Understanding the Sending Context of Haitian Immigrant Students

Introduction

In the past twenty years, the immigration wave to the United States has increasingly challenged U.S. schools to meet the needs of students who come from different historical and cultural contexts. Immigrant children make up the fastest-growing sector of the U.S. child population (Landale and Oropesa 1995). In the U.S. today, roughly one child in five lives in an immigrant-headed household, according to the 2000 Census and the National Center for Education Statistics. The vast majority of these new immigrants to the U.S. are non English-speaking people of color coming from the Afro-Caribbean basin, Asia, and Latin America (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001). Although the number of studies on Asian (Zhou 1999; Louie 2001) and Latin American children (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 1995; Portes 1993; Olsen 1997) has been growing, there is still relatively little research available on immigrant children (Hernandez and Charney 1998; Garcia-Coll and Magnuson 1998), despite this rapidly growing student population. Children from the Afro-Caribbean basin continue to be a neglected and isolated group in research and schools.

This gap in the research on Afro-Caribbean immigrants is particularly dramatic since increasing numbers of people are coming to the U.S. from that region. In particular, Haitians are one of the most significant and growing groups of Afro-Caribbean immigrant students in Florida, New York, and Massachusetts, but little research has been conducted on Haitian immigrant children. In fact, some researchers have said that Haitian immigrant children are hard to describe or are “anomalies” of research on immigrant student adaptation (Stepick 1998; Waters 1999).

Haitian children who have migrated to the U.S. over the past ten years arrive with a history of extensive and prolonged exposure to violence. The social and political context in which Haitian students migrated has affected
many aspects of their lives and left them with a number of academic and psychological needs, of which most U.S. educators seem unaware. This ignorance has profound implications on the immigrant students’ school adjustment in the U.S. and blocks any adequate understanding of their full academic potential and needs. Haitian children’s complex sending context must be understood to support their transition to life in the U.S. (Stepick 1998).

While there is a limited body of literature on second-generation Haitians (Stepick 1998; Zéphir 1996) that addresses post-migration identity formation, there are no comprehensive research studies on first-generation Haitian immigrant children, who fall far behind and are less engaged in school than their U. S.-born schoolmates (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; State of Haitian Americans in Massachusetts Conference 2001). This paper will examine the sending context of Haitian immigrant children between the years 1991 and 1994. I will highlight the history of the Haitian education system and its relationship to the political sphere. I will also conceptualize the problem Haitian children faced in Haiti during and after the most recent embargo, when they were exposed to daily unpredictable violence. This paper will provide a preliminary analysis of the issue of trauma—its effects on Haitian students’ lives and its implications for migration.

Theoretical Context

To comprehend immigration experiences, research suggests that three aspects be considered: 1) the immigrant’s pre-migration history, 2) the process of migrating to the host country, and 3) the long-term adaptation of immigrants (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001; Harvard Educational Review 2001). The Suárez-Orozcos (2001) emphasize that the pre-migration history gives us a “sending context” for immigrant children. These young people migrate with their specific characteristics, traits, and experiences. Immigrants who are “pushed” out of their countries of origin by political conflict or chronic hardship may have more difficulties adjusting after migration. Moreover, immigrants for whom pre-migration stress or trauma was the impetus for migration may suffer further trauma during the process of migration and throughout the adaptation period. Many Haitian students I encountered were unable to discuss their pre-migration history in detail, though they both bore witness to and were victimized by social and political violence (Gibbons 1999). Haitian students interviewed as part of the Harvard Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation Study (LISA) had migrated with the understanding that they had been “pulled” out for access to education; however, an entire generation of Haitian immigrants was also pushed out by political conflicts that interrupted schooling.
Portes’s Segmented Assimilation Theory likewise emphasizes the conditions for departure. According to Portes and Zhou (1993), the process of becoming American varies from smooth acceptance to traumatic confrontation, depending on the characteristics that immigrants and their children bring from the sending country and the social context that receives them. Portes addressed these issues with immigrant parents; I am interested in how these issues pertain to first-generation Haitian immigrant children.

Trauma is a significant aspect of Haitian immigrant students’ migration. According to the research, many children who suffer from aspects of extensive trauma exhibit symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Children diagnosed with PTSD may demonstrate persistent re-experiencing of the stress, persistent avoidance of reminders of the threat, numbing of general responsiveness, and persistent symptoms of arousal. Trauma experienced before age eleven is three times more likely to result in PTSD than are events experienced after age twelve (Garbarino 1992). The majority of the students interviewed for this paper were younger than twelve during the 1991-94 political upheaval in Haiti.

