Caribbean schooling and the social divide – what will it take to change neo-colonial education systems?

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Introduction
When Professor N’Dri Assie-Lumumba asked me to reflect on what ‘ubuntu’ might mean in the context of education in the Caribbean, the first thing that came to mind was an image of pit latrines in impoverished primary schools in poor countries. In this essay, I argue that the continuing problem of pit latrines in these schools symbolizes the failure to solve the problem of poverty, neglect and inadequate provision of education services for people at the bottom rungs of Caribbean and other decolonising societies. I ask what implications the ‘ubuntu’ concept chosen for the 2015 CIES conference would have for reforming education in a direction that combines global reform, ethics and good sense. Educators rarely consider toilets when they are thinking about what is needed to reform the system. But talking about toilets draws attention to the entrenched inequity that persists in education systems across the globe – an inequity that forces many schools and young people to remain at the base of the social pyramid, and that perpetuates a dysfunctional model of education holding back many societies. Starting from the twin images of social pyramids and toilets, we can ask some pointed questions about education reform.

Pit latrines, traumas and ‘transformation’
As an educator in Jamaica in the 1970s and 80s, I taught for some years in a teacher’s college whose graduates would be assigned to teach in the poorest of schools. I supervised their teaching practice in such schools. Later, I went to teach in a secondary school in one of the poorest areas of Kingston. Coming from the elite section of the Jamaican education system, I experienced these schools as a complete shock. They suddenly revealed to my sheltered view the daily life of children from poor families (see Evans, interviewing Hickling-Hudson, 2010).

Bad sanitation was a defining characteristic of many of these impoverished schools. In the towns, the schools’ toilets, used by hundreds of students and dozens of teachers, were often in disrepair. When there was a water lock-off, they stank. Sometimes, they were near a classroom block, and you had to grit your teeth to go through a lesson coping with the stench. But at least these urban schools usually had a sanitation block with modern toilets and hand basins. When there was piped water, they could be cleaned (although even then, an odour of urine could linger). This luxury of a sanitation block was not provided in some of the remote rural schools. There, students and teachers were expected to use outdoor pit latrines. Some of these were quite sturdily built, and useable. Others were shabby, rotting and fly-infested. It is hard to imagine the discomfort of realizing that you would need to visit an outdoor pit latrine at least once in your supervision visit, that your student-teachers would have weeks of coping with them, and that the school pupils were permanently consigned to that fate.

Recently, the memory of pit latrines came flooding back when friends that I engage with in a global e-mail group exchanged news and comments about the
trauma experienced in 2013 by a little boy when the rotting wooden seat of a pit latrine in his primary school in Jamaica, gave way. The child fell into the latrine and had to be rescued. Three primary school girls going into a sanitation block to change for a physical education lesson in a school in rural Jamaica fell into a pit latrine when the concrete floor collapsed under them (Turner, 2008). In another rural primary school, the teachers drew the attention of the public health authorities to the plague of flies emanating from the pit latrines (Gleaner, 2013).

The accidents that befell the unfortunate children are not unique to schools in rural Jamaica. Such accidents, and worse, still happen in poor schools in many countries. In September 2008, a little girl drowned when she fell into a primary school’s pit toilet in rural Guyana (Stabroek News 2008). In January 2014, a little boy drowned in a primary school’s pit latrine in Limpopo, South Africa (Heywood 2014, Moloto 2014, The Observers 2014). Since bad sanitation is one of the acute problems affecting many poor countries, it is likely that pit latrine accidents afflict impoverished schools globally. A South African group of commentators points out that in the Eastern Cape, 350,000 learners go to schools that either have pit latrines or no latrines at all. In the latter case, both students and teachers are forced to relieve themselves in the bushes (Van Vuuren 2014).

