World War II broke and most of the lands in and around Vieux Fort, including what were set aside for the Barbadians, were leased to the Americans. Losing their land, some Barbadians returned home, while some others stayed to work for the Americans as they transformed Vieux Fort into a military complex. Pa Dan and Ma Dan were among those who stayed. When the school opened, Ma Dan established a canteen on the same spot where the one storey building on the river side of the playing field now stands. Pa Dan, on the other hand, continued to raise cattle, milk his cows, and cultivate food crops. Ma Dan and Pa Dan quickly became the away-from-home parents of generation upon generation of secondary school students. You didn't have enough money, no problem, Ma Dan will find the end of a cut-cake that matches what you have. You want lunch on credit, no problem, Ma Dan will loan you lunch, though both you and she knew that this is one lunch that will never get paid. And when all fails, there were always Pa Dan's mangos and papayas to raid.

At the river several children were bathing and frolicking in the section that used to be the water catchment of the now defunct Vieux Fort Water Plant. Straight after I graduated from the Vieux Fort Secondary School, I worked eleven months at the water plant, testing and monitoring water quality. This was my first job, but also my first and only dismissal. I was fired for bringing rudeness to the manager of the water plant. I envied the carefreeness of the children. The water plant and the children brought back the memory of the river of tears that I shed when to my disbelieving ears the supervisor of works at the headquarters of the Water Authority said, "I 'm afraid we will have to part company." Leaving the river

and children behind, I climbed back to the school and started a closer inspection, opening doors, peeping into classrooms.

I noticed that there were no door handles or locks on many classroom doors. Several doors were held closed by large stones. One door was held closed by a drinking straw threaded through where a padlock should have been. Some doors were missing panels, leaving gaping holes. Some classrooms had sideboards missing. The louvers of some windows were completely absent. Large patches of linoleum were missing from the floors of several classrooms, and dirt and graffiti covered many inside walls. *Niggaz Strikes; Black Stud; Cookoon Mama; All Jamets in here please give a fucking shout; Blacks, the blackest fucker around; Ras 2 Sick 2 Cure* were some of the more colorful Graffiti, which in my day was reserved for toilets, that have found their way into our classrooms. My thought was: the American inner city has moved into our classrooms.

I was about to walk off the school grounds when something kept nudging me, telling me my tour was incomplete, so I turned around as if to ask what else is there to see? Then I remembered the auditorium, and my thought was, how could I have forgotten. After all, it was to this place that I rushed at the commencement of recess and lunch breaks to ensure a place at the tennis table, it was there that we gathered for school assemblies, it was there that my graduation ceremony was held, it was there that I first listened to the school's steel band, and it was there that I witnessed the incident that would overshadow all other school incidents. The one involving the then school principal, Mr. Gregory Williams, and a student from Laborie.

Mr. Williams was a radical. He wore long beard and unkempt hair, and his feet were always in sandals. So rustic was his appearance that the students renamed him Castro. He was a man given to sudden fits of anger during which the whole school, teachers included, walked on tiptoe, followed by long periods of lax, during which the school was loose, everyone doing as they pleased with little consequences. On the other hand, in an era of student radicals, the student from Laborie was a radical among radicals. He had been expelled from at least two secondary schools in Castries. However, being the radical and free thinker Mr. Castro was, and having a sincere desire to uplift students academically and otherwise (at least that was my impression of him), he thought he would succeed where others had failed—he would break the boy in. After all, he, Castro, was at the hem of the most radical of secondary schools. The boy was admitted into Form Three.

Less than two months into the term, in midmorning, Mr. Castro called an assembly. Glad to be out of class, we assembled in the auditorium. The air electrified. Something was coming down. We knew that we were in for some high drama, after all, why would Mr. Castro disrupt classes to hold an assembly. Yet Mr. Castro's bearing gave nothing away. He was loose and jovial. He called the boy from Laborie up on stage.

The boy was all smiles, his head held high, his beret on his head, and he took his time to strut onto the stage. After all, this was the era of coolness, of dreadness, of peace signs and black power fists, of Afros and black rubber rings around wrists and ankles. It was an era in which the Black Power Movement and the Rastafarian Revolution were playing themselves out on the grounds of our secondary schools. We didn't have universities so it was at the secondary schools that the battle lines were drawn. In the boy from Laborie, Mr. Castro may have found his match.

We held our breath. A hairpin falling on the floor would have been audible. Mr. Castro said, "take off your beret." The boy refused the offer. But obviously Mr. Castro hadn't called an assembly and brought the boy all the way upstage to tell him to take off his beret. Truth is, Mr. Castro was fed-up with him. He was making Mr. Castro, the most radical of school principals, at the hem of the most radical of secondary schools, look bad. To save face, Mr. Castro had to make an example of him. Knowing Mr. Castro, we knew sooner than later the boy would do something during one of Mr. Castro's dark spells and there would be a show down. But what we couldn't guess was what form the showdown would take.

"You are expelled," shouted Mr. Castro, "and get the hell out of my school." The boy walked out, the smile still on his face, his walk cool and deliberate. He was a dread among dreads, a radical among

radicals, the student that the most radical and free thinking of principals could not break down, could not break in.

But we were in shock. We were devastated. Expelled. There through the window goes the prestigious teacher's job, the air-conditioned bank job, the long sleeve and tie government office job that we all had come to expect would be ours no sooner than we graduate.

Suddenly, the midmorning sun's glare had become harsh and unforgiving. Suddenly, we were not as cool, not as dread, not as radical as we thought we were. Suddenly, we were no longer men and women, but mere children in search of refuge.

So how could I have forgotten the auditorium, the place where it all happened. I retraced my steps.