The PTSD diagnosis has some limitations. It does not capture the reality that children can be emotionally distant, decline in school performance, and change in their interaction with friends (McMann 1992). PTSD focuses on trauma more than victimization. As a result, PTSD does not address the effect of victimization socially or in a group context (Cicchetti and Troth 1997). Nonetheless, PTSD theory offers a psychological understanding of how to address and recognize trauma in children.

As time passes, traumatized children may exhibit disturbing behavior and psychological concerns. In their work with traumatized children, Cicchetti and Lynch (1993) stated that these students may experience dysfunctional attachment relationships, difficulties in emotional self-regulation, problematic peer relationships, and trouble adapting to school. Recognizing the violence that Haitian students witnessed prior to migration may bring a broader understanding of the cognitive and psychopathological behaviors associated with PTSD.

Conceptualizing the Problem

Marie T., a nine-year-old student recently immigrated from Haiti, was sent to the principal’s office for stabbing a classmate in the head. The school administration was considering an expulsion based on the district weapons policy. I walked into the office and saw one child with a small gash in his head and another child with an angry frown on her face. I took Marie to
Charlene Désir

my office and asked her what happened. With a glazed look in her eyes, she told me, “No one will ever hurt me again.”

This paper originated with my work as a research assistant for the Harvard Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation Study (LISA), co-directed by Drs. Marcelo Suárez-Orozco and Carola Suárez-Orozco. LISA was a longitudinal study from 1997 to 2002 that analyzed the adaptation of immigrant students from China, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Central America. I was the lead research assistant for the Haitian subgroup of the study.

As a LISA researcher, I conducted yearly interviews with Haitian students living in Massachusetts over a period of five years. This cohort of thirty Haitian students ranged in age from nine to fourteen when the study began. They had all attended school in Haiti during and after the most recent embargo. The majority of the students in the study migrated to the U.S. in 1995 and took part in the study within two years of their arrival.

Based on the timing of their migration, the students had presumably witnessed and experienced overt violence. However, the student-informants avoided questions that addressed specifics of witnessing violent acts. Many of the students did not initially want to speak about their lives in Haiti prior to migration. Even when they were willing to share information, Haitian students from the LISA project provided multiple, often conflicting responses about their reasons for coming to the U.S. For example, during our initial interviews, 22 percent of students and families reported coming to the U.S. for family reunification, 50 percent indicated for opportunities (whether it be work or school), and 14 percent responded they came to escape political persecution. However, in subsequent interviews, students were not fully able to respond to specific questions regarding reasons that school opportunities and political persecution were the impetus for their migration, or if there were connections between the two. Students may have responded that they came to the U.S. for security reasons but in subsequent interviews could not provide detailed accounts of the security problem they fled.

The Haitian Ministry of Education confirmed that schools were closed for weeks and months at a time from the years 1986-1996 due to political disturbances. These were the precise years that my student-informants were in school in Haiti, yet when asked if they missed school during this time in Haiti, many students did not report missing substantial amounts of schooling. For example, when I asked if schools were closed for any period of time while they lived in Haiti, they responded that school was never closed. However, there was not one year from 1986-1996 when school was open for the entire academic calendar (Haitian Ministry of Education 1997).
At the time of the LISA study, I was also working as a school adjustment counselor in a school district where many of the Haitian student-informants for the LISA study attended school. I therefore had exposure to them outside the formal study. In my capacity as a school counselor, I was responsible for gathering data about these students’ backgrounds for the purpose of cognitive evaluations. While I collected data about students’ developmental history, behavior in school, and family history of special education, it was not part of my job to ask about their school experience prior to migration, nor about their reasons for migrating to the United States. However, in order to provide a holistic evaluation of these students, as a counselor, I began to probe students about their lives prior to migration. The following inquiries would later be central in my research on Haitian students’ adaptation.

Younger students were more apt to speak with me candidly, and I soon began to notice several troubling themes. The students explained that they witnessed rapes and killings. Some went further and shared that they had been forced to go into hiding to avoid violence. One of my students, Marie K., was able to recount the following story: “The situation was very bad. In Haiti when there was a political problem, school would be closed. When I was at Luc Grimar School, they used to drop this gas on the kids—I had to put a lemon to my nose and we would run. The school would not let us leave the school grounds because it was more dangerous on the streets. … It was so bad I went to my aunt’s home [in the countryside] to hide. I could not stay in the city. Every morning there was shooting.”

