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ABSTRACT

Culturally differentiated patterns of behavior among Englishmen and Jamaicans are discussed in this article. The attitudes of Jamaicans toward English concepts of authority, governmental administration, and education reveal potential problems in communication in cross-cultural education programs. (RL)

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'The Smiling Englishman'

AUDREY M. ALLISON

In my article in the Summer 1967 issue of this journal, I mentioned the attitude of many Jamaicans towards the English. An expansion of this remark, together with a description of some of the communication problems I found in Jamaica, may be of use to teachers in their relationships either with newly-arrived children or with Jamaican-born parents.

I found that the awareness of authority was far greater in Jamaican than in English society, a natural consequence of the country's history, perhaps. It might be said that Jamaicans have a love/hate relationship with authority. This is especially evident in the relationships between the middle and working classes. These two classes are extremely sharply defined; differences in shade of colour, language and living standards accentuating this division. I noticed that many working class people found it a great strain to communicate with a member of the middle class. This was especially evident in the 'better' shops and in the Post Offices: a working class person might often wait a long time to be served (there is no queueing system), sometimes hanging back, muttering embarrassedly when his turn came. One extremely unsympathetic official complained that, in answering oral form-filling type questions, many working-class people would give the answer that seemed to be required by the official, resulting in a wildly contradictory document.

I found that many people regarded England with deep respect, as a place of culture where the administration was efficient and incorruptible. Englishmen were regarded with a similar respect, as highly intelligent, well-educated people. At the same time, the English were regarded with mistrust and suspicion: the Jamaican has had experience of colonial administration. In addition to this, there is a difference of social behaviour involved. I noticed that Jamaicans usually expressed the emotions they felt: they smiled when really pleased or happy, they showed their anger, or fear, or sorrow.

The English have the tradition of the stiff upper lip: emotions should be controlled carefully. The English also smile a great deal: smiling is part of English etiquette – in shops, on meeting a stranger, when arguing or dealing with a delicate situation in order to show continuing good-will. I found the Jamaican felt no need for this: shopping transactions, introductions, daily activities were done without smiling: why, indeed, should one smile if one did not feel real pleasure? On one occasion, it was my duty to explain to a teacher a particularly complicated piece of classroom management, which implied a criticism of her previous behaviour in the class. During my explanation, my Jamaican friend stopped me, took me aside and said, 'Audrey, stop smiling! she doesn't trust you'. I recalled that my friend had successfully performed previous explanations with a poker face, rarely looking directly at the teacher. My friend then told me of the phrase 'the smiling Englishman': I later found it was a well-known phrase, but it had taken me a year to discover it, so great was the politeness and lack of prejudice amongst the Jamaicans I knew. The Englishman, smiling when he gives orders, smiling when he meets strangers, smiling when he is merely buying fish; he, who is so intelligent and well-educated, must have concealed motives. Smiling indicates hypocrisy.

In what light, I wonder, is the Englishman regarded by Asian peoples, whom the English think of as far more subtle, emotionally reserved and dependent on etiquette than themselves? In a multi-racial Britain, one of the greatest tasks may be for the Englishman to come to know himself as others see him.

The pattern of child upbringing in Jamaica has, as far as one can generalise, many similarities to that of Victorian England. Children are expected to know their place, to be seen and not heard. Orders to children, as, indeed to other adults, seem brusque to English ears. A common example of this is the Jamaican order, 'Come!': the

English use a 'gentler' form, 'Come along!' or 'Come on!' Many English people I met felt involuntarily irritated by the brusque orders: they were not meant to be aggressive, but were merely the normal manner of address. Many English people have a 'special' way of speaking to children, but I did not find this amongst Jamaicans. I found that teachers generally maintained a distant relationship with their pupils: in many cases, this was only distant as seen through English eyes. An extremely successful and capable teacher I observed, when talking to an individual child (perhaps in a conversation during break) again rarely looked at the child and maintained a poker face. The children loved her and demonstrated their affection in many ways.

On arrival in England, Jamaicans may find the looser class structure difficult to deal with. One Jamaican in Bristol told me that, in Jamaica, he had to call his factory foreman 'Mr Jones', or, more usually, 'Sir'. Here, he said he may call him 'Alf', adding as many colourful epithets as he thinks fit and Alf will reply in like manner, yet respect is still required in the relationship. Language - accent, intonation, differences in meanings - is a great barrier to communication for Jamaican-born citizens of England. The ever increasing pressures of life in a society where colour discrimination is practised must often seem intolerable to a person brought up in a multi-racial society, where one's class, education and breeding, not the mere fact of one's race, were the criteria of social acceptance.

Thus Jamaican parents in England may find it very difficult to communicate with teachers and others in authority. They may have a natural suspicion of authority and feel unable to deal with it. Talking to a teacher who is well-educated, fluent and of the middle class may be a strain, despite the great interest in their children's education that many Jamaican parents have. Modern classroom methods are not easily understood by adults of any nationality who have themselves been educated by other methods. It is difficult for teachers to explain modern methods by merely verbal descriptions, so the already wide gulf between English teachers and Jamaican parents may grow wider.

The children, too, may find it difficult to adjust to classroom disciplines. If the child has been to school in Jamaica, he will find the transition from an authoritarian atmosphere to a more permissive one especially difficult. Even if the child has no Jamaican experience, it may be that the contrast between his home and his school disciplines causes conflict in him. A Bristolian child of Jamaican parentage was not progressing at school: she would rarely talk and had not, of course, begun to read. The matter was discussed with her mother, who said, 'Oh, yes, I have trained her to be silent'. The little girl had thus daily to cope with two totally different expectations. Some of the teacher's vocabulary may be unknown to the child, the teacher's orders may be given in a gentle, pleasant manner, reprimands may be given in a quiet, reasonable tone, the strength of the rebuke being carried in the subtlety of the meaning of the words. A child whose home language is somewhat different, or whose home discipline depends on brusque, well-defined orders and brisk punishment, may, quite literally, not hear many of the orders given in class, nor may he understand when the teacher is ordering, rebuking, or merely commenting. A child caught between the two worlds of home and school undergoes

much conflict and may react by withdrawing from one, or both, worlds. He may, alternatively, react by expressing his conflict and may see no necessity for controlling his emotions through a regard for polite unemotional behaviour. He may consider his teacher soft and attempt to play up in class. Because his actions - his facial expressions, his verbal expressions - may be somewhat alien to the teacher and because the sympathetic teacher may be expecting the child to have some conflict within him, the teacher may not realise that the child is playing up and may treat him with gentleness. The child may thus become even more insecure, and continue to play up until this becomes his habitual classroom behaviour and becomes, indeed, a full expression of his increased emotional disturbance. It is extremely difficult for a teacher to treat children as he believes they should be treated, while avoiding the creation of conflict in the child. As the child grows older, he will have to come to terms with the difference between the disciplines of home and of society as a whole. The task of the teacher is to provide a bridge between these two worlds: a bridge on which the child can slowly be introduced to the new type of discipline.