As recently as 2013, pit latrines were being ‘used by an estimated 1.77 billion people. This is mostly in the developing world as well as in rural and wilderness areas. In 2011 about 2.5 billion people did not have access to a proper toilet and one billion have to resort to open defecation in the surroundings of their dwellings’ (‘Pit Latrine’, Wikipedia, Accessed 30 November 2014)

While some Caribbean countries may have managed to bring about the ending of unacceptable sanitation in some of the schools for the poor, others have not. The Minister of Education in Jamaica is recently reported to have said that ‘at the start of the 2013-2014 financial year, there were 158 schools still using pit latrines and 53 were projected to be transformed during the course of the year’. I have highlighted the word ‘transformed’ to draw attention to its problematic meaning. The report ended with the remark that ‘...the minister did give a disclaimer, pointing out that the project would be completed based on the availability of the necessary resources’ (The Gleaner, 2013). The disclaimer was taken further, when the Minister promised that by 2015 pit latrines would be phased out according to the availability of water supplies in the area of the school (The Jamaica Observer, 2014).

Responses on the internet about the promise to change a few of the pit latrines point both to moral and to technical issues surrounding the ‘transformation’ of unacceptable conditions in schooling. These responses throw up sharp questions for education reform. There is the unethical double standard (on local and global scale) of spending lavishly on the comfort of the privileged while many of the children of agricultural and manual workers are schooled in appalling conditions. There is the neglect of urgent health problems. There is the question of whether governments intend to build piped water infrastructure in impoverished areas so as to facilitate modern sanitation, or whether, instead, modest but efficient composting toilets should be built in such areas. And there is
the frustration of a situation in which a Minister of Education, cash-strapped, is forced to engage in what one internet commentator called ‘double speak’, promising to attend to the improvement of sanitation should funding become available and if adequate water supplies existed in the area.

In the newspaper reports on pit latrines and schools in Jamaica, nothing was said about the taboo subject of menstruation. No one asked: what are the educational consequences for the girls who are forced to use the schools’ pit latrines at that ‘time of the month’? Globally, millions of girls in poor communities simply stay away from school during the four or five days of menstruation each month, when they are faced with bad sanitation and lack of privacy (see Patchett, 2010). The water and sanitation situation increases the endemic socio-economic inequality between males and females.

The report on pit latrines spoke of the Minister’s desire for transforming them. How is the transformation of a situation of educational discrimination towards the poorest to be carried out in the Caribbean and other societies wrestling with the inimical legacies of colonialism?

The education system, the social divide, and an ‘Ubuntu’ approach for considering change.

The litmus test of school quality is the answer of any parent to the question: would you be willing to send your child to that school? Would you want him or her to go to a school with pit latrines, poor teaching resources, an inadequately qualified teaching staff, and a history of low performance in examinations? The answer, ‘Of course not’, brings us to the heart of applying the lens of Ubuntu to education.

The ‘Ubuntu’ theme chosen for the 2015 CIES conference explores the implications for education of the ancient African word connoting not only ‘humanity to others’ but also ‘I am what I am because of what we all are’. If educators, influential parents and other decision makers were to embrace and apply the humanity of Ubuntu, it would mean showing in concrete ways that they value the children of the poor and uneducated as much as they value their own. It would mean valuing and respecting the hard and unrecognized work and the contribution of the impoverished, or unemployed, or semi-literate, or poorly educated parents of such children, by working together with these parents to overcome the traumas of a discriminatory school system. It would mean cutting through the fractured contradictions of inequity that characterize most education systems.

In the movement of decolonization in Caribbean societies, as in many developing regions, people have struggled to address the injustices of deep socio-economic stratification. This was the aftermath of the five centuries of colonialism in which Britain, France, Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands relentlessly exploited the majority of the populations that they ruled for the gain of the metropolitan elite classes and their countries. The structural violence of colonialism created many constraints to the decolonising journey of seeking justice, but as noted by Errol Miller, a prominent Jamaican professor of education, the huge hurdles did not
dim the self-awareness that “We are a people who understand that our destiny lies in defeating the odds” (Miller 2004: 174). This is illustrated by the establishment of stable democracies throughout the region, the development of institutions that have expanded services in health, education, housing and legal provision, the brilliance of Caribbean achievements in intellectual pursuits, literature, music, dance, sport and the visual arts, and attainment as well as sheer survival in the face of racism and other enormous difficulties (for example see Richardson 2005) in the migrations that have established thriving diasporas in the former colonising countries as well as the USA and Canada.