As both an adjustment counselor and researcher, I was intrigued by the sending context of these immigrant students. Many of the Haitian immigrant students were being referred to special education, exhibiting major behavioral issues, and having extensive memory problems. Moreover, I was hearing anecdotal evidence from Haitian bilingual teachers as well as regular education teachers that this recent cohort of Haitian children was different and had more special needs compared to those who had migrated ten years prior. As educators, we seemed to be misunderstanding Haitian children’s poor adjustment to school in the U.S. by not examining their sending context as immigrant children. It was apparent to me that these students struggled with having been exposed to violence as young children, as Haitian schools were not immune to political attacks. I wondered if these experiences had caused the reluctance of my student-informants for the LISA study to divulge their experiences prior to migration. Researchers suggest that children who have had traumatic experiences require more extensive time to develop trust through relationships (Terr 1991; Martín-Baró 1994; Herman 1997).
Methods

Unfortunately, no body of work addresses the experience of students in Haiti during the coup years of 1991-1994. This made it imperative for me to go to Haiti to try to better understand the students’ experiences during this historical period. Data collection in Haiti took place over the course of two summers, in 2000 and 2001. During the first summer, I conducted in-depth, audiotaped interviews with Haitian educational experts and young adults in order to supplement the limited amount of research available on the period covered by my study. While falling far short of a comprehensive portrait, this analysis offers insights into an area of students’ experience that has not yet been investigated or theorized.

In addition to the six students who were to become by main interview subjects, I interviewed education experts who were familiar with the period and had been recommended by the U.S.-based Haitian Studies Association, Harvard University’s Rockefeller Center, and my colleagues: Michèle Pierre-Louis, director of FOKAL; Dr. Paul Bien Aimé, a former minister of education; and Roody Edmé, co-director of a respected school and co-founder of the national teachers’ union. All of the Haitian education experts agreed to be interviewed for an hour; all interviews took place at agreed-upon locations in Haiti. These interviews were conducted in English and Haitian Creole; I transcribed the interviews and translated the Haitian Creole.

Using family contacts, I was able to interview a group of six young adults who had been students during the 1990s. In the summer of 2000, I conducted a focus group with these students. All of them began school in a semi-rural town I will call Tiville. Some of the students opted to go to school in the city, which I will call Granville. All were over eighteen at the time of my first contact with them, but because of numerous school closures resulting from political disturbances, they were all still in high school.

When I was introduced to my interviewees during the focus group, they looked at me from head to toe and only said hello, listening politely as I explained in my accented Haitian Creole that I was a researcher interested in the school experience of Haitian children during the years 1991-1994, and that their voices were important. I turned on the recorder, but no one said a word. Turning off the tape recorder, I engaged them in a conversation about their individual goals and aspirations. As we began the dialogue, a student reminded me to turn the recorder back on. We met twice and discussed a range of issues: Haitian politics, schooling, the lack of educational opportunities, and personal goals. I returned to Haiti in the summer of 2001 to conduct individual interviews with the students at a hotel in Granville. The individual interviews complemented the focus group and
indeed provided richer data from my student-informants. The individual and focus group interviews of the student-informants were all conducted in Haitian Creole, translated and transcribed by Fedo Boyer, president of CreoleTrans translating service.

The students I interviewed in Haiti represented first-generation high school-educated children; they all attended elementary school in Tiville. Three of the informants continued their education in the local public high school that has been nationally recognized for its students’ success in passing the high-stakes Baccalaureate national high school exam. Three other student-informants attended Catholic high school in the city. It is interesting to note that despite the high-achieving reputation of Tiville’s public school, half the students opted to go to the city, where there is more opportunity to interact with a variety of classmates, including those from a higher economic class. These students shared the same background in Haiti as my student-informants in the U.S.; all were part of a distinct group—the privileged poor—in terms of their social class and mobility.

The privileged poor are a phenomenon associated with the increasing urbanization of Haiti’s population. These students were only one generation removed from the peasant class, and all of their families had experienced internal migration from rural to semi-rural areas, or to the city. If their parents had attended school at all, they did not complete elementary school. Three characteristics distinguish the privileged poor. Because they have pursued their schooling further, they have automatic membership in Haiti’s educated minority. In school, they socialize with individuals of significantly higher socioeconomic status. Finally, all of these students have relatives living in the U.S. and several thereby have access to U.S. goods.

**Political Context**

Due to the overwhelmingly negative depiction of Haiti in the media and elsewhere (Lawless 1992), Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1990) urges researchers to analyze Haitian issues within a historical context. Haitian and non-Haitian scholars alike recount the history of Haiti as violent and marked by continual political uprisings and uncertainty (Lawless 1992; Wilentz 1989; Heinl and Heinl 1996; Aristide 1993; Farmer 1994; Nicholls 1996; Trouillot 1990; Fatton 2002, 2007; Dupuy 2007). Yet very little is known about the effects of this violence on students and schooling in Haiti.

Haiti was the second former colony in the Americas (after the United States) to become an independent nation. It did so by defeating its French colonizers on January 1, 1804. The United States and France then placed
an embargo on Haiti to cut off all political influence that the Caribbean nation might exert on their own populaces.