As I approached the auditorium, I noticed that it was barricaded. I said to myself, "don't tell me it is no longer in use." I entered the auditorium through a gaping hold at the bottom of the barricaded door, and realized that the building that was built like a pyramid was now a white elephant. Rusting and rotting away it served as storage for surplus desks, chalkboards and chairs, and as homes for birds, lizards, roaches, and other creatures. I wondered aloud, how could they allow such a building to go to waste? Aren't such buildings supposed to last several lifetimes? I walked out of the auditorium, out of the school grounds, almost as disturbed as the morning Mr. Castro had expelled the student from Laborie. I thought: we are definitely in need of a commission of inquiry.

A Historical Landmark

The commission of inquiry aside, The Vieux Fort Secondary School turned Vieux Fort Comprehensive Secondary School is nothing less than a historical and socioeconomic landmark. Built by the Americans in 1962, as part of an appeasement effort for their wartime occupation of Vieux Fort, the Vieux Fort Secondary School started as a six-classroom institution. A plaque on one of the original buildings of the school reads:

Vieux Fort Secondary School

*This building and equipment were provided through the joint efforts of the government of St. Lucia and of the United States of America
(a symbolic handshake image)
Constructed 1962*

Back then Vieux Fort was little more than a sleepy fishing village and a somewhat commercial center for its hinterlands. The town's only claim to fame was the American military base, and its only infrastructure worthy of mention was what the Americans had laid down—St. Jude's Hospital, the Dock, the Jetty, Beane Field Airport, the water plant, two bridges. St. Lucia was still five years from statehood and seventeen years removed from independence. The formation of the UWP Party and the commencement of Mr. Compton's reign, first as Chief Minister, then as Premier and later as Prime Minister, would have to wait for another two years. Seroc, the Canadian construction company, was yet to have lengthened Beane field Airport into Hewanorra International Airport. Winera, the Brewery, Halcyon Days (now Club Med) were still waiting to be born. The notion of Vieux Fort as an industrial zone was not yet even in conception. The system of three Junior Secondary Schools (in Vieux Fort, Soufriere and Micoud), a Canadian generosity, later turned into full secondary schools, was still twelve years away. The immediate surroundings of the school—La Resource, Derriere Morne, La Tourney, St. Judes—was still a maze of tamarind, guava, and mango trees sprinkled with a few scattered houses. Rice was still being cultivated a few hundred yards away.

When the school first opened its doors, it was one of only three secondary schools on the island—St. Mary's College and St. Joseph's Convent being the other two—and the only secondary school outside

Castries. Then, for students stretching from Praslin to Victoria, the Vieux Fort Secondary School was the only viable option to a secondary school education. Commuting to Castries was out of the question. The days of speedy transits that zoom to Castries within the hour, available at any hour of the day, which have become health hazards, were years ahead. These were back in the days when a trip to Castries was a whole day affair, when one had to get up three-thirty in the morning to catch the only bus traveling to Castries. A bus fitted with wooden benches, a wooden body, and a hood crowded with luggage and produce. A bus filled with the aroma of saltfish, flour, sugar, butter and much more. If one got up half an hour late one would have to wait the next day to get to Castries. In those days the buses passed and stopped at every village on the coast, because that was the only road that led to Castries. The buses literally crawled up the hills, and every time they changed gear at the top of a hill you were forced to hold your breath because it seems that the bus would not make it, that it would roll back downhill. Upon arrival in Castries, one was more worn out than if one had spent a whole morning working under the bananas.

This being the only transportation to Castries, commuting back and forth to school was unthinkable. To attend school in Castries one would have had to find an uncle, an aunt, a cousin where one could stay. And even when one could find such accommodations, one's problems were just beginning because in those days people from the out districts saw a trip to Castries, don't talk of living there, as a daunting and foreboding task. So with the difficulty involved in attending school in Castries, only the well-to-do and the most determined of parents succeeded in their children acquiring a secondary school education. Yet not only did the Vieux Fort Secondary School bring secondary education to the South, it was the first secondary school on the island that wasn't administered by nuns and priests, that wasn't under the control of the Roman Catholic Church or any denomination for that matter. Therefore, in many ways, the Vieux Fort Secondary School marked the beginning of the democratization of secondary school education in St. Lucia.

Unlike the St. Mary's college, the Vieux Fort Secondary School does not boast of Nobel Laureates, at least not yet, but it can boast of a Prime Minister, and that may be close enough. Imagine this. Without this American charity, Dr. Kenny D. Anthony might have missed out on a secondary school education, Doctor might not have been part of his name, Vieux Fort may have missed out on a district representative, and the country of a Prime Minister. Imagine how many students the Vieux Fort Secondary School has graduated over the years that otherwise would have never seen the inside of a secondary school. It is difficult now to fully convey how valuable a secondary school education was in those days. Secondary School graduates were elites of the society. No matter if one graduated with just one GCE Pass or none at all one was guaranteed a good paying job. A secondary school education was a ticket out of the banana fields, a means to avoid working as a store clerk, to avoid all forms of manual labor. The phenomenon we have now of hundreds of secondary school graduates with plenty of CXC Passes walking about without jobs was unheard of, was unimaginable. Today most of the captains of industry and the people running government departments and ministries are those of Dr. Kenny Anthony's and my generation who back then were able to secure a secondary school education.

