

# Dominican Schools

A Socio-Historical Survey

Mike Police  
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## **Introduction**

The island of Dominica lies almost in the center of the arc of the islands known as the Lesser Antilles. The Nature Isle of the Caribbean, as it is referred to, lies between the islands of Guadeloupe to the north and Martinique to the south. The island is one that is rich in both cultural and physical beauty. The volcanic origin of the island has created rugged mountain peaks in its central areas and narrow beaches along the coastline. The large amount of rainfall, up to 300 inches per year in the wettest areas, is responsible for creating the 365 rivers that traverse the island, as well as maintaining the lush, green vegetation. Dominica's rich cultural heritage can be attributed to the many early influences from the Spanish, French, and British. In this way, the island may be seen as a melting pot of European colonial cultures, which is visible in Dominican society even today. The purpose of this paper is to familiarize the reader with the educational system of Dominica. Because education as an institution is a basic element of any modern society, it must be bound to the larger historical and political events that have shaped such a society. As such, this paper must analyze the events that have helped shape Dominica's current educational system. Beginning with an historical framework, this paper will then describe a typical school day for a Dominican child, and conclude with a discussion of current educational issues being addressed by the island and its people.

## **Historical Framework**

“At about five o’ clock on the morning of 3 November, in the faint light of early dawn, a seaman saw a black mass on the horizon ahead. “Abricas que tierra! Tierra!” “Land! We have sighted land!” The call spread from ship to ship. As soon as the admiral was certain that it was indeed land he called all hands to sing *Salve* and other prayers, giving thanks for so short and safe a voyage. Columbus named the island Dominica, the day being a Sunday.” (Honychurch, 1995). The importance of the European discovery of Dominica cannot be understated. However, it is important to note that indigenous people inhabited the island as early as 3,100 BC. These people would later become known as the Caribs, or more accurately, the Kalinago.

The early Spanish conquests of the Greater Antilles in the 16<sup>th</sup> century are of great importance for several reasons. First, the destruction and enslavement of both the Taino people of Cuba and Puerto Rico

and the Kalinago people of the Windward Islands caused migration to the most inaccessible of the Caribbean islands, namely Dominica. To compensate for this loss of labor, slaves were imported directly from Africa, beginning in 1518 (Honychurch, 1995). These African slaves would become the ancestors of much of the Black population that live in the Caribbean today. The Spanish conquests of the Greater Antilles changed the demographics of Dominica by both concentrating the Kalinago populations and introducing African slaves onto the island.

By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, other European nations began to establish colonies in the Antilles. British merchants were given royal permission to occupy Dominica and other islands located between the latitudes of 10 and 20 degrees north. At the same time, France was also encouraging the establishment of settlements in the Antilles (Perezon, 1993). Through this, however, Dominica remained a stronghold of the indigenous Kalinago. A treaty signed by both Britain and France in 1660 recognized Kalinago possession of St. Vincent and Dominica. After a Kalinago offensive at Antigua in 1676, the English and French tried again to annex Dominica, but their failures resulted in the admission of neutrality of the island in 1686. Despite the failed efforts of widespread European colonization, some French and British families successfully established themselves on Dominica.

Finally, in 1728, the French imposed their occupation on the Kalinago. By 1730, only about 600 Kalinago remained on Dominica, and aggression against colonists had begun to lessen. The Kalinago fled to the most remote and inaccessible parts of the northeastern side of the island.

In 1752 the English captured Dominica. In 1778, during the American War of Independence, France regained control of the island. Dominica remained under French control until 1782, but by 1783 the Treaty of Versailles officially recognized English rule and administration. This period of English rule lasted until independence was declared in 1978.

The first allocation of funds for education on the island came by way of the Mico Charity, a humanitarian group that fought to secure an education for newly liberated people of the West Indies. An amount of 600 pounds was given in 1835 (Honychurch, 1995).

Despite the efforts of the Mico Charity, there were considerable hurdles to the effective expansion of schooling on the island. The rugged mountain terrain and isolation of most villages provided the natural obstacle while language differences- most citizens outside Roseau spoke French patois- and discord

between Catholics and Wesleyans provided the cultural and political obstacles. Furthermore, the plantation lifestyle discouraged parents from sending their children to school; they were needed as labor at home. The failure of the Education Act of 1863 is the result of these obstacles. The government took away from this failure one important lesson. They realized that it would be impossible and inadvisable to exclude the priests from the educational system in a simple Catholic community such as Dominica (Honychurch, 1995). The 1863 act had called for the establishment and operation of secular schools, but this legislation greatly underestimated the paternal influence of the Catholic Priests over the countryside.