Between colonization (which began in the seventeenth century) and independence, the only governance model known to Haitians was the slave plantation (Gibbons 1999), in which a tiny minority of the population controlled the majority of the wealth, while the majority of the people remained poor and uneducated. This legacy continues to plague the small island nation. Today, just one percent of the population—four thousand families—controls more than forty-five percent of the nation’s wealth and resources (Aristide 1993). Eighty-five percent of the population is illiterate, and only nine percent finish high school (Heinl and Heinl 1996).

Since 1804, only four Haitian presidents have completed their terms. Every other Haitian president abdicated or died, or was ousted from or murdered in office (Heinl and Heinl 1996). Bien Aimé, the former minister of education, explained, “Due to the consistent political problems and uncertainty between 1804 and 1990, education was not the priority of the Haitian government.” He acknowledged that as a result, the majority of children were not educated and the school system was maintained for and by the elite.

The Duvalier Years

Many of the Haitian students in Haiti and the U.S. with whom I have spoken were too young to recall the twenty-nine year dictatorship of the Duvaliers from 1957 to 1986. Nonetheless, there are many aspects of the Duvalier regime that have deeply influenced the complex connection between violence and education that affected students’ lives during the political upheaval in Haiti that took place during Aristide’s tenure.

Several theorists on Haiti agree that corruption became the core of the Duvalier regime (Farmer 1994; Heinl and Heinl 1996; Nicholls 1996). Under Duvalier, schools and children were not protected from violence. The government’s reign of terror resulted in the elimination of thousands of educated, middle-class citizens through imprisonment, torture, and forced emigration, successfully reducing the possibility of an opposition (Trouillot 1996). This period would mark a significant exodus of the educated middle class.

After the death of François Duvalier, his son Jean-Claude succeeded as president in 1971. Only nineteen years old, he knew very little about the workings of a government and brought the country to a deeper level of poverty. When he was ousted in 1986, he left the national treasury with less than two million dollars (Trouillot 1990). The education experts I
interviewed noted that the majority of the Haitian people celebrated the end of the dictatorship as marking a renewal of hope and the possibility of various freedoms. Edmé, co-director of Cours Privé Edema, remarked that

The departure of Duvalier meant freedom of speech, intellectual freedom, but the drama that interfered with those changes was the fact that after the fall of Duvalier the people were still not satisfied. The political system did not change so the protest continued. We found ourselves in a phase of instability because the people were fighting against the military regime, which succeeded the Duvalier regime, and the instigators of these protests were the students, a movement of protest inside the university and inside schools.

The Rise of Aristide and the Lavalas Movement

After the end of the Duvaliers’ dictatorship, the poor masses of Haiti were hopeful that political decisions thereafter would include their voice and improve their social and economic position in the country (Nicholls 1996; Trouillot 1990). Unfortunately, the social barriers that were intrinsic to politics in Haiti led to little representation of the poor. However, during this time, the popularity of a vocal priest, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, began to increase. Aristide began to emerge as a safe representative for the poor majority. Because he was a priest, the poor masses trusted in his interest in improving their plight, and assumed he would not have ulterior motives (Wilentz 1989).

Even before his political life, Aristide’s ministry supported and acknowledged the significant role of young people in his church and in the larger society. They became active political supporters as well as religious followers. In one sermon, Aristide exhorted, “Let the new children of the hemisphere be born. Let us all join in solidarity to hasten their delivery.” (Aristide 1993) Aristide also dedicated a weekly mass specifically for young people.

One of the first overt acts against Aristide and his young followers occurred on September 10, 1988, during morning mass. The church and its parishioners were attacked, several people were killed, and the church was torched (Ibid.). Two symbolic occurrences in this attack would signify the magnitude of the threat that young people posed to the existing political structure. First, the visibility of the young people as guards and soldiers representing the church during this attack demonstrated their allegiance to Aristide (Wilentz 1989). Second, the stabbing of a pregnant woman in the abdomen prompted concern that even an unborn child could be perceived as
a threat. An Aristide opponent was quoted as stating, “That pregnant woman, her baby, they are not innocent. They were there to hear Aristide, that makes them guilty … they deserve what they get.” (Ibid.) The mother and fetus ultimately survived, and the child was named Esperancia—Hope.