Academics, however, are not the only contributions of the Vieux Secondary School to St. Lucian society. Since its inception the school has been a dominant force in sports, and to this day it continues to dominate track and field. If the memory of the sports director at the Vieux Fort Comprehensive Secondary School serves him well, over the past fifteen years the school has won the inter-secondary school track and field competition no less than twelve times. As to be expected, the school has produced some outstanding national athletes. Three such athletes come to mind. Ronald Promesse, Bernard "Fox" Henry, and John "Burtle" Erysthee. Mr. Ronald Promesse is the current holder of the national record in the 100 and 200 meter races and he will be representing St. Lucia at the Sidney Summer Olympics. To this day Mr. Bernard "Fox" Henry is the only St. Lucian to have won a gold medal (the 1500-meter race) in a track event at the Carifta Games. Yet in that same year he also won a silver medal in the 800-meter race. Beginning in 1973 when Mr. John "Burtle" Erysthee first started competing at the senior national level, not only did he keep setting new national records in the 800 and 1500-meter races but right up to 1985

when he departed for Mexico he was virtually unbeatable in this two distances. But Mr. Erysthee isn't done yet. Well into his forties, he recently returned from Mexico to take part in national trials to represent St. Lucia in the marathon and other long distance races at the Sidney Olympics. Several weeks ago, as part of his marathon training regiment, he ran nonstop from Vieux Fort to Castries in under seven hours.

Today, thanks to new technology that has turned recording into a simple and inexpensive affair (at least compared with the past), the music industry (production of CDs) in St. Lucia is flourishing. This year, for example, long before the sensational Lady Spice had won the calypso crown, and in so doing created history, the calypsos of the season were already recorded, burnt or stamped on CDs and were out on the national and international market. All music has breeding grounds, and a little-known fact is that the Vieux Fort Secondary School has served as a major breeding ground for music in the south, a phenomenon from which the whole island is benefitting. It was from there that Halcyon Steel was launched, ushering in a new era of steel band in Vieux Fort. Then, so new was steel band in Vieux Fort that myself (still preteen) and many other Vieux Fortians were amazed, dazzled, that those teenaged secondary school goers could beat so many pans at the same time yet play music so sweet. To my childhood, underexposed Seventh Day Adventist eyes it was nothing less than magic. Halcyon Days Hotel was probably Halcyon Steel's first professional gig. I used to love to go there and listen to those guys play magic next to the bean-shaped water pool, next to the Atlantic Ocean. So much so that up till today I cannot separate pan music from Halcyon Days. When I think of Halcyon Days, I think of pan. When I think of pan, I think of Halcyon Days.

It was also at the Vieux Fort Secondary School that the seeds of Survival, many of whose members were also in Halcyon Steel, were sown and germinated. A Survivals that later, in the middle and late 70's, would rival Tru Tones as the best band on the island, and when, notwithstanding the present proliferation of musical recordings, one added Magic Circle and some of the other bands of the times to the mix, you had what many would consider the brightest musical era in St. Lucia. Many St. Lucian recording artists will tell you that these days it is difficult to find instrument players who can do justice to their recordings. HiFi's, sound systems, DJ's, now the musical rulers of the land, have pushed too many instrument players out of a job. Besides, we have entered an era where very little new music is being created. Dub and Hip-hop artists are more often than not doing their thing on music they didn't create, and many other singers are just regurgitating the works of past masters. It is shameful how non-creative and imitative music has become. The likes of Bob Marley must be turning in their graves. The musical giants that now walk the land—Monty Maxwell (Survivals), Mervin Wilkinson (Survivals), Boo Hinkson (Tru Tones), Luther Francois, all came out of the era before Dub and Rap, and before sound systems and DJ's came to rule the land. Sang by Mervin Wilkinson, Survivals 1979 reggae single, *Let Us Start a Revolution*, remains a defining moment in St. Lucia's musical history.

The Vieux Fort Secondary School as a musical seed bed is not just a relegation of history. The tradition continues. Pianist, Mahurney Augier, a past student of and teacher at the Vieux Fort Comprehensive Secondary school, another product of Survivals, leads the school's jazz band. Last year I was privileged for the first time to listen to them as they entertained teachers, parents and graduates of the Plain View Combined School, where I was asked to give the graduation address. If I had not known that it was the school band performing, I would have sworn that the band, which was calming my anxiety over the speech I was to deliver, was a professional jazz band. Since then I have listened to them several other times, including Jazz in the South, yet I have had no cause to revise my first impressions. At a recent poetry and drama event held jointly by Jako Productions and the Vieux Fort Town Council, Rafique Dolor, a member of the school band, gave a flute solo performance that was more poetic than even the poetry of the poets themselves.

Things Fall Apart

Much has changed since the Americans first built the secondary school that to them was just a token of

their appreciation for the British allowing them to use Vieux Fort as a military base, but to St. Lucia and the South in particular an institution that has changed lives. Now there are more than twenty secondary schools on the island, half of which are located in the Castries area. Even Anse Ger, a rural community in the district of Micoud, that no one could mistake for a town, now boasts of a secondary school. Last year these secondary schools graduated more than 2080 students. Gone are the days when just getting to school (our feet being our only carriage, ala Bob Marley), and not exams, was the challenge of attending school. Now, no matter how short the distance, buses zoom children back and forth to school. Now, when someone sees you walking, they think you are crazy.