A new bill was therefore passed to bring about free cooperation between the Board of Education and the Catholic Priests. This new bill provided for the establishment of schools that would be under the direction of the clergy throughout the island. From this period Catholic elementary schools developed rapidly in all parts of Dominica. However, many of the old problems of expansion continued to persist; attendance remained low and the standard of local education limited.

The establishment of secondary education on the island developed in the late 1800's. The Dominican Grammar School, the first secondary school established on the island, opened its doors in Roseau in 1893. 25 boys were enrolled. According to Lennox Honychurch, Dominican historian, the aim of the grammar school was to educate the sons of the bourgeois families and prepare them for positions within the Dominican Government, positions that were becoming increasingly vacant as more British-born citizens left the island in the late 1800's. The Dominican elite at this time was composed mainly of the Mulatto families, those that possessed both black and white blood. These families were large landowners with the money and social connections to send their children to such schools. Secondary education remained for many years limited to those who lived in the Roseau area. Public transportation did not exist and the cost of boarding a child in the capitol was too great for all but the richest Dominicans.

In the 1960's secondary school attendance rose rapidly and soon thereafter the first rural high school was opened in Portsmouth. With secondary schools in Roseau unable to accommodate their increasing enrollments, parents established the Community High School as a cooperative in 1976. In 1979, a group supported by the Methodist Church opened the St. Andrews High School immediately increasing access to students of all denominations in Northeastern cities of Marigot, Atkinson, and Wesley (Honychurch, 1995).

Meanwhile a continual effort was being made by the government to increase the quality and access of primary education. New, larger schools were being built on the island with the help of Canadian, French, British, and American governments. The establishment of the Teacher's Training College introduced new skills to the teaching service. Figures for the 2000-2001 school year show 61% of current primary school teachers are trained at the Teacher's College.

The 1990's were a period of further educational reform, similar to the trends during the 60's. The past decade marked an undertaking by the government to further increase both the quality of secondary schools and the access to the secondary schools (Edwards, 2002). These measures included the construction of new schools, such as the Castle Bruce High School, which opened in 1999. Reform of the existing curriculum followed, with an added emphasis on entrepreneurial business skills in the secondary schools. These measures have followed an increase in educational funding. Dominica's Education expenditures for 2000-2001 were EC43,152,900; nearly 17% of the governments total yearly expenditures. Today, nearly 150 years after the first Education Act of 1863, there are 65 primary schools serving over 12,000 students annually and 15 secondary schools serving almost 7,000 students annually.

### **School Organization**

The educational system of Dominica is under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth Affairs. Formal schooling may begin as early as 3 years of age, within one of the 79 pre-schools on the island. These pre-schools are funded and operated by the private sector, which usually means one can be found in many of the local village churches. At age 5 a student enters the primary school. The primary level encompasses kindergarten through 6<sup>th</sup> grade. There are currently 65 primary schools on the island with an average annual enrollment of almost 12,000 students. It should be noted that there are 6 private primary schools in Dominica, which enrolled 897 students during the 2000-2001 school year. There are also 5 primary schools that are privately run but publicly assisted. These 5 schools enrolled over 2,000 students in 2000-2001. Primary students study subjects in Math, Language Arts, History, and Art. French is also studied in some private institutions. The school year begins in September and ends in late June. Upon completion of 6<sup>th</sup> grade, a primary student must take the Common Entrance Exam, which will determine if the student continues to the secondary level. A committee of Dominican schoolteachers

prepares the exam. A student must not only pass the entrance exam, but must also score high enough to secure a spot within a secondary school, and the number of seats available to incoming students changes every year. The scores on the exam are ranked, highest to lowest, and the top scoring students are admitted. If 500 seats are open in the upcoming year, the students with the top 500 scores are admitted. While access to secondary education has increased dramatically in the last decade, universal secondary education is not yet a reality, and the Common Entrance Exam is the only criteria by which a student is judged for admission to the secondary level. As late as 1998, only 52% of male students and 68% of female students who took the CEE moved on to high school. Within 3 years those percentages rose to 74% and 81%, respectively. The secondary level of education consists of 5 forms. These forms roughly translate into grade levels, so a secondary student will complete the 5<sup>th</sup> form by age 17 to 18. There are 15 secondary schools in Dominica; 7 that are public, 7 that are publicly assisted, and 1 that is private. A total of 6,731 students were enrolled in these schools in 2000-2001. Students study subjects in Math, Science, English, History, and Foreign Language. There are also a number of after-school activities that students participate in such as Math Club, Chess Club, and Theatre. Dropout rates among secondary school children remains low, with 72 of the 6,700 students quitting before graduation in 2001. As graduation approaches, students wishing to continue into University study must take the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) exam. This council is the regional examining body for the Caribbean nations. The CXC was established to create a uniform exam for use by universities abroad in admissions criteria. Previously, a student's high school grades were the determinant factor in admission. A student wishing to study at the university level on the island has relatively few options. The only university on the island is the Ross Medical School and is not open to secondary school graduates. A student may take distance education courses on the island from the University of the West Indies, but even that option is limited to a few specific subjects. A secondary school graduate with the opportunity to attend college will almost always travel to one of the three campuses of University of the West Indies, located in Jamaica, Trinidad, and Barbados, or, more commonly, abroad to a University in the United Kingdom or the United States.