On December 19, 1990, Aristide won the Haitian election with two-thirds of the vote. Aristide’s presence in the presidential palace reflected and reinforced a new confidence among the poor majority in Haiti (Nicholls 1996). He invited hundreds of street children and peasants to the palace for dinner. Within seven months, Aristide was ousted by the military. This is when elementary and high schools experienced the majority of abuse by the military regime. The victims were almost always young people (Ibid.). Every city youth was suspect in a country where the majority of the population is young; more than ever before, they were presumed guilty. All the education experts I interviewed agreed that children suffered the most during this time period. As a result of the constant attacks on children and schools, Edmé hired an armed guard to stand at the gates of his school. He recalled an incident that occurred during that time:

> There was a paramilitary group which was quite violent. They were protesting with machetes. They went to schools with machetes in their hands demanding that the school close. Very often when something like that occurred, many parents were in a state of panic. Sometimes this group would walk around with their machetes and slam them all over the pavement in front of the school and against the school gate. Every now and then the parents would run to school to pick up their kids. So the kids grew up with those uncertainties. Sometimes they would ask whether there would be school from one week to the next. All of these issues affected the way school functions.

**The Embargo Years**

In October 1991, the United Nations imposed an embargo on Haiti for three years. Gibbons (1999) explained the embargo was part of a sanction regime initiated by the international community. Its objective was to punish coup leaders and force a return to democracy and full respect for human rights. In actuality, the Haitian military exploited the embargo—provoking dislocation as another means for breaking up organized resistance—and increased its political control (Ibid.).

During the embargo, national unemployment went from 50 percent in November 1991 to 70 percent in November 1994; agricultural output
declined 20 percent; the cost of basic food increased by 100 percent; annual per capita income declined 30 percent; child malnutrition doubled; thousands of youths perished from a measles epidemic; infant mortality increased 29 percent; school enrollments dropped by a third; the number of street children doubled; and 100,000 children were placed in domestic service (Gibbons 1999). According to FONHEP³, 50 percent of children reported they were unable to pay for school because their tuition came from family living outside Haiti, and during the embargo there was a $50 per month limit to what families could receive from sources outside the country. In 1993, UNICEF withdrew foreign aid to education, making education a luxury for poor families and causing many schools to close (Gibbons 1999). Farmer (1994) explained that while the military fought for spoils, the peasant and urban poor fought for survival. They were hungrier and sicker than before. The dissolution of the weak public health sector meant thousands of easily preventable deaths.

The embargo had a direct effect on children and their schooling, and I wanted to understand why students and schools were primary targets of the military regime. Two of my education informants shed light on my question. Bien Aimé, the former education minister, explained: “You know in Haiti, things are different when school is in session as opposed to when it is not. School is one of the major activities in Haiti. When you see a lot of traffic in the morning in Haiti, it is because people are taking their children to school. School is truly an industry in Haiti. So when people are trying to disrupt the function of the population, the … most common places to target are schools.” He acknowledged that students missed a lot of school days but said there was nothing the Ministry of Education could have done about it. Edmé, the school principal, responded to my question by saying:

In general, all politics revolve around children because once the children are affected, the families will be affected directly. When the schools are threatened, it carries a more direct psychological impact. So when a strike is announced, they usually start by telling the parents not to send their kids out. I have to tell you that we are a people with a connection to our children, which is very important. You know that in our culture children mean treasure, wealth, reproduction, and everything. Children are very important in our society. Once you mention the word children, it is a direct attack on the family. So that’s why sometimes the pressure is exerted on institutions where there are children—to frighten, to paralyze, to pressure the population.
President Aristide returned on October 15, 1994, three years and twelve days after the sanctions were first imposed (Heinl and Heinl 1996). From the inception of the coup, five thousand people—58 percent of whom were children—had been murdered in politically motivated killings; some 300,000 were internally displaced; another 64,000 Haitians took to the sea on rickety boats attempting to migrate; and the poor stoically bore the burden of the embargo in silence (Gibbons 1999). Pierre-Louis of FOKAL concluded: “The 1991 coup killed the dream … and what is happening today continues to kill the dream. We moved backward in time in all aspects; we did not progress as hoped. Now it is up to us to decide whether we can regroup, gather our strength and understand that we lost one battle in a long war. What can be done now? I am getting old; I will need the backing of the youth. The youth need determination and purpose not only to revitalize hope but also to invigorate the battle for their demands.”

Overview of the Haitian Primary and Secondary Education System

Students have been targets of political attacks in Haitian history. Under the Duvalier regime, college students were primarily targeted. François Duvalier, although viewed by some as an intellectual, saw the university and teaching profession as potential opponents and went to extreme means to control this threat—imprisoning the president of the National Union of Secondary School teachers, closing the University of Haiti, and founding the University of the State (Nicholls 1996). Pierre-Louis of FOKAL recounted, “In order to attend the State University, one had to pledge allegiance to the government.” In the more recent regime, school-age children were targeted. As a U.S.-based educator seeking to fully comprehend the history, access, and significance of education in Haiti and its relationship to Haitian immigrant students in the U.S., I was particularly interested in the significance of the attack on school-age children.