Yet the structures and functions of the colonial system have been echoed during the years of independence from the colonizers, and in those islands which are ‘departments’ or provinces of France and the Netherlands. In most Caribbean countries, below the surface of thriving modern sector enterprises and a prosperous standard of living for affluent groups, there is still poverty and precariousness for large proportions of the population. For the Caribbean countries that are not yet high on the scale of per capita income or human development indicators, economic crisis is the foundation of educational inefficiency. In Jamaica, for example, this contributes to a 20.1% illiteracy rate, an unemployment rate of 14.2% in 2012, a high poverty rate, and a high rate of violent crime (see figures and sources quoted by Hickling-Hudson, 2013 b). Although a few countries, such as Trinidad and Tobago, and Barbados, have developed relatively high per-capita incomes, they still have some way to go in reducing poverty, inequality and unemployment. This is also the case in the French and Dutch Caribbean provinces of France and the Netherlands. Unemployment rates are much higher than those in the European countries; for example, 21.7% in Martinique, 23.8% in Guadeloupe and 21.1% in French Guyane compared to a 9.4% rate in France. In Martinique, ‘40% of the population aged 15 and over no longer in schooling have no school qualifications; that is twice the national average of 20%’ (Marie and Rallu, 2012).

In Haiti educational inequality is particularly severe, as is set out in this extract using figures from the World Bank as well as from Haitian government sources:

“The enrollment rate for primary school is 67%, of which less than 30% reach 6th grade. Secondary schools enroll 20% of eligible-age children. Higher education is provided by universities and other public and private institutions....The majority of schools in Haiti do not have adequate facilities and are under-equipped. According to the 2003 school survey....some 58% (of schools) do not have toilets and 23% have no running water. 36% of schools have libraries.... More than half of the teachers lack adequate teacher training or have had no training at all. There is also a high attrition of teachers, as many teachers leave their profession for alternative better paying jobs. Sometimes they are not paid due to insufficient government funds.”

('Education in Haiti', Wikipedia; Accessed 30 November 2014)

Significant strategies have been experimented with in the Caribbean to try to alleviate serious educational deficiencies. For example, the proportions of people who lacked functional literacy in Jamaica stood at over 80% when the British left
in 1962 (Beckles 2014), and through the efforts put in place by successive Jamaican administrations, is now less than 20 per cent. The collection of chapters in the book edited by Emel Thomas (2014) describes the improvement after colonialism of the different education systems in the countries of the Commonwealth Caribbean and Netherlands Antilles. Winning independence in the 1960s and 70s, Caribbean people have made significant gains in modernizing the model of education. The intent of reforms put in place by the Trinidad and Tobago government, as described by Samuel Lochan (2014), applies to all Caribbean countries, in which “the goal of a seamless education system with increased quality and access from primary to tertiary has been espoused.”

Education reform involved:
- policies and programs that expanded school places
- improvements in the delivery of instruction at all levels, with special emphasis on ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education).
- the implementation of ICT to support teaching and learning
- programs to reduce failure and support the disadvantaged – for example, school-feeding programmes for disadvantaged children, book rental programs, remedial supports and free transport in rural areas
- improved teacher preparation
- improved management of the education system
- improved school- based management

(Lochan 2014: 381; see also Miller, 2000, for a description of the goals and achievements of education reform across the Caribbean).

