

Extending the Reach of Education, Generating Employment for the Marginalised

Abstract

Promise of extending free tuition to secondary level students as well as increasing employment took the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) out of the wilderness after 18 years. This paper examines how the initiative of the outgoing People's National Party (PNP) government to have all teachers at the secondary level educated to the first degree level could be extended to ensuring primary and secondary education for all (adults and children alike). Such low cost strategy through the use of distance education could generate employment for the youth as well as those who are over 35 years, without working experience and who have thus been deemed unemployable. Through this mechanism, the potential of most members of the society would be unleashed to realize enhanced welfare for all.

The Context

An Inadequate Educational System

The previous administration in Jamaica sought to have all teachers in the educational system educated up to the first degree level. It therefore implemented a programme for teachers to access a first degree in education at the University of the West Indies at the cost of the state (Ministry of Finance, 2004). This in service programme is done through distance education with facilities being available for online interaction with tutors. Additionally, some teachers' colleges have become degree granting institutions with Mico College being granted university status (Ministry of Education and Youth, 2004). At these institutions, students have the option of being granted a diploma or a degree in the field of education.

With the constraints of a tight budget and increased inflation, the new administration implemented its election promise of free tuition for students at the secondary level. However, students were required to pay much more than the tuition fee established by the government. Tuition fees were set at higher rates for traditional high schools. Yet, many traditional high schools charged more than twice the recommended tuition fees for schools through the contributory fees that they attached thereto. Such "voluntary" contributions are even higher for those who are enrolled in the Sixth form programmes at these schools.¹

However, many children are outside of the net of educational access, with boys more likely tending to drop out of or perform at low levels within the school system (Chevannes, 2005). Chevannes points out that boys under perform because the system fails to cater to their needs by excluding a learning experience which largely involves 'doing'. As a result, boys lack interest and some drop out of the system. However, where their interests are stimulated, they do as well as their female counterparts in the educational system. He states

that parents tend to send girls to school over boys if they face financial difficulties because they feel that boys are better able to fend for themselves without a formal education (Chevannes, 2001). Girls also fall out of the system because of financial constraints as well as teenage pregnancy.

Consequently the situation exists where many students leave the educational system at levels of academic competence that is below the minimum required standards. A significant proportion of students from non-traditional schools complete their secondary education functionally illiterate, while there are many who have to cease their education at grade nine because they cannot access spaces in secondary schools after attending junior high schools (Statistical Institute of Jamaica, 2000). Correia and Cunningham (2003, p.19) endorse this position by stating that, "In Jamaica in 1999, 2.5 percent of 12 to 14 year olds were not in school, but by the age of 15 to 16 years, the proportion of school leavers was almost 17 percent which indicate a significant drop out rate at the secondary level." There is therefore a need for a definition of educational access which involves an output of literate and skilled individuals able to grasp opportunities in the domestic and international realms. This need is underscored by the Ministry of Education statement that despite widespread access to education, its effectiveness is compromised by high pupil teacher ratio, inadequate space and resources for studying within some poor households, as well as difficulties these households face in providing lunch money and bus fare for their children (Ministry of Education, 2004).

Schools attended by students from low socio-economic backgrounds tend to have inadequate facilities to cater to their needs or to rebound from adverse effects of natural disasters. After Hurricane Dean in August 2007, teachers at a traditional high school were upset that repairs to the Sixth Form block only took place at the end of the first term. This was despite the fact that they were provided with alternative classroom space which includes the infrequently used lecture rooms of the Science Department.² At this school, teachers enjoy comfortable office space, with approximately five of them to a room, and are better able to acquire resource materials for their students. In contrast, many of the non-traditional high schools that experienced damage by Hurricane Ivan in September 2004 have not fully recovered from its ravages and have no extra classroom to facilitate alternative learning

space for students. Such schools usually have a common staff area with limited storage facilities for teachers. In the case where the school has two shifts, the number of teachers who use the common staff area is doubled.

Constraints to Employment Opportunities

Functionalists consider schools as important for providing suitable personnel to fill available positions in the society (Haralambos and Holborn, 1995). Marxists such as Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue, however, that the educational system is skewed toward maintaining class positions. However neither recognises the gender bias nature of success in the Jamaican educational system or that the most influential and financially rewarding positions are held by men (Miller, 1986). Jamaica's educational system seem to reflect functionalist contention that its objective is to sort people for different positions in the society as well as to get them to internalise values that promote cohesion and hence discipline in the society. However, the state is concerned that inadequate positions exist to match the number of persons who are available for work. Consequently, there is a tendency to look overseas for employment opportunities because of the awareness of the social ills that are likely to emanate from unemployment. Lack of education and access to employment are considered to be major contributors to crime in Jamaica. Hence a reserve army of labour to keep the working class in check actually has the reverse effect of that postulated by Marxists. There is therefore a general concern for raising the degree and dispersion of educational competence within the population.