Not only has the number of schools changed, but some existing schools have expanded many fold. Take the Vieux Fort Secondary School turn the Vieux Fort Comprehensive Secondary School, for example. It now has two campuses, A and B. Campus A used to house the Vieux Fort Junior Secondary School, but now it represents Form One and Form Two of the Vieux Fort Comprehensive Secondary School. Campus A alone occupies twenty-five classrooms and has an enrollment of more than 600 students. On Campus B, the initial six-classroom American generosity has expanded into a fifty-seven-classroom complex, and the initial one hundred and fifty (guestimate) secondary school students have grown into a thousand (946 students in 1999) strong secondary school student population. Yet Campus B isn't just an expanded number's game. It has expanded in function. To begin with, as the name suggests, it is now a comprehensive secondary school, meaning that it offers a wider range of subjects, including trade related courses like architecture, woodwork and mechanics. Furthermore, it now boasts of both an A-Level and a post-secondary school program where students can enroll in business, secretary, and carpentry and joinery programs. So in 1999, besides its 946 secondary school students, Campus B had another 285 students in search of A-Levels (122 students) and post-secondary school (163 students) certificates. Also, in that same year, it graduated 278 secondary school students, 50 A-Level students and 23 post-secondary business students.

In general, keeping in tune with population growth, schools in St. Lucia, be it primary or secondary schools, are no more the five or six-classroom enterprises they used to be. More often than not, they are twenty or more classroom institutions where, unlike in the past, the teachers may find it impossible to know the names of all the students, don't talk of knowing the parents of them all.

Since my initial tour of the Vieux Fort Comprehensive Secondary School, I have been speaking to teachers, members of the Student Teachers Association (PTA), members of the Vieux Fort Town Council, parents, and just about anyone willing to talk about education, and to most the size and function of our schools are not the only things that have changed. Utmost on the minds of many are the conduct of children and students now-a-days, and the perceived island wide deterioration in educational standards.

Students, I am told, have no respect for teachers or any authority for that matter. They curse and carry on any kind of conversation in the presence of teachers. Students cut classes at will, their attention spans are shorter than that of a newly born, their minds on anything but what's being taught. Students can barely read and write, they cannot express themselves on paper even if one were to pay them to. I am told at the Vieux Fort Secondary Comprehensive School, in broad daylight, during school hours, students are having sex in classrooms. One student standing at the door on guard, while the couple gets busy inside. Not only are students rude and talk back to teachers, they threaten teachers with bodily harm, even death. And as the student cutlass attack on the school principal on Campus B suggests, some of the threats are not empty ones. I was told that many other students knew of the student's intentions on the school principal, yet no one reported the matter to the principal or any other school authority. Gangs, I am told, have entered our schools. Drugs and alcohol are rampant.

Teachers, I am told, are now viewing school and the classroom as war zones. The objective is to spend as little time as possible on campus, in the classrooms, with the students. Go teach your courses, then bunker down in staff rooms until the bell signals it's time to go home. The conditions at our schools, I am

told, are forcing many teachers into premature retirement, and those who are too far from retirement age, who have just began teaching, see the classroom as a place to endure on their way to better things. I am told that the era of dedicated teachers looking forward to a lifetime of shaping the minds and hearts of the nation is over.

With rising anxiety one parent told me that some post-secondary school students (at the Vieux Fort Comprehensive Secondary School), many of whom are well into their twenties and have been working for several years, draw up lists of secondary school girls with whom they wish to have sex, and with great deliberation they go about seducing the immature girls, after each conquest crossing the victim's name off their lists, much like gun slingers of the American West notching their guns after each shoot out, or American Indians collecting scalps on the warpath. Even rape, student on student rape, I am told, have taken residence in our schools. I got the impression that our schools are more about gangs, drugs, sex, and violence than about learning and education; that our schools have become ghettos in which it is the students and not the teachers who are in control.

After hearing all this I said to myself, "no wonder there is a commission of inquiry, maybe we should investigate not just this one school but education on the island as a whole. The commission has completed its investigation, but its report isn't out yet, so I have no idea of its recommendations and I am even less knowledgeable of how many, if any, of its recommendations the government will implement. Nevertheless, from my conversations with people, one thing was clear, the conduct of our students was at the center of what was wrong with our schools.

So I asked myself, "is the behavior of our young people intrinsically different from that of my generation when we were their age, and if so what has caused the change?" I asked this question because I am always wary when people in middle age and beyond make the well-used pronouncement "*manmai apwézan mové*, children now-a-days are wicked." Because it seems to me that when I was growing up my parents and others of their generation said the same thing of me and my generation, and rest assured my parents' parents had said the same thing of them, and now my generation is saying the same thing of their children, and rest assured that our children will be saying the same thing of their children.

In my days at the Vieux Fort Secondary School my impression was that the school was the wildest secondary school on the island. The location of the school—away from the town, away from civilization (so to speak), in the middle of guava, mango and tamarind bushes, with plenty of space for children to roam—was probably what gave me that impression. Or maybe the school had taken after Mr. Gregory Williams (renamed Castro), its then erratic and radical principal.

However the reason, I do remember that in my days students did drink alcohol, smoke marijuana, and were definitely having sex under the mango and guava bushes. During end of terms, I felt left out, I felt out of place, I felt like an outsider, because my strict Seventh Day Adventist upbringing didn't allow me to join the other students as they partied, drank their rum, smoked their ganja, and engaged in the other happenings called having a good time. During those times I was so miserable that I used to curse the day I was born an Adventist. So it seems to me that my generation wasn't as tamed and well behaved as they would like their children to believe.

The Environment has Changed

Some sociologists would argue that depict an environment and they will describe the behavior of the people living in that environment, or alternatively, describe the behavior of a people and they can go back and characterize the environment that gave rise to that behavior. So if, as the consensus seems to suggest, we agree that our students are behaving worse than ever before, it may be fruitful to examine what changes

have taken place in the physical and socioeconomic environment that has caused this worsening of behavior.