It must be asked why, despite reforms that considerably widened access to schooling, the Caribbean in general has continued to implement the stratified system inherited from the British, French and Dutch colonizers. This is a three-tiered model of schooling designed for different social classes. Schools are still divided by resourcing and social status into high-tier or prestige ‘grammar’ style schools, middle-tier comprehensive or technical, and low-tier elementary or ‘All Age’ schools. Lochan (2014: 390), describing schooling in Trinidad and Tobago, points out that only 25% of the age cohort can get into the prestige grammar schools, while Prem Misir (2014: 205), describing schooling in Guyana, perceptively labels them ‘List A’, ‘List B’ and ‘List C’ schools. This three-tier model unfairly sorts and classifies children by putting them through a common examination after age eleven, regardless of the severe inequality of their primary school preparation and family background. This echoes the same kind of selective system that Britain used for many decades to sort children into grammar, comprehensive and secondary modern schools as well as elite ‘public’ (meaning private) schools. In most Caribbean countries, unequal schooling is still a long way from having been ended (for example see Evans 2001 and 2006, Misir 2014, Jennings 2014). This model of education inherited from European colonialism is dysfunctional for Caribbean goals of improvement. It continues to cause anguish and contributes to the social class tensions across the region (see Ramsaran 2002, V. Jules, 2002).

Most Caribbean countries have fallen short of using their projects of education reform to drive educational change that is wide and deep enough to overcome inequality, inequity and inefficiency (D. Jules 2010). This is shown by the facts
that large numbers of young people leave school semi-literate, or without any qualifications, and that there is a high level of exam failure in the region. Pointing out in 2012 that some 70% of the Jamaican labour pool has no certification, Jamaica’s Minister of Education estimated that between 150,000 and 200,000 adults could benefit from new measures that the government aimed to put in place to expand access to adult learning – measures that included increased adult basic education through e-learning and a new high school equivalency program (Robinson, 2012). “At the secondary education level, the number of students obtaining acceptable grades in 5 or more subjects is less than one quarter of the cohort sitting the exam (and an even smaller percentage of the age cohort)” (D. Jules 2010). This is occurring despite relatively high levels of government expenditure on education.

The challenge of changing unequal education: some scenarios
How would the philosophy of ‘Ubuntu’, an active respect for our common humanity, be applied to transforming education for the impoverished and neglected majorities all over the decolonising world? This is the challenge for the consideration of delegates to the CIES conference in 2015. I will outline here two scenarios of change that are arguably foundational. First, without contextual change, educational transformation is unlikely to happen. Second, without a change in the uneven levels of ‘literacies’ offered through education, even committed educators are unlikely to be successful in transforming education for those made poor in the prevailing socioeconomic system.

Scenario 1: Contextual change – reparations and productive development
A meaningful transformation of public services such as health and education requires far more financial and institutional resources than most Caribbean countries have access to. CARICOM (the Caribbean Community) has launched an official movement for reparations for the crimes of slavery from Britain and other European countries. Reparations would help address this inadequacy of resources. A newspaper report describes the reparations demand as follows:

‘CARICOM, a group of 12 former British colonies together with the former French colony Haiti and the Dutch-held Suriname, believes the European governments should pay (compensation for slavery and colonialism).... It has hired a British law firm.... which recently won compensation for hundreds of Kenyans tortured by the British colonial government during the Mau Mau rebellion of the 1950s. CARICOM has not specified how much money they are seeking. But senior officials have pointed out the Britain paid slave owners £20 million when it abolished slavery in 1834. That sum would be the equivalent of £200 billion today’ (Leonard and Tomlinson, 2103).

