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Towards Caribbean `knowledge societies': dismantling neo-colonial barriers in the age of globalisation

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Abstract

This paper discusses what it would take for Caribbean societies to move towards becoming 'knowledge societies' that would support a higher standard of living and more equitable social relations for all the people. It calls for a research agenda for postcolonial development and asks: what sort of learning is needed to transform problematic social landscapes? It puts forward a scenario of how the Caribbean region might look by 2050 if it were to be restructured on the foundations of higher levels of education and the ethical application of knowledge promoting a creative, culturally confident, productive and dynamic regional society. What kind of Caribbean people will achieve such a scenario, and what kind of education systems will help to produce such people? The article explores this by discussing the multiple challenges to be overcome in the currently dysfunctional education system. It advocates utilising a socio-political analysis of `literacies' in order to probe the stratification of knowledge, power and prospects, the better to challenge the conservative norms and privileges that maintain a deeply unequal status quo.

Pearlette Louisy raises issues of pressing concern for the future of Caribbean education. Here, I elaborate on some of the dilemmas that she raises. Interwoven in this discussion are sketches of potentially positive scenarios in a globalising future.

Globalisation and knowledge societies

It is claimed that for societies to succeed in the global era, they need educated and skilled populations. In the knowledge societies leading the globalising process, people are expected to achieve sophisticated knowledge breakthroughs in all fields, relating to the production of goods or services. High levels of educated creativity are seen to lead to economic wellbeing to a greater extent than ever before, although this may not improve societies socially, politically or ethically. The sophisticated functioning of workers depends on strong education systems ± a prerequisite that leaves the poorer countries in crisis (Chossudovsky, 2000). Many have dysfunctional education systems that are weak in organisation, pedagogy, curriculum and teacher preparation and weak at the macro level of policy and planning. The challenges to their education policy and practice are intensified by the external pressures of neo-liberal globalisation (Ramsaran, 2002; Samoff, 2003).

A research agenda for postcolonial development calls for deconstructing modernist assumptions which equate non-sustainable development with progress. Triumphalist myths give way to paradigms that respect socio-cultural dignity as well as environmental sustainability (Escobar, 1995; Ellyard, 1999; Stromquist, 2003). Ethical practice, collectivity, and equity principles inform the learning needed to transform problematic social landscapes. This agenda explores how societies might set about achieving transformation of this sort as a challenge to the current

context of deepening global patterns of inequity for many (Synott, 2004, pp.28, 181, Tikly 2004).

The knowledge society: a scenario for the Caribbean

Postcolonial perspectives (see Young, 2003; Hickling-Hudson et al. 2004; Tikly, 2004) shed light on the political parameters of current social problems and their improvement. I want to use them to examine what the realisation of the ideals of the term `knowledge society' might mean for transforming social relations to benefit Caribbean people. My suggested scenario for the future, set in the middle of the 21st century, is an expansion of earlier visions for the development of the Caribbean University over the same period (Hickling-Hudson, 2000a, 2000c). It is predicated on the hard-won achievements of Caribbean people between now and 2050. The people have won integrated regional trade, inter-country labour mobility, social structures promoting greater levels of justice for the poor and those with disabilities, and governmental and institutional reforms facilitating and supporting equity and creativity. Among their proudest achievements are sophisticated education institutions and practices. With fluent multilingual teaching, Caribbean schools, colleges and universities have promoted good relations between the 24 million Spanish speakers, 7 million French speakers, 6 million English speakers and one million Dutch speakers of the Caribbean region, and have nurtured the dynamism of African-based Creole languages in most countries. Between 2010 and 2050, the education systems of the region were transformed. Primary, secondary, tertiary and adult education increased access and equity. The majority are no longer shut out of high quality education. Universities and colleges expanded and now offer flexible degree and diploma programmes that blend a strong Caribbean character and selected global principles. Activist educators throughout the region and in its dynamic diasporas of Caribbean people – particularly in the UK and North America (Patterson, 2000) – have contributed to the breaking down of the neo-colonial barriers which kept the Caribbean societies insular ± trapped in the language and isolationist education traditions of the former colonising powers. Collaborating with communities, governments and global, diasporic and local business, they are working closely with counterparts in Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Haiti to improve the region's economy and society. For example, researchers, educators and workers are collaborating across agriculture and industry in new enterprises including those producing environmentally-friendly fuel, composite construction materials and textiles based on the innovative utilisation of sugar cane and other crops. Agriculture and mariculture are linked to food processing and more extensively serve the local, regional and diasporic markets, including the tourist sector. They are reducing the unfettered importation of food which can be better produced locally, and applied research and education-industry partnerships are helping each sector towards ecological sustainability (Ahmad 2000; Lloyd-Evans et al, 1998).