The Environment has changed. An obvious change is a much larger and much more mobile population. Schools have gotten more populous, principals and teachers have many more students than in the past to deal with, and, despite the proliferation of secondary schools, students and teachers of any one school are coming from a wider geographical area. Our schools have become more impersonal, and less trackable. Teachers are no more necessarily living in the same town or community as their students. The connection or bonds between teacher and students, teacher and parents, have weakened. When I attended secondary school, I knew by name and place of residence of just about every student at school. This is no longer possible, there are just too many students to keep track of. The teachers are overloaded and overworked.

The Environment has changed. What this means is that parents need to become more involved in the education of their children. The days when parents could simply give their child a carrier of food, or bread and cheese or bread and butter, or sometimes nothing at all, and set the child on foot to be on his or her merry way to school, and the teachers would take it over from there, and the parents could rest assured that their child was well on his or her way to the nice tie and collar job that they had wished for themselves but had never gotten the opportunity, are gone. If parents still have that same approach to education, then they shouldn't be surprised if after five years of transportation, food, and clothing expenses, their secondary school graduate can read and write no better than the grandparents who never made it to primary school.

The environment has changed. The teachers can no longer do it all, but have the parents picked up the slack. From my understanding the opposite may be happening. Whereas in the past when a school punished a student, at home the student received yet another set of punishment for having given the school cause to dish out punishment in the first place, now (I am told) that the same parents that would not attend teacher-parent meetings even if they were paid to, would make a special trip to quarrel and curse out the teachers, and if still dissatisfied would make a special trip to the office of their district representative.

The Environment has changed. For the first time in our history we have a generation of young people raised on television. In short, an American TV generation. No matter how deep under the bananas we live, just about every one of us have ready access to a television set. Yet one would be hard pressed to find any other activity that is both as alluring and mindless as television watching. The biggest enemy of young people is time, boredom, not having anything fun and exciting to do, therefore they are always killing time, killing the enemy. Suddenly, here comes the dream box, promising a solution to their problem of time. Given young people's infinite need for entertainment, in the past a parent knew that no matter that their child is at play all day, when night falls the child will have little choice but to pick up a book because at nights this was one of the few activities available for children to keep themselves entertained, occupied in a pleasurable way. But with television there is no guarantee that whether it is morning, noon or night the child will ever pick up a book. What is more likely to happen is that homework will remain untouched, books will remain unopened. Boredom, the absence of excitement causes the eyelids to close early. With television not only are books likely to remain unopened, but people who need a good night's rest to do justice to the following day's schooling are likely to spend all night watching television. If parents think that homework and story books can beat out Jerry Springer, The Young and the Restless, Professional Wrestling, late night X-Rated DBS and HTS, then they need to think again. If tops, kites, rope-skipping, bird-hunting, *kabouwé*, marbles, have all fallen by the wayside, what should one expect of books, and lessons.

The environment has changed. To what extent are parents monitoring not only how much TV their children watch but also what programs? To what extent are TV curfews being placed on children, to what extent are parents forcing their children to sit and read, not in front of the television, but somewhere with fewer distractions? What is being done to counteract the negative influences of American television? I

could be wrong, but I think that the negative American television programs have greater detrimental effects on our children than on American children. I say this because children from the culture that produced the programs are better able to decipher the programs, put them into context, and take them less as givens than our children who the best they can do is drink up the programs wholesale.

The environment has changed. Television is not the only new source of distractions that our children now face. In more affluent homes, those with computers, besides television, books and lessons now have to compete with the Internet and computer games. Stores stay open much later than before. There are malls at which to hang out. On weekends there is a blocko at every corner spinning music, chicken, smoke, rum and obscenity. We now have the Jazz Festival, and just when the Jazz Festival comes to a close, carnival and calypso, bigger than ever before, takes over. Soon after the excitement of calypso and carnival dies down we have Jounen Kwéyòl, and then comes Christmas and New Year's followed by Independence, which then leads us into the Jazz Festival. Besides these month-long celebrations, we seem to have more holidays than any country in the world. Sometimes I get the impression that there is a year-round, nonstop party going on.

The environment has changed. I like a good party myself, so it is not like I am complaining. However, If I have a complaint, it is that most of the entertainment the island offers is of the loud music and whining type. I think there isn't enough of wholesome entertainment like poetry, drama, dance theater, and so on, to balance off the other entertainment that I would argue does little to uplift the spirit. It seems like we have the church and bacchanal, nothing inbetween. As I said before, the greatest enemy of young people is time. So as not to be bored they will do anything, go anywhere. If all what we have in place for them to do is whining and drinking, then that is what they are going to do. I keep hearing that all what the youths are up to these days is hanging out, cursing, fighting, drinking–bacchanal. So my question is, where are the alternative sources of entertainment that we the adults are putting in place for the youths?

The Environment has changed. One point I hope the commission of inquiry brings out is that the amount of resources, especially administrative resources, devoted to the Vieux Fort Comprehensive Secondary School is too far below its needs. For example, although the function of the school has tripled, and the student population has increased many-fold, the school still operates on two full time administrators--a principal at campus A and another at campus B. One can even argue that Campus B has less than one fulltime administrator because the current principal is an acting principal, and that has been so for some time now. It seems to me a more appropriate structure is to have a vice principal for campus A, a vice principal for the secondary school at Campus B, another vice principal for the A-Level and Post-secondary School programs (possibly one for each of them), and a principal to whom all the vice principals would report.

The Environment has changed. In my day, I suspect that if children could have gotten away with having sex in the classrooms, they would have probably used the classrooms instead of the bushes. That didn't happen (or at least I never heard of it) because back then the school was small enough such that principal and teachers could adequately monitor students' in and outs. This days given the size of the student population and the number of classrooms to be monitored, one full time administrator is just not enough to keep things under control. It seems that we are putting greater burdens on our schools, demanding more out of them, yet providing them fewer resources. If we agree that students have gotten worse, should we not also agree that schools need more administrative resources.