In the struggle for reparations, Caribbean intellectuals are playing a leading role. On July 16, 2014, Sir Hilary Beckles, a professor of History and pro Vice Chancellor at the University of the West Indies, made a speech to the British House of Commons. In his capacity as Chair of the CARICOM Commission for Reparations, Beckles outlined why Britain has a legal case to answer in respect of reparatory justice. He said:

The crimes committed against the indigenous, African, and Asian peoples
of the Caribbean are well documented. We know of the 250 years of slave trading, chattel slavery, and the following 100 years of colonial oppression. Slavery was ended in 1838, only to be replaced by a century of racial apartheid, including the denigration of Asian people. Indigenous genocide, African chattel slavery and genocide, and Asian contract slavery, were three acts of a single play – a single process by which the British state forcefully extracted wealth from the Caribbean resulting in its persistent, endemic poverty’ (Beckles, 2014)

Beckles’ speech in Parliament drew on the scholarly arguments and historical evidence put forward in his book ‘Britain’s Black Debt’ (2013), in which he argues:

‘Families in the Caribbean today have elders who knew their enslaved forbears. The mass poverty in towns and villages, widespread illiteracy, dysfunctional family structures, and rampant ill-health... are contemporary expressions of the horrors of slavery that targeted black persons. The engagement of reparations begins an act of justice. It embraces a process of redemption and renewal that celebrates humanity rather than inhumanity’ (Beckles 2013:171)

CARICOM’s ten-point reparation demand ‘identifies a number of areas through which restitution should be made, including educational, health and cultural institutions and programmes, debt relief and technology transfer’ (Maharaj 2014). In the case of Haiti, reparations are particularly urgent. Haitian people were made to pay dearly for their historic achievement of being the first enslaved group in the Americas to defeat and drive out a colonial power, thereby winning freedom from French enslavement in1804. But the fledgling Haitian nation was made to pay for its emancipation when France in 1825, threatening war, demanded 150 million francs (US$21 billion at today’s value) from Haiti as reparation for the former slaveowners’ loss of human property and colony. Though the sum was reduced to 90 million francs, its payment over the century crippled Haiti (Beckles 2013: 214). This and further injustices at the hands of the Europeans and the USA, has left Haiti one of the poorest nations in the world.

Reparations would be one way of helping Haiti and other exploited nations, including some in Africa, to develop in an equitable and sustainable manner. Other urgent contextual reforms include:

1. Rethinking and challenging some of the neo-liberal economic strategies resorted to by Caribbean states in last third of the 20th century. Jamaica is one example of a country where, after 35 years of following IMF demands for liberalization, privatization, and reducing social spending, there are ‘higher levels of debt, less social services, little to no economic growth, and the collapse of Jamaica’s productive economy’ (see Edmonds 2012).
2. Developing the productive potential of natural resources through regional partnerships. In my paper ‘Caribbean Knowledge Societies’ (2004), I drew on the work of social science scholars to explore scenarios setting out what this might look like in the future. For example, I painted a picture of researchers, educators and workers collaborating across linguistic regions and with Caribbean diasporas, to bring about unprecedented developments in agriculture,
mariculture, manufacturing, tourism, educational services and cultural industries in the region (see Hickling-Hudson 2004).

3. Attending to reform of governance. As is argued by the late and highly respected Caribbean scholar, Norman Girvan, three vital areas of improvement needed in Caribbean political systems are: consensus building, community participation, and accountability (Girvan 1997).

I look forward to seeing how CIES conference delegates might flesh out ideas about linking education to the sustainable development of postcolonial regions in economics, productivity and governance.

Scenario 2: Equity and a ‘literacies’ model

Literacy indicators are assumed to be important benchmarks of a country’s educational progress. However, there is a strong argument against assuming that current interpretations of ‘literacy’, ‘numeracy’ and ‘education for all’ are the answer to underdevelopment. This approach is flawed when it fails to challenge the model of literacy and education being promoted.

Literacy is not just a skill. As I have argued in previous papers (see Hickling-Hudson 2004, 2013a, 2013b), it should always be seen in social context, so that the question is asked: what kind of literacy? Dominant or subordinate? Public, humanist, epistemic or technical? Critical or conformist? Such questions would guide the use of the ‘literacies’ concept as a social tool of analysis. This would extend the pedagogical approach to ‘multiliteracies’ understood as teaching and learning critical competencies in respect of a range of texts in diverse cultural contexts (Healy 2007).