### **A Typical School Day**

In order to obtain a better understanding of the Dominican School System, I observed a typical classroom setting. Observations were made in Ms. Perkin's 3<sup>rd</sup> grade class at the Pioneer Preparatory School in Canefield, Dominica. The Pioneer School is privately funded, and was established in 1995.

The classroom is fairly large with two ceiling fans to circulate air, as there is no air conditioning in the building. A dry erase board covers the front wall of the class, and student's work is displayed throughout the classroom. In the back corner of the classroom is a carpet, presumably for story time or any group activities. A map of the world and a globe can be found in the same corner. On another wall, a clock is mounted along with a small Dominican flag. Several charts, one that displays the numbers 1 through 100 and one that displays common editing marks, adorn the wall as well. A small desk is set up along the last wall and houses a computer and printer. The student's desks are arranged into 5 groups, with 4 or 5 desks in each group. Ms. Perkins desk is located at the back of the room, behind the student's desks.

The class day begins at 8am. 20 students are enrolled in Ms. Perkins class and 18 are present. 2 students show up within the next 10 minutes. Class begins by checking the homework assignments of the day. First the math assignment is checked. The assignment involves finding the correct cost of several items for which the student in the example has been shopping. Two students are scolded for not bringing their homework to class, and their names are written on the board. After the math assignment is checked, the students put away their math workbooks and begin to check the Language Arts assignment. Thus far, the students have seemed quite eager to answer questions, and the organization of the desks breeds competition among the five student groups.

Ms. Perkins begins to award "points" to the five student groups to ensure discipline. This she does by adding a tick mark to each group number on the board. The students are awarded "points" when they are quiet, organized, efficient, and on task, or based on any other criteria the teacher sees fit. This method of discipline is incredibly effective and the game is played the entire day. The team with the most points at the end of the school day receives greater liberties than the other groups, such as choosing what book to read during story time.

After all homework assignments are checked, Ms. Perkins writes the assignments due for the next day. Approximately 15 minutes are dedicated to explaining the assignments. Directly after explaining the homework assignment the students begin their Language Arts lesson. In their books, *Caribbean Reader*, is

a reading selection about Samuel Morse and his invention, Morse Code. One student begins reading a sentence or two, and then the next student takes over and reads the next few sentences. This goes around the classroom until each student has read from the selection. Once the reading is done, the teacher asks the students to summarize the theme of the reading, and then to state several details from the reading. Then the students are asked to write down 3 facts from the story. This is a group activity, and results in each group securing more facts than the last group. Once again it is evident that this competition breeds cooperation and excellence among the students.

At 9:30am the students begin their math lesson. The lesson today is learning to tell time on the analog clock. Ms. Perkins holds up an analog clock used for teaching and sets the time. The students must write the analog time into numerical form on their individual chalkboards. After several minutes of this exercise, Ms. Perkins seems satisfied with the student's comprehension of analog time and begins teaching the students how to read and write military time. The exercise is to convert analog time into military time. Four students get the first conversion correct. After the students grapple with the new concepts, Ms. Perkins announces that they will continue the lesson next class.

At 10am the students are dismissed for break time. Ms. Perkins gives each student a donut and the children leave for the playground. Every student is now on a break, approximately 130 in total. The older boys and girls play soccer in the field. Many of the younger children sit and eat their lunches at the tables outside. At 10:30, a man rings a hand bell and the students freeze. An announcement is made, unintelligible from my vantage point, and the students rush to the outside sinks to wash off.

When class resumes, a new teacher enters the classroom. I find out her name is Ms. Bouganoesie, the French teacher. She begins her lesson by writing several new vocabulary words on the front board. The words are used in a song that Ms. Bouganoesie plays on tape for the class. The students follow along with the words, which are printed in their French workbooks. The song is about planting cabbage with your hands, but also with your feet, with your elbows and with your ears. After the students memorize the rhythm and lyrics, the teacher leads the class in standing and "planting" the cabbage with the various body parts. Ms. Bouganoesie then administers a quiz of the vocabulary words the students just learned. The quiz has several illustrations of people and requires the students to color in the parts of their bodies that are spoken on a tape recording. The teacher then collects the finished quizzes and French class is over.