The Environment has changed. We give much lip service to the value of education, but to what extent does our actions support our words. To what extent are our children calling our bluff. They come to a school with classroom windows completely missing, doors without handles, classrooms with dirty walls covered with graffiti, making one wonder how could children learn under such dreary and depressing conditions, and how could children respect teachers when next to the very blackboards on which the teachers are sharing their knowledge are scribbles like *Niggaz Strikes; Black Stud; Cookoon Mama; All*

Jamets in here please give a fucking shout; Blacks, the Blackest fucker around; Ras 2 Sick 2 Cure? An auditorium that was supposed to last several lifetimes has been allowed to deteriorate beyond repair. We complain that at all hours of the day groups of students are seen hanging out both within and outside the school's compound. Yet the wire fence that would have allowed the school to better monitor if not control the students in and out have been allowed to fall down and become nonexistent. The bricks (on which plenty of money was spent) brought in to fence the track and field grounds have been left to crumble and return to sand. The fences are not only to monitor the movement of students, but also to keep danger away in this time of rising crime and rape. Should we not be protecting the future of the country?

The Environment has changed. Vision was already the most dominant of all our senses, yet television, computers and the Internet are turning us into an even more visual society. So what does this, combined with the fact that few things can captivate the senses as can television, tell us about classroom instruction? Well one thing it suggests is that to hold students' attention teachers would have to make increasing use of visual aids—the computer, the Internet, video tapes. Well, from my observation, teachers are no better equipped with visual aids now than then.

The Environment has changed. A more visual society also suggests that we need better libraries with a greater variety of resource material. I visited the library. The librarian said that the library was much too small for the needs of the school. When A-Level or post-secondary school students were using the library, there was no room left for the secondary school students, so effectively they are attending school without the benefit of a library. Many of the library's encyclopedias and other resource books got there by way of donations and most were years out of date. The librarian's opinion was that most of the books in the library were so outdated that they needed to be discarded. It appeared that while the school has expanded quantitatively, a case could be made that it has contracted qualitatively.

The Environment has changed. Talk is cheap. We can keep talking about the value of education, our children are the future, and so on, but if the children don't see concrete evidence of the value we place on education—clean well-painted classrooms, libraries filled with updated resource books, school grounds and buildings well kept and maintained, abundance of computers and other visual aids resources, highly motivated and concerned teachers and principals—then we are wasting both our time and the young people's. Let the children see, not hear, how much we value education.

The Environment has changed. A few months ago I was asked to give an educational motivation talk to Form Three students of a secondary school. Off course, I accepted, but my first thought was how could I succeed where teachers trained to do this sought of thing have failed. Furthermore, my thinking was that it was impossible to fully convey to teenagers the value of education. Partly because most things can only be appreciated upon looking back, and partly because teenagers are too preoccupied with the many exciting yet troubling changes taking place inside them to contemplate on such abstract notions as the value of education. To my mind, less effort should be placed on preaching the value of education and more on creating environments conducive to learning. In addition, we should reward good performances, and take children to work places where they can visually link education with jobs, income, the good life. Immediate rewards are important because we are dealing with a more affluent group of people who are probably much less willing than were their parents to endure sacrifices for the distant notion of a better life. Focus should be placed on accomplishing and rewarding tasks.

The Environment has changed. Another issue that should concern us is the school curriculum. The Prime Minister, and rightly so, often speaks of the need to forge a national identity, a sense of nationhood, a sense of what it means to be a St. Lucian, a willingness to buy into the notion that we are all participants in the drive to build a better St. Lucia. But I can think of no better way to instill a sense of nationhood than a study of our history, especially the part of our history when we, and not the Europeans, started having some say in how we run our lives. I would argue that a knowledge of our history and a sense of our national identity is even more critical to our well-being today than in any other time in history. Because

globalization, trade liberalization, whole sale exposure to US culture, US television, ease of travel do nothing but erode the cultural identity of small, outward looking states like St. Lucia. The only way to counteract this phenomenon is to have a strong sense of who we are as a people and of those who came before us. Yet I look at our school curriculum and I see little attention, beyond what dates we gained statehood, independence, and so on, and who first led us there, to St. Lucian history. Yes, we study West Indian history, but not much of St. Lucian history.

The Environment has changed. A few years ago I was doing research for a novel, *Death by Fire*, I was writing at the time. I found several history books on St. Lucia. *Outlines of St. Lucia's History*, by Rev. C. Jesse; *St. Lucia: Historical, Statistical, and Descriptive*, by Henry H. Breen; *Call that George*, by Augustus Justin; *Historical Review of the Castries Municipality, From 1785 to 1967*, by Francis J. Carasco, OBE; *St. Lucia Historical Sites*, by Robert J. Devaux; and *A History of the Roman Catholic Church in St. Lucia*, by Charles Gachet, F.M.I. This was the first time that I became aware that there were history books on St. Lucia. My thought was, don't tell me those books were there all the time and they never made them available to us at school. No wonder most of our history books are written by non-St. Lucians. How could we have any desire to write our own history when our schools never gave us the impression that we had a story, a history, worth telling. I was in Toronto at a St. Lucian party, and I mentioned that I was thinking of writing a historical novel on St. Lucia. One response was, "what history we have to write about?" Mr. Prime Minister, *there goes the forging of a national identity*. I remember how thrilled I was when I first came across Mr. Walcott's poetry. Here for the first time I was reading about myself, here was my countryman talking about me, giving voice to my experiences. What better way to instill national identity than this?