Schools are powerful instruments for inculcating the different domains of literacy into future citizens. Students become familiar with:

- the epistemic domain of academic knowledge in the various disciplines
- the humanist domain of narratives of cultural and gender identity
- the technical domain of procedural skills and
- the public domain of socio-political knowledge and know-how.

These knowledge domains are taught along lines deeply divided by class, gender and ethnicity. Utilising ‘literacies’ as an approach to 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.

To pursue the goals of ‘Ubuntu’ in changing our education systems, we cannot stop at equalizing access and resources. The other side of this challenging goal is to redesign the curriculum so that all institutions offer students dominant, critical and powerful literacies across the four domains. Adults who had previously been excluded from education must be fully catered for in this transformation of the curriculum. Simply expanding the existing stratified model of education will never achieve this.
In my paper ‘Theatre-Arts Pedagogy for Social Justice: Case Study of the Area Youth Foundation in Jamaica’, I analyse an example of an education project that, using arts education in a very creative way, puts young adults on a learning path that helps to develop their literacy domains (Hickling-Hudson, 2013b). I argue that such an approach needs to be widely applied in order to develop the literacies of young people, particularly those who have suffered from disadvantaged schooling. In another paper with Steve Klees, detailed proposals are set out for changing the prevailing industrial model of the school. We argue, as many scholars of education do, that the age-graded structure and lock-stepped curriculum of traditional schooling constrains learning, and that very different approaches need to be taken to educate the 21st century citizen (Hickling-Hudson and Klees, 2012, see also Wrigley, 2006). In another area of my research, I analyse, with colleagues, the educational strategies of the Cuban revolution. Cuba has built an education system that guarantees high-quality learning institutions and pathways for all citizens, and in which students have been shown to achieve academic results of an excellence unprecedented in most developing countries (see Gasperini 2000, Carnoy, Gove and Marshall 2007, Martin Sabina, Hickling-Hudson and Corona Gonzalez, 2012). Cuba provides an example of how the entire edifice of the education sector needs to be developed in the pursuit of equitable, efficient and effective education that delivers strong results for the region.

Change that challenges inequity must include acquiring literacies that are powerful enough to enable citizens to critique negative social patterns, local and global, and help to change them. Taking this kind of public action would require citizens with high self-esteem, a strong cultural identity, and a commitment to improving their societies. This would require attention to humanist literacies, in which students are taught to interpret and create materials that present the struggles of their societies and in which they develop empathy for those who have been disadvantaged and discriminated against. Seeking gender justice as well as socio-economic justice would be goals of all of the domains of literacy.

Seeing ‘literacies’ as powerful tools of social division is a key to understanding how a stratified education system operates. It is therefore also a key to changing this stratification, particularly when the constraints of neo-colonial legacies in education are also understood and challenged (Hickling-Hudson, 2010 and 2011). Educators inspired by an ‘Ubuntu’ philosophy are vital to the transformative process of equalizing literacies.

Conclusion

Nearly all Caribbean societies are still struggling with inadequate resourcing of the schools at the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid. These schools account for a flow of thousands of young school leavers whose poor education has left them without the skills and competencies to achieve an adequate living or respect in their societies. At the same time, a fortunate minority benefits from going to ‘prestige’ schools and colleges that provide them with an excellent education and career preparation. While gains have been made in overcoming the odds of inadequate resources to advance the spread of high-quality education in the region, it cannot be denied that there is a long way to go in
addressing the injustices of neo-colonial educational structures of privilege, elitism and deprivation.

Using an 'Ubuntu' model, which clearly accords with the ethical and humanist goals of the great religions of the world, the Caribbean region would work in alliance with development partners to change education so that every parent would be satisfied with the education pathways and the humanist education available for their children. The state would be required to change the pattern of stratified channels of education and occupation, so as to help reduce and eliminate the barriers that still sustain a dysfunctional level of inequality between social classes, strata, and gender groups. It is this that would achieve 'transformation'.

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