At 11:15 the class begins presenting their book reports, which apparently they have been doing for the past several days. Conrad begins the presentations. He speaks quietly and Ms. Perkins asks him to speak louder. After his presentation, Ethan asks a question that is meant to stump Conrad, because he believes Conrad didn't really read the book. Conrad answers the question to the satisfaction of both the teacher and the students. After 6 book reports are presented, the class gets a bathroom break.

At noon the students begin Art class. Normally the students would move to the Art room, but today a large project for the Art Exhibit is being completed there, so class is held in the regular classroom. The assignment is to draw and color the flags of several countries on a small piece of white construction paper. Ms. Perkins informs the class that the best looking flags will be used in the upcoming Art Exhibit. Each student group picks a country, but arguments between students cause the teacher to intervene. The countries to choose from include Great Britain, Australia, Germany, United States, and Dominica. Great Britain and Australia are class favorites. By 12:35 the art projects are done and collected by Ms. Perkins.

The remaining class time is spent reading a book to the students and cleaning up the classroom. The school day ends at 1pm, and the student group with the most "points" is excused from class first.

### **Current Issues and Future Considerations**

During the course of my study of the Dominican school system, there were several issues that received deeper interest and response among those individuals I interviewed. Certainly these issues will continue as topics of concern among the citizens in the years ahead, for they affect the youth of today's Dominica. Moreover, I suggest the following issues as candidates for further research, should any student find interest in obtaining a deeper understanding of Dominica's educational system. This is advantageous because the issues of school violence, the establishment of a State College, and universal secondary education are issues that will continue to affect many developing nations with the expansion of worldwide educational systems.

The issue of school violence is a relatively new concern for the people of Dominica. On April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2002, one sixteen year-old student from St. Andrews High School killed a fellow seventeen year-old schoolmate. According to reports the two boys were friends, but when the victim approached the sixteen year-old that morning, the boy stabbed the victim multiple times in the chest. The child was later allowed

to write a letter of apology to his classmates, and in the letter's closing the child wrote, "Jackie Chan's cousin will return". This has raised suspicions that television violence is to blame for the death at St. Andrews. Currently, much research and investigation is being done to understand the motives and to identify "At-Risk" characteristics to avoid further violence in Dominican schools. A fifteen-minute documentary, "St. Andrews Speaks", has been filmed and distributed to schools throughout the island. The death at St. Andrews has also raised concerns among some Dominicans who believe stricter discipline is needed in the nation's schools. Some individuals also believe the decreasing role of religion in Dominica's public schools is responsible for the "degradation of the moral character" of today's youth. Further research should be done in regards to the issue of school violence on Dominica, as investigation of the St. Andrews incident and reaction from the Ministry of Education is in the preliminary stages.

As I have stated earlier in my report, there are very few options for a student wishing to continue into tertiary education on Dominica. I have also described the alternative options to University education, such as the Dupigny Technical School and the Teacher's College, which are located on the island. Currently, there are plans within the Ministry of Education to create the Dominica State College, which would combine the Technical and Teacher's College as well as the 6<sup>th</sup> form of secondary education. The completion of the State College would bring an increase in quality to all three schools through investments in new educational inputs, facilities, and faculty. The creation of the State College may also bring an increase in prestige to the technical school; apparently many families of high school graduates are ashamed to have their child attend the technical school, even though those graduates are certain to find jobs on the island (Honychurch, 2002). The State College has yet to be established, so research should be of great interest to future students.

The establishment of universal secondary education is perhaps the issue of greatest concern within the Ministry of Education (Edwards, 2002). Currently, students who wish to move onto secondary school must take the Common Entrance Exam. As I reported earlier, this exam is the only criteria for admission to the secondary level. Although there has been a large increase in access to the secondary schools in the past decade, there are plans to abolish the CEE altogether and allow all students to enter the secondary level (Edwards, 2002). This is a slow process, however, because there are currently not enough resources, not enough seats, and not enough schools to support universal secondary education. The Ministry is working

with the government to solve this problem, as expenditures on education have increased over the past 3 years. However, the current economic slowdown looks to jeopardize the goal of universal access in the near future. The issue of universal secondary education is paramount to the citizens of Dominica, and future research should be gathered to assist in reaching this goal.

### **Conclusion**

I first began this project hoping to obtain a greater understanding of Dominica's educational system and the processes that maintain said system. Through an historical analysis, I have gained insight into the cultures that influenced early Dominica. These influences are evident even today, whether one is buying a fresh loaf of French bread in Roseau or traveling to any of the English-named Parishes on the island. I found my observations of the school setting at Pioneer informational and gratifying. I have also included future concerns because I believe further research should be done on the educational system of Dominica. I have no doubt that future students will find their research just as satisfying.

## **Bibliography**

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