In 2050, cultural industries are thriving. The region's artists, musicians, dancers and film-makers collaborate in promoting the expressive talents of each society. Their products, services and performances are snapped up both locally and by Caribbean diasporas and are admired and sought-after globally. Information technology experts are producing software relevant to the culture of the region and servicing local enterprise and intellectual needs. The people of Guyana and Belize are exploring and developing their unique continental resources. They are collaborating with regional and international science and business enterprise to reverse the old exploitation by transnational corporations. With post-nationalism, creativity has soared and employment levels have risen. People are pouring into new and expanded industries and services in the region and in the diasporas (Patterson, 2000). A growing proportion of workers are self-employed and/or working in self-initiated cooperatives. Unemployment has dropped from between 20 and 30 percent in the early 21st century to only 7 percent, matching the levels of the wealthy countries of the `North'. These improvements became possible through the determination of civic movements all over the Caribbean. Women now comprise fifty percent of governments, instead of the two or three percent of the old days. Governments support each other and

encourage pressure groups to challenge the galloping impoverishment resulting from `free market' practices of the late 20th and early 21st century. As Meeks pointed out in 1998: `Someone has to speak out for small, defenceless states in a world dominated by large, unimaginably powerful mega-blocs. Someone has to speak truth to power' (see Hickling-Hudson, 2000c, p.153).

The `Caribbean Ideal Person'

Returning to the present, what kind of Caribbean people will achieve such a scenario? Louisy quotes Caribbean reports as promoting the vision and goal of the `Caribbean Ideal Person'. Such a person is a citizen-worker with multiple literacies, one who can seize economic opportunities, improve local and global environments, overcome gender stereoptyping and respect cultural heritages. These and many more attributes will be needed to realise my scenario for 2050. For an ‘Ideal’ person to bring about such change would lead us to interrogate characteristics of the `quality' education that will produce this person in the Caribbean. The `Ideal' person is not only highly educated but an ethicist; not just an entrepreneur but a civic activist; not just a citizen-worker with `multiple literacies', but one with critical and highly-developed intellectual competencies, across epistemic, humanist, technical and public spheres of knowledge. This person is one who applies powerful, political and technical knowledge to improve the condition of the majority. If such a range of attributes is beyond the reach of any one person, there is the hope that each individual might exemplify some of them. We have to ask what role should be played by educators and education systems in shaping such attributes.

Education in the Caribbean: challenges and responses

Louisy's focus is the challenge being faced by Caribbean education. She highlights the contradiction of high educational expenditure and low student achievement and stagnation, and decline in examination performance. To tackle the problem, she argues that policy-makers have to reshape education to meet agreed quality criteria. The Caribbean Education For All Plan of Action, 2000 ±2015 proposes that quality education should aim at mastery of language, mathematics, science and `the digital world', with attention being paid to vernacular education. Quality education stresses the value of culture and the arts in the lives of Caribbean peoples. While no one could disagree with such criteria of excellence and relevance, we should be suspicious of slogans such as `education for all', as long as they are unsupported by critical analysis of what kind of education is being offered to `all'.