A Future at Stake

Today there is a revolution going on. But unlike many revolutions of the past, this one isn't about slogans, wars, uprisings, and bloodshed. This revolution is about information, knowledge and technology. This revolution is called the information revolution. The essential nature of the industrial revolution was that machine power had replaced many tasks done by man and beast and as a result how society went about producing goods and services changed and the speed at which it did so increased tremendously. So what is the essential character of this information revolution? Well, as the name infers the essence of it is information. Because of the computer we are generating, analyzing and storing greater volumes of information, and we are doing all this at unprecedented speeds. Consequently, the way and speed with which we are going about producing goods and services have changed, the way we interact has changed, the way we speak has changed, even the way we think has changed. The scare that surrounded the Y2K phenomenon was a clear indication of how pervasive the computer has become in our daily lives. The computer flies our aircrafts, controls our vehicles, runs our electronic devices and home appliances. Banks use it to record and store information on our savings, loans and deposits. The government uses it to track our births, deaths, and taxes. Our teachers use it to prepare their lessons. I used it to write this article.

In the industrial revolution it was machines and industrial processes that drove the revolution. In the information revolution it is computers and information systems. We can think of the computer as hardware and software. Hardware has to do with the wiring of the computer, it is everything you see when you look inside a computer. Software is what you don't see. Software is a set of instructions that directs the computer into doing certain tasks. Without software the computer can do nothing. If the computer is at the center of the information revolution, then software is at the center of what the computer does. Still, what is the essential character of software? Software is nothing more than encoded instructions, encoded

information, encoded knowledge. So essentially knowledge is what is driving this revolution, and this is why education, the accumulation of knowledge, is more important to the economic well-being of nations than ever before. It is true that knowledge was also what drove the industrial revolution, but it was knowledge as translated into machines and processes. In the information revolution it is knowledge as translated into knowledge. Knowledge is the beginning and the end, the objective and the goal, the motive and the action.

In days gone by nations counted their wealth by how much territory and natural resources they commanded and how many slaves and serfs they possessed. As the Soviet Union found out, albeit the hard way, this is no more the case. The ongoing revolution has shifted the basis of wealth from that of natural resources to that of knowledge, information, and technology. If one has any doubt of that, take a look at Japan. The Second world War started when Germany, headed by Hitler, started invading and taking over other European countries. Italy and Japan sided with Hitler, and the rest of the world combined forces against them. Japan's interest in the war was in taking over countries in the Pacific to gain access to raw materials. Japan, Italy and Germany were defeated, and Japan and Europe were devastated. In fact, the war against Japan ended after the Americans dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Osaka. Japan realized that it had lost the war to America because of superior American technology. So after the war, ironically aided by America, Japan embarked on a massive industrialization and technological program. They took western machines and products apart and learned to make them better. They sent people to Europe and America to watch, asked questions, photograph and tape-record technological information. Japan's concerted efforts at gaining technological knowledge paid off handsomely. In 1950, five years after the war, Japan made only 32,000 vehicles, which amounted to less than two days of American manufacture. Yet by 1980, Japan was exporting six million vehicles, and had surpassed America as the biggest car maker in the world. Today Japan is a clear world leader in auto technology. Before 1945, made in Japan meant low quality, inferiority, but today made in Japan is associated with quality, class, top performance. Japan produces not only cars but most high-tech goods. They make computers, cameras, precision machinery and instruments, robotics and electronics. So successful has Japan become, that it is now the second largest economy in the world, second only to the United States.

In this new era, never before have small nation states like St. Lucia been so well positioned. Because if there is one thing the shift of the basis of wealth creation from natural resources to knowledge has done is to level off the playing field. Suddenly, anyone with a computer and a modem, be it in the middle of the banana field, has access to the same information as someone on Wall Street, in the middle of Manhattan, in the middle of New York City, the heartthrob of America.

No country epitomizes this new revolution than America, and no company than Microsoft. Pick up any one of Microsoft's products and what you would hold in your hand is a CD, a piece of metal thinner than a coin and no larger than a saucer. A piece of metal worth mere pennies. Yet Microsoft generates more than twenty billion dollars in annual revenues, placing it among the 100 largest companies in the US. Bill Gates, its founder and principal owner, is reported to be the richest private individual in the world. So what about those CD's that is so valuable? It is the information stored on them, information that drives computers, information that drives the computing world. Information, that's all it is. More than 80 percent of computers in the world use the Microsoft software that runs computers, the software that all other software interface with, the software that acts as the language or better yet the operating system of the computer. This operating system is called Windows.

So how did this Company called Microsoft and this software called Windows began? It all began when Bill Gates and a few of his buddies got hold of some old computer and started tinkering with it in his parents' basement. So what is the implication of all this to St. Lucia? It means that any one of our students now gracing the classrooms of our secondary schools can start tinkering with a computer, and then twenty years later St. Lucia could have a computer software company generating billions of dollars and rivaling,

surpassing even, the Microsoft's of the world. Because it doesn't take natural resources, it doesn't require a great deal of electricity, initially it doesn't require a large capital outlay. All what the student needs is a computer and some knowledge.

Southwestern Bell (SWBell), a large telecommunication company in the US, the company I used to work for, out-sources some of its computer programming to people in India and in some of the ex-states of the Soviet Union. Via E-mail the company explains what it needs done, and again via E-mail computer programmers in India send back the completed programs. Both parties benefit. SWBell cuts employee cost by not having to provide medical and other employee benefits, and the Indian programmers get US salaries without ever having to leave home. There is nothing to prevent St. Lucians from entering into such arrangements with US companies. Nothing except having the necessary programming skills and possessing the relevant knowledge.