The Ministry of Labour is one medium for recruiting personnel for enterprises in North America. Parnel Charles, the current Minister of Labour bemoans the fact that many skilled persons in Jamaica are uncertified with some even lacking the basic academic background to facilitate easy certification (Ministry of Labour and Social Security, 2007). He considers training as necessary for Jamaicans to maximise their benefits from the international labour market. Hence one solution pursued by government to reduce unemployment is the discovery and grasp of employment opportunities for Jamaicans overseas.

Trained workers who are employed seasonally in North America bring back more funds to the domestic economy than untrained workers since they command higher wages

and thus contribute to higher standards of living and economic growth. Additionally, the pool of permanent migrant workers to developed countries provides resources that can be accessed by the state.

There is the view being bandied about that our males, particularly the youth, are worse off because a significant proportion of them drop out of school. Their female counterparts are said to have better life chances because they tend to be more literate and numerate. However more males tend to be employed than women and thus women and children are still more likely to be steeped in poverty (Chevannes, 2005). Chevannes also state that the males tend to be more street smart and hence better able to survive the harsh economic conditions of Jamaica.

However, despite being street smart, many males – some of whom can barely read – but who are proficient in their fields, cannot obtain certification. Such skills, although allowing them to command high levels of income much of which is outside of the tax net, are constrained by their lack of academic achievement. This reduces their ability to maximise their income and, in extreme cases, renders it easier for them to be swindled. In a lower class community in Central Village, for instance, there is a plumber who everyone considers to be competent in solving plumbing problems. Although he is illiterate, he is quite proficient in calculating the money he should receive as well as the change for his clients. He has had the misfortune of being swindled of his life savings twice because the bank had recommended that he should have a trustworthy joint account holder to help him with transactions at the financial institution. This underscores the problem of a significant proportion of our mainly male population, although a smaller proportion of females also face this problem. Low academic competence is further exemplified in skilled construction workers finding it problematic to provide the required estimate of costs of building to the loan agency of their client. By virtue of being marginalised by the lack of literacy, some skilled personnel use their acquired wealth to buy items such as motor vehicles, but sidestep the official system by buying a drivers' license.³

Despite the fact that people who drop out of the educational system, particularly the males acquire skills that result in the command of high levels of income in some instances, they are constrained in terms of their life chances. Such constraints result from the need to

interact with the formal system in situations that require competence in reading and writing. This sometimes contributes to corruption, where they might resort to bribery of public officials in order to enjoy the fruits of their labour or their being swindled by persons in whom they put their trust.

Literate and Marginalised Groups

P.J. Patterson, a former Prime Minister of Jamaica, recognises the great loss of human resources when teachers retire. He therefore spoke of a plan that would include retired teachers to train young teachers (Ministry of Education and Youth, 2004). Despite the recognition that retired teachers could actually contribute more to the educational system, many are only allowed to continue for only an extra year or two in the public educational system. Some of these teachers access jobs at private and public schools but many suffer from having to survive on fixed pensions that rapidly depreciate in value. Moreover since Jamaica is faced with an aging population, it is of even greater importance to make good use of our resources and reduce the age discrimination that is part of our society (Morgan, 2005). Many of these retired teachers feel that they can, and many continue to, make positive contributions to the educational system. However, not all of these retired teachers can be utilised in the formal educational system. There is therefore a need for careful consideration of how such human resources can be utilised to make additional contributions to the Jamaican society.

There is another group of persons who leave school with a sound education up to the tertiary level, but are unable to gain employment because they lack experience and there are few vacancies. Some of these are young, but there is also an older set – albeit much smaller than the former – who gained their tertiary education at a later stage such as in their late thirties or forties. These older members of the workforce had spent their earlier adult lives nurturing or caring for their children or loved ones. They are unable to gain employment in areas that are not considered to be menial and are sometimes belittled by potential employers who feel that they should be on the “dump heap” because they have wasted their lives. Their response to questions that attempt to find out what they were doing with their lives all this time is not taken to be an adequate response by potential employers. That these persons are

not utilised in the process of producing goods and/services mean that the nation is producing below its potential.

The Solution

School places are limited and the Ministry of Education seems preoccupied with saving the ones who are now in the schools. It has therefore proposed that no student should be promoted to a higher grade until he or she has achieved the minimum level of academic competence for each grade. There is very little attention given to those who lack basic skills or competence levels who have fallen out of the education system because few facilities exist to deal with their weaknesses. Moreover, overcrowding in many schools at secondary and primary levels and rising levels of indiscipline in school require that actions that are least costly be taken.