The model of education inherited from European colonial history is more than dysfunctional for Caribbean goals of improvement. It continues to cause anguish (Evans, 2001; Jules, 2002; Ramsaran 2002) and contributes to the devastating class tensions across the region. If we cannot reshape the model, there is little possibility of improvement in quality, the range of skills, competencies, values and other attributes. Education systems like those of the Anglophone Caribbean are underdeveloped in terms of the quantity of provision and maldeveloped in terms of its stratification and unevenness of quality. They match the logic of the capitalist underdevelopment found in many post-colonial countries (Bacchus, 1992), preparing a minority of the population with advanced levels of education to participate in the complex economic activities of the very small modern sector (industry, business, construction, high-level `knowledge' services and so on). The majority, with low levels of education, are destined to work in the unskilled economic sectors in plantation and peasant agriculture and menial services. The standard of education in a few top quality schools and in some departments of the region's tertiary institutions is comparable with the best in the Western world, but large proportions of Caribbean populations have been the victims of gross educational discrimination, consigned to poorly

endowed schools and `nonformal' education. Although determined civil society activism has won gains for the impoverished in some contexts (Francis Brown, 2000), in general, adult basic and popular education is often too underdeveloped to provide adequate opportunity for poorly schooled adults to gain the qualifications necessary for well-paid employment, social mobility or the political skills to press for democratic change.

The assumption that something called `literacy' and `education for all' is the answer to underdevelopment is flawed when it fails to challenge the model of literacy and education being promoted. We need a tool of analysis somewhat different from the essentially pedagogical approach of `multiliteracies' understood as critical competencies in respect of a range of texts in diverse cultural contexts (The New London Group, 2000). I argue for a socio-political approach to the concept of `literacies' (Hickling-Hudson 1995, 2002, 2003), which integrates the work of several scholars (Graff, 1987; Winchester, 1990; Gee, 1991; McCormack, 1991) within a political economy framework. Such a tool becomes a powerful key to understanding how a stratified education system operates. Utilising `literacies' as a tool of socio-political analysis, we can explore how people are initiated in different ways into society's discourses and competencies, according to their socio-economic and cultural status. The literacies they acquire both reflect and perpetuate their status in society (Gee, 1991). Schools are powerful instruments for inculcating the different domains of literacy into future citizens: the epistemic domain of academic knowledge, the humanist domain of narratives of cultural and gender identity, the technical domain of procedural skills and the public domain of socio-political knowledge. These knowledge domains are taught along lines deeply stratified by class, gender and ethnicity. Through different kinds of schooling, people are placed on a certain track in the education hierarchy. Some are initiated into the content and techniques of dominant literacies in each domain, and this is used to justify their continuance in elite positions. Others are denied this initiation. They are shunted into less adequate, often grossly under-resourced and neglected education channels that provide subordinate literacies and which are penalized as being of inferior worth and status within the society. When a political process is serious about achieving change with equity, it has to learn how to change the stratifying processes of these literacies (Hickling-Hudson, 1995, 2003).

The nub of the problem is how to redesign education systems so that all institutions offer students dominant, critical and powerful literacies across the four domains. This cannot be done by expanding the existing model of education, when such deep stratification is inherent to it. The difficulties become evident when education reforms in the Commonwealth Caribbean are examined (Hickling-Hudson, 2000b). One of the most important changes in education in the history of the Anglophone Caribbean was to replace the British `Ordinary' and `Advanced' level General Certificate of Education (GCE) examinations with Caribbean-designed examinations ± the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) test at the end of five years of secondary schooling, and the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination (CAPE) as a pre-university examination. This increased the Caribbean relevance of the syllabus and forms of assessment, bringing in a variety of testing (essay, multiple-choice and school-based assessment) to replace the rigid essay-only tests of the British exams. Access to examinations, however, remains problematic. The entry fees are so high that only students from relatively well-off families can pay, and standards are so demanding that only well-qualified teachers (usually correlating with the small proportion with university degrees) in well-resourced schools can prepare students adequately.