For the most part, the Haitian school system is modeled on the French educational system, in which students must pass a Baccalaureate exam at the end of high school. In general, the Haitian academic calendar runs from October to June. The national curriculum consists of French, Creole, math, social science, and experimental science. The grading system in Haiti tends to be on a ten-point scale, with ten being the highest score, five passing, and zero the lowest score. In the traditional system, students begin school at the age of six and continue their primary education until the age of twelve. At that point, they go through two cycles. In the first cycle, students complete a three-year track; in the second cycle, they complete a four-year track, and after successful school and national examinations are awarded
a Baccalaureate. In the fundamental reformed system, students receive a nine-year basic education from age six to fifteen. At the age of fifteen, students entering secondary school may opt for a technical, classical, or professional track. After a three-year program and after passing their high school exams and a national exam, they receive a Baccalaureate. Currently, both the traditional and fundamental reformed systems are used. The large majority of these programs’ high school graduates come from the upper classes.

As the economic disparity has deepened in Haiti, education has become a privilege for those who are able to successfully navigate a school system with limited government support. In a country where 70 percent of the people live on less than one dollar a day (UNESCO 1998), schooling is not always financially accessible; even public schools require parents to pay for books, uniforms, and school supplies. Lawless (1992) documented that just 40 percent of school-age children finish primary school, and of those students who reach high school, only nine percent successfully pass the national high school exam in order to acquire the Baccalaureate diploma (Haitian Ministry of Education 1995).

There have never been enough schools to enroll all the children in Haiti. In 1990, the Haitian government allocated 15 percent of its budget to education, and those funds allowed the Ministry of Education to provide public schooling for only 10 percent of school-age children (Trouillot 2001). Sixty-four percent of Haitians live in rural areas, which have always been the most neglected by the Ministry of Education (FONHEP 1999). In recent years, the ministry has allowed a growing number of private agents to open schools in order to provide more access to children in all areas of the country. As a result, most schools are privately owned: 86 percent of primary schools and 84 percent of secondary schools are private (FONHEP 1996).

The mere presence of a school can be deceiving, however: most of these schools are unaccredited and lack adequate facilities, according to FONHEP. According to the same study, many of the teachers in these schools may not have the proper training to teach students (see table on following page). Indeed, although 81 percent of teachers have completed high school, only six percent attended normal (teacher training) school, and only another five percent went to university (FONHEP 1996).

**Students’ Understanding of the Role of Education**

Historically, schooling in Haiti has been used as a means to exclude the poor majority from the economic and social development of the country.
The concept of the privileged poor stems from the Haitian population’s severely limited access to schooling; by virtue of this, those poor Haitians who manage to achieve an education become part of a privileged minority, even though they may suffer the same material privations as their uneducated neighbors. Education remains one of the only legal means for members of the poor class to advance to a higher social and economic status. The biggest challenges continue to be access to education and the ability to use education achievement as a means for upward mobility.

In Haiti, poor and working-class students form a school identity that serves a number of purposes: they become initiated into a select group that potentially has access to opportunities and ideas that were closed to their own parents. These students not only recognize school as a way to advance personally but also connect their education to its potential to help their family and community as a whole.

Agathe, one of my student-informants in Haiti, shed light on the issue this way: “Education is something that teaches you how to speak in this society, and how to conduct yourself. If a student has the opportunity to go to school, he too should take the opportunity to learn something so that they can be useful to themselves and to their relatives especially those who cannot help themselves.”

Elix responded similarly: “Education is the number one opportunity to amount to something in society. … School and education will help an individual get ahead. School and education will render an individual valuable to him/herself, to his/her parents and to the society at large.”

A few of the student-informants indicated their ability to express

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<th>Type of Private School</th>
<th>Percentage of Schools in Haiti</th>
<th>Schools Licensed by the Ministry of Education</th>
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<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>13%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>9%</td>
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themselves as an important factor in their schooling. Astride explained, “School gives me knowledge of how to approach others … and how to speak to anyone. School gives me knowledge and training to learn how to deal with people who live in this country.” Françoise noted, “School has made me an outspoken individual. I can carry myself in society; I have a lot of friends; I participate in different groups.” These two informants had expanded their understanding of schooling to include not only academic knowledge but also the training that allows individuals to become active members of the greater society in Haiti, in particular the educated and upper classes of the society.

For the privileged poor, higher education in Haiti did not automatically provide for a secure future or economic mobility, yet education provided social mobility within their respective communities. Private universities are very expensive and most of the privileged poor can only dream of attending even the public university. Moreover, the focus group participants agreed that even a university degree does not guarantee a job. Several recounted seeing unemployed college graduates in their communities; they said that even when educated, most individuals have to be well connected in the government in order to secure employment. Nevertheless, in a country where 85 percent of the population is illiterate, and education is a privilege available to only a few, school provides a space of knowledge-gathering and socializing with others that is not always tainted by class disparity. School is one of the few places where members of different classes are able to express their knowledge on level footing.

**Students Recount the Attack on Schools and Community**

All of the students I interviewed in Haiti remember school during the 1991-1994 time period as unpredictable, frightening, and violent. The education experts I interviewed in Haiti acknowledged that students were under attack but stated that in a poor country, financial resources were not available to deal with these issues. One parent with whom I discussed the nature of my work was impressed that I wanted to look at the issues of exposure to violence that children faced during this era, but admitted that no one truly spoke about how this time period affected young people. A president was ousted from power, a three-year embargo ensued, and the president’s supporters—students in particular—were under attack by the military and its attaché, yet few recognized or acknowledged the voice of the victims. Students risked their lives going to school, and when schools were opened, students risked the possibility that their teachers would not show up for class. One of the students explained: “My presence in school one day could be construed as defiance and insubordination. If the supporters of the
military regime had called for a general strike, a stoppage of all activities in the country, the presence of students and teachers in a particular school could result in violent confrontation and brutal quarrel. This atmosphere of violence was not conducive to teaching and learning.”

Agathe recounted, “During those days, you might go to school [one day] without any trouble, and then while you were in school, you would hear the protesters outside demanding that the students be dismissed. And until the students were dismissed, they kept throwing bottles and rocks. Then [school officials] were forced to dismiss us, and we would run somewhere to hide.”

The protests and strikes often were intended to disrupt daily functioning but also to intimidate students and hinder their commitment to further their education for the benefit of the poor majority. According to Elix, “The police persecuted the youth, especially the youth that had vision for change and improvement, the youth that wanted to challenge the status quo, the youth that were active politically. These future leaders were arrested, beaten, raped, molested, and physically abused. Parents were frightened, and anyone who did not support the military was worried about such oppression.”

Students witnessed many injustices that individuals in the larger community might not have been aware of. In a nation where the majority is illiterate, educated individuals hold a position of status. In many circumstances, teachers are role models for students and carry the intellectual knowledge for the community. These teachers played a role in the political happenings during this time period. For their own safety, students had to be aware of the political affiliation of their teachers. Astride recounted: “In the morning before classes, during the break and lunchtime, and after school, we would meet some teachers in the streets. We could clearly see these teachers casually interacting with the police and military in the street. Other teachers were never seen in the streets, in the open interacting with anyone. They cautiously came and left school under concealment. They went underground. These two patterns of behavior among teachers helped us identify the macoutes and the non-macoutes.”

These students often witnessed members of the community who were Lavalas supporters being harassed, beaten, and shot. In most of these young adults’ stories, family members were the victims. Different students said:

“My uncle was shot in the hand …”
“My cousin was forced to go into hiding …”
“My brother was accused and threatened …”

When students spoke about the enforcement of a 6:00 p.m. curfew during
this time period, a layer of complication was added to my interviews. The
father of one of my student-informants was an enforcer who brutalized the
community. During the focus group, other student-informants pointed this
out, and the student in question admitted the fact and hinted that parents and
children were often in different political camps, and that students should
not be judged by their fathers’ mistakes. It was a difficult juncture in our
meeting. It appeared that the students did not hold this fact against the
student, but I am not sure how the apparent tension was resolved. I was able
to gather a more elaborate idea of the curfew time period from Françoise:
“The violence was a bit strange. Personally … I was having trouble sleeping.
As soon as it was 6:00 p.m., they lit the lamps. They would come to your
door and ask you to keep the doors closed and the lights off. Sometimes I
would lie in bed thinking whether they were going to do something.”

During this time of political chaos and unpredictable acts of violence,
not only was the institution of school under attack, but the process of
becoming an active citizen, the ability to have a voice, the means for upward
mobility, and hope for the advancement of the poor majority were all brutally
attacked by targeting the students. These young people represented the link
to a better future for their communities.

The students I interviewed in Haiti saw themselves not only as victims
but also as actors. As members of the privileged poor, they posed a triple
threat to the power structure because they were educated, young, and
represented the poor masses. Fear or the thought of victimization did not
consume the young people I interviewed. They were able to rationalize
the significance of their role as privileged at a time when the county was
under siege. Agathe explained: “They did not want [us] to grow up to be
anything in the future. They did not want [us] to help [our] relatives in the
future. They did not want [us] to be useful to ourselves in the future. They
came to bother [us] because we wanted to be useful to the country in the
future.” Astride concurred: “We would become somebody in the future and
be capable of helping the people. They [the opposition] wanted to remain
the only one in power.”