I was fascinated by two primary school students who were on their way to school on a cramped bus. They were enjoying themselves by quizzing each other on the Spanish or English equivalent of a few words. My enquiry yielded the information that they had learnt the Spanish words from the cartoon "Dora and Her Friends" that is aired on television. This underscores the role that television could play in passing on literacy and numeracy skills which uses cartoons as an integral part of the process. The programme would be piloted on young children and complemented by production and dissemination of comics which reflect the progress in reading after the completion of each module. Most people do not mind comics, but young boys seem to be partial to reading them. It was such knowledge that made a homemaker, who is currently a teacher, utilise them to teach her boys to read because they did not respond well to their teachers' efforts in this regard. She also baked delights which she used to foster an understanding of fractions because she understood that her sons, unlike their sisters learnt from "doing." Instruction, using the television as tool for distance education, in this regard, should not only be aimed at the young but all members of the population who need to become literate and numerate.

The education programme should also involve parents by instructing them on how to instil acceptable values and modes of behaviour in their children. Further, it should indicate

how they can be involved in educating their children and reinforcing what they are learning in the public educational system which includes distance education through the television.

Retired teachers from the primary system could be used in this project to provide formal instructions to students in their homes, for reading and others subjects for which a basic competence is required. This instruction should be pitted at different levels and such programmes should be available on DVD for families that need them. At the same time, in different communities, people who are unemployed and trained at the tertiary level would have the option of serving as special tutors for such students. They would dedicate some days per week to get students, after they attained an acceptable level of numeracy and literacy, to catch up with students in their age group. Of course the tutors would have to be trained as facilitators and retired teachers could be utilised in this process.

With respect to dropouts from the secondary sector, classes by master teachers in different subject areas should be videotaped and accessed by such students at educational centres in different communities. In areas where traditional high schools exist, they could serve as the centres since they are likely to be equipped with the required technological equipment. Safeguards would, however, have to be in place to ensure that the equipment is properly taken care of. Of course, the schools that serve as centres should be paid for use of the facilities since they are usually equipped by resources that are gained independently of the Ministry of Education.

Similarly, retired teachers and students who have left tertiary institutions and find themselves unemployed could be used to give feedback to students in different subject areas in the capacity of tutors. A tutor would be required to correct students' assignments in one subject area only. Additionally, interaction with students would be facilitated and built in this programme for a few hours per week at central locations. Students should be prepared for the CSEC subjects offered by CXC. Training at all levels should also involve inculcation of the relevant values for the cohesion of the society.

Costs, Benefits and Financing of the Programme

Integral to any educational programme is the consideration of how funding could be accessed and costs minimized. In the short, medium and long terms, the project would yield

cost savings and the development of human capital and hence increased productivity. It has an inbuilt scheme for correction of the situation of anomie that threatens the nation as seen in the increase incidence of crime and other antisocial behaviours. Bertrand Bainvel contends that the price of excluding boys from the educational system is high by stating, "As we know, the price of exclusion is high, the price of violence, the price of poor health and poorly informed decisions." (UNICEF, 2007) Cost savings would be realised in the reduction of the need to build and maintain schools as well as pay fulltime teachers and other support staff. Part time personnel would gain valuable working experience and earn income. Since training of tutors would not involve the full certification required for teachers but would be enough to enable them to provide proper guidance to students, there would be mitigation of the adverse effects of losing experienced and competent teachers from the educational system.

Greater equity would be achieved through greater access to education and employment. The marginalised groups identified would be empowered and better able to function in the formal system (both locally and overseas), thus reducing the perceived need to bribe employees in the local public sector.

The Minister of Education speaks about the willingness of members of the Diaspora to help in the education system. He states that monetary contributions from such source could be placed in a general pool to facilitate improvements in education (Cuff, 2008). This fund could be used to finance this project which would extend the reach of education to adults and children as well as be inclusive of both males and females.

Conclusions

Colonial education was considered important for inculcating the values for achieving imperial goals. During that period, such goals had little to do with improving the condition of the masses. Inculcating positive values is important in independent Jamaica but of equal importance is the need to improve the conditions of the masses and to ensure that very few, if any, of the populace get left behind in the quest for improved well-being. Education enhances prospects for improving and maintaining welfare and the strategy prescribed above has an inbuilt formula for greater equity. Increased employment is generated from expanding access to education and the possibilities provided by increasing academic and social competencies.

Greater opportunities and equity should reduce motivations for criminal activities and lead to expansions in the domestic economy. A more cohesive and committed society to the objectives of the nation would be realised, because it would be clear that seeking the well-being of its citizens is the core function of government.

¹. Some sixth form students at a traditional high school were appalled and others outraged when they received their tuition refund for tuition last term. They received less than four thousand dollars after they had paid over twenty thousand dollars in Jamaican currency.

². This information was gleaned from discussion with students and teachers at a traditional high school.

³. Such knowledge was obtained from participant observation in the community