In the Caribbean, an estimated one in four children live in poverty, and family poverty is widespread (Unicef, quoted by Ramsaran, 2002, p.181). This explains in part why the CXC exams are taken by only a minority of Caribbean youth of school-leaving age and why, within this minority, results remain sharply uneven. As Louisy points out, only a miniscule proportion

are taking science, languages and information technology subjects. The examination performance in Jamaica is typical of that of nearly every other country in the region. As late as the 1980s, 45 percent of Jamaican children who entered primary school did not progress to secondary levels. Of the 55 percent who did go to secondary school, only 4 percent achieved the 4 passes in CXC exams, recognised as the minimum for continuing to higher levels. Three percent of the age cohort attained the Cambridge Advanced Level passes to enter most degree programmes at the University of the West Indies and similar British-style universities. Two percent of the cohort attained university degrees and 5 percent attained a tertiary, non-degree qualification. Only Barbados had managed to change student performance patterns in any appreciable way by the early 1990s (Ramphal, 1993).

Towards Caribbean `knowledge societies'

Governments in some countries of the region have recently taken steps to upgrade schools, curriculum design and teacher qualifications. But, as yet, there has been no appreciable change in the low proportion of passes, particularly in mathematics and the sciences, in most countries. Students and teachers in the poorer schools (still the majority) are not provided with the opportunity to acquire the dominant epistemic and technical literacy necessary to gain at least four strong passes in this regional, highly respected Caribbean examination system. Among those who do take the exams, the majority fail. If we are to build an intellectual foundation for the Caribbean Ideal Citizen, this is little short of insanity. Improvements are claimed for the substance of the regional examination system, but it still performs a neo-colonial, exclusionary function.

Access to quality in `literacies'

Since Caribbean students are as capable as any others, it is clear that the form of the regional examination and the school system itself are doing them a disservice and have to be changed. `Caribbean governments need to recognise that the improvement of education of its youngest citizens is inherently linked to the improvement of the social circumstances of all its people' (Samms-Vaughan, 2002, p.145). The challenge is how these improvements are to be made when most Caribbean countries have GDPs which are only a fraction of those of the wealthy `North' (see Ramsaran, 2002, p.180). To bring about equitable access to `quality' education in the four domains of literacy outlined above, educational change has to be far more radical than hitherto envisaged. It may have to include abolishing any kind of selective exam which determines access to schools of differing status. This would mean a challenge to the economic privilege now exercised by the minority of families across the region, who send their children to the high-status preparatory and secondary schools which remain an entrenched legacy of British colonialism. It would mean extending the same privilege to those excluded, and ensuring that all students have teachers to give them the dominant, critical and powerful literacies needed to build a knowledge society. Schools would have to shed their 19th century characteristics of stratification, didacticism, authoritarianism, competitiveness and selfish individualism, and become open, accessible, socially responsible and facilitative, instead of closed, custodial and often humiliating institutions (Evans 2001; Jules, 2002). Students and parents would have to be alert, to challenge and counter any signs that subordinate instead of dominant literacies are being inculcated. If educators perpetuate examinations, they must ensure that `all' (not just one quarter) are well prepared, and can enter and pass. This has to rest on immense improvements in the education of teachers and their conditions of service, since, `Without the reform of teacher education, there will be no reform of education' (Torres, 1996).

All of this would so challenge conservative norms and privileges in a resource-poor environment that it would take a revolution to bring it about. If revolutions of the old communist style are no longer feasible, other revolutionary change must be feasible to transform the anguish of the dispossessed and create more viable societies in globalising times. To make real progress in the journey towards education for all, we have to start by understanding `quality' as the means of addressing equity through the de-stratification of literacies, as argued above. Education will feed into economic improvement, if the economy is being strengthened and not weakened by the pressure of global financial agencies, and if new jobs in higher occupational categories are created to absorb the growing numbers of people being educated (see Hickling- Hudson, 2002).

Such change is political. The hallmark of educational quality is that teachers prepare people to appraise their systems of governance, understand the implications of international and global change, address patterns of injustice, hold politicians accountable and experiment with problem-solving, both nationally and in alliance with global civic movements. Adult education should enable people to run for political office from informed platforms of participatory, rather than just electoral, democracy. The analytical tools of postcolonial, socio-political `literacies' are crucial to a critical understanding of culture.

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