If this era represents the best of times for small, resource-poor states like St. Lucia, then it may also represent the worst of times. Aided by computers, national, cultural and market boundaries are rapidly disappearing. Now every six months the makers of computers are coming out with faster and more versatile computers. Every day some company comes out with a new computer and electronic gadget. The peril we face is that knowledge and information is being generated at such unprecedented rates that the amount of information we need to know and the level of education that is required to function well is much greater than before and is increasing as I write.

In my time, with just a few GCE Passes you could go directly into primary or secondary school and teach, you could enter most business offices and start work, and before that, in say my father's time, a standard six level of education carried you very far. Not anymore. The country is crowded with secondary school graduates with a bunch of CXC Passes who cannot find work. Today, to assure themselves of jobs, students need to plan on attending nursing schools, business schools, trade and technical schools, colleges, universities. As the information revolution rushes ahead and as the nation progresses, the jumping bar gets higher. Soon, to teach at primary and secondary schools one would need a college degree.

In my father's time one was considered educated if one had a standard six certificate. When I graduated from secondary school a quarter of a century ago one was considered reasonably educated with a secondary school education. However, today because of this information revolution there is so much information to access that one can hardly consider oneself educated with just a secondary school education. To consider oneself educated one almost have to study beyond secondary school. The first leader of our nation, Mr. George Charles, had only a secondary school education. Our second leader, Mr. John Compton, had a bachelor's degree in Law and economics, now our Prime Minister, Dr. Kenny Anthony, holds a doctorate in Law.

Lack of education is transacting a tremendous cost on the nation. So many people are not only illiterate or functionally illiterate but can barely understand English, the country's official language. So much so that businesses, the government, and just about any institution that deals with the public have to spend vast amounts of resources on just trying to explain to people the simplest of procedures and policies. Institutions cannot simply print brochures and expect the public to be informed. When come to loans, bank accounts, etc., banks have to arbitrarily make decisions for some of their clients because the fine points of such things as the computation of interest are beyond the grasps of many. People are robbed without ever knowing that they are being robbed. I am amazed at the extent to which people does misinterpret government policies and it makes one wonder how can we go forward with this level of ignorance. The lack of education puts a tremendous burden on management. For things to go smoothly even the simplest of tasks has to be managed to the last detail. It would be interesting to find out how often things have to be redone, how much delay, how much wastage that results from the inability of people to understand and follow directions. I think that education or the lack of it accounts for over half our problems. Therefore,

despite the malls that are mushrooming, the cars that are running out of roads, and the mansions springing on our hilltops, it is futile talking about development without a focus on education.

A few years ago, I attended COMDEX in Las Vegas, Nevada. COMDEX is the largest computer show in the world. All the world's powerhouses and not so powerhouses in computer and communication technology were present. Cutting edge computing technology of all kinds were on display. Whites and Asians were in the majority. I searched and searched to see if I would find one person from Africa. But I found none. It occurred to me then that if we were not on this train, we would lose all hope of ever catching up.

During the Gulf War, coined *Desert Storm* by the Americans, I sat in front of my TV completely captivated by the US smart bombs. I was amazed how the US military could stay far away on the ocean and completely take out a country, and that country couldn't even begin to retaliate. Though I had supported *Desert Storm*, my overwhelming thought was that the White race or the Chinese race could completely obliterate the black race, and we could do nothing about it, because we didn't possess any atomic bombs, we didn't have the technology, we didn't have the know-how, we didn't have the knowledge.

One thing that strikes a visitor to St. Lucia is how young a population we have. Nearly a third of our population is under the age of fifteen. On school days the sight of multitudes of children in pink and brown, black and white, yellow and grey, orange and checkered, some bobbing and weaving among traffic, some emerging from the banana foliage, some skipping along rural roads, full of motion, sound and eagerness, reminding me of when the world was freshly created, fills me with a kind of joy. Yet I cannot but worry about what is going to happen to all these young people in this information age. How are we as a nation going to occupy all of them when already so many school leavers cannot find jobs? How are we educating them? Are we teaching them how to create their own employment?

The horror stories that I have heard about our schools and the sad state of affairs at my alma mater, the Vieux Fort Comprehensive Secondary School, have done nothing but add to this worry. Are we neglecting our schools and the education of our children at a time when education is more critical to our economic survival than ever before? Has my generation failed the children? If there is a time when we cannot leave the education of our children just to their teachers, or to the government, the time is now. The time has come for parents, communities, and all concerned parties to start playing an active role in the schooling of their children. If it is a question of funds, the community can help raise funds. If it is a question of administration then parents should not rest until they are satisfied that an adequate administrative staff is in place.

As the flagship educational institution in the South, the Vieux Fort Comprehensive Secondary School has had a glorious past. Nevertheless, great institutions become and remain great not just through the actions of current members but also through the continued involvement of past members. Past students of the Vieux Comprehensive Secondary School can be found in all corners of the island, and I bet in all corners of the world. The time might be ripe for us to come together and help rescue the institution where it all began for us.

Among its recommendations, I hope the commission of inquiry include the following:

- (1) Proper fencing of school grounds;
- (2) Repair and proper maintenance of buildings;
- (3) Repaint classroom walls and keep them graffiti-free;
- (4) Shift the A-Level and Post-Secondary School programs to the Sir Arthur Lewis Community College, and leave the Vieux Fort Secondary Comprehensive School to stand alone as a secondary school;
- (5) However, if the school is to remain as is, staff it with at least four full-time administrators;
- (6) Upgrade the library, both in terms of space, books and computer facilities;
- (7) Encourage greater association between parents and teachers;
- (8) Encourage and support Mr. Powlette in his effort to revamp the Past Student Association;
- (9) Provide students and teachers better access to computers and visual teaching aids.