It was apparent that these young people wanted to see themselves as
future leaders; they acknowledged that they were attacked because they
had the potential to lead their country. Nonetheless, because of the way the
students recounted this period—especially from the emotions that surfaced
as they spoke, I wondered, from my experience as a school counselor,
whether they struggled with trauma and its aftermath.

Edmé, the school principal, recalled a student who hid under a desk
each time he heard a loud noise. He further commented, “Generally the
children are on their own. If the child is suffering from some kind of trauma, this child will not be able to learn, and that’s the end of it—they just classify the child as one who can’t learn. It’s a catastrophe that children have experienced some horrible things and there is no one to help them. These are some aspects of our new reality, and we do not have the structures in place, such as social workers and psychologists.”

The victimization of Haitian children occurred as a result of the daily threat they faced specifically by going to school. Cicchetti and Troth (1997) define victimization as harm that occurs to individuals because of other human actors behaving in ways that violate social norms. Garbarino et al. (1992) further noted that victimization occurs when one experiences a serious threat to one’s life, physical integrity, family, home, or community, or sees another person seriously injured or killed. During the time period studied, children in Haiti witnessed abuses at school, in the community, and in their homes.

From my professional work with students, I recognize that some children who are exposed to continual and systematic violence may exhibit symptoms associated with trauma. According to Terr (1991), childhood trauma is defined as the mental result of one external blow or a series of blows, rendering the young person temporarily helpless and breaking past ordinary coping and defensive operations. She further points out that four characteristics of childhood trauma include visual or repeated perceived memories of the traumatic event; repetitive behaviors; trauma-specific fears; and changed attitudes toward people, life, and the future. In addition, trauma influences cognitive skills, attentive skills, social skills, personality style, self-concept, self-esteem, and impulse control. The extent of violence and subsequent trauma that students may have been exposed to at school in Haiti was compounded by the violent acts they witnessed in their neighborhoods and in their homes.

**Conclusion**

The period 1991-94 was a time in Haitian history when the role of students was politically charged, making Haitian schoolchildren targets of violence. Elix, one of my Haitian student-informants, summarized this time in history as one when “the life of children was comparable to that of a tree. It could be rooted out and cut down anytime.” Because of many missed days of school and the aftermath of the political upheaval, my student interviewees in Haiti, all over eighteen, struggled to finish high school. Five years after I last interviewed them in summer 2001, only one of the six students had continued with school and successfully graduated from high
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school and pursued additional education. They continued to have feelings of worry about repression and maltreatment that they admitted interferes with their concentration and daily lives.

Life in Haiti during the time period studied for many of these children could best be described as a phenomenon of massive trauma, which Jacobvitz and Hazen (1999) define as being characterized by extensive and prolonged traumatic life events or conditions experienced by large numbers of individuals in a community. According to Robben and Suarez-Orozco (2000), massive trauma does not manifest itself just in a child’s inner world; it is transmitted within the family and across generations. Massive trauma has the potential to destroy or damage cultural systems that normally function to support and protect human adaptation and child development (Jacobvitz and Hazen 1999).

As children who were students during this era have migrated, the conversation among Haitian parents and educators continues to remark on the differences between this group of students and those from the previous decade. In my past roles as a school adjustment counselor and school administrator and presently as a university researcher studying immigrant students, I hear the conversations echo over and over among school staff that these newer Haitian students lack motivation, migrate with extensive learning needs, and are not representative of Haitian students who migrated in the past. It is imperative that we recognize the sending context of these more recently immigrated students and the influence of that context on the students’ academic and social adjustment to the U.S. These students survived an unpredictable and violent history in which they were under attack. In order to fully support their adjustment in U.S. schools, this can no longer be ignored.

Endnotes

The author wishes to acknowledge assistant editor Amy Ramos of the Center for Black Studies Research at the University of California, Santa Barbara for her helpful comments on this article.

1 All names used in this text are actual names of informants.
2 FOKAL is the abbreviation for Fondasyon Konesans ak Libète (Fondation Connaissance et Liberté). FOKAL is a private educational research agency that establishes schools in the most remote areas of Haiti.
3 Nivah Jean Jacques, an administrator at the Fondation Haïtienne de L'Enseignement Privé (FONHEP), provided access to documents invaluable to my research. FONHEP is the only educational research agency focused on
the study of schools in Haiti. It was founded in 1986 by the U.S. Agency for International Development to analyze the Haitian school system. After its initial five-year grant expired, FONHEP continued its research with funding from other sources.

4 Tonton macoutes was the name of the police force created by François Duvalier.

References


