

SERVICING OF EQUIPMENT

One of the greatest needs in the Caribbean, and the one that has received the least positive attention, is a maintenance and repair service. A problem in any country, apparatus breakdown is aggravated where there is high teacher mobility, as there is in most Caribbean countries. A teacher faced with unfamiliar equipment may fail to take the necessary precautions which helped the equipment to survive in the hands of a predecessor. The responsible teacher is expected to facilitate access to the laboratory for evening classes whose teachers he or she may not even know. In some countries the same laboratory is used by two shifts per day with two sets of teachers. One is more likely to find apparatus repair skills in physics teachers, but we have already seen that physics graduates are thin on the ground.

Even where a school or country can find finance and foreign exchange to replace defective apparatus, import procedures are cumbersome and slow, and laboratories once adequately equipped fall into decay. Ministers of Education need to explore ways of reducing bureaucratic procedures in order that schools can respond within a few months to their needs. Up to the early 1970s teachers in Jamaica and Trinidad, at least, were able to find firms which would service and repair equipment, at a price, and for microscopes this is still possible in Trinidad. Those who repaired electrical apparatus have one by one gone out of business, or no longer handle such repairs, and laboratories are full of unserviceable equipment packed away in the hope that one day someone can be found to repair it.

A very limited and friendly service is provided occasionally by the Physics Department of UWI Mona and the electronics technicians of the Multimedia Production Centre of UWI St Augustine. Antigua's Teachers' College and Technical College, which are adjacent, are reported to co-operate (3) but no formal arrangement is known anywhere in the Commonwealth Caribbean.

Guyana's STAG identified the possibility that school equipment could be serviced by the Faculty of Technology of UG, and has had informal discussions with both UG and the Ministry of Education. The formal channels of approach that are necessary have yet to be made (15).

In any country, and especially in one with foreign exchange problems, one of the best investments that could be made by the Ministry of Education would appear to be a school equipment maintenance and repair service. Certainly it would not be easy to find the skilled technicians necessary, and they would expect salaries which compare with those paid by industry. They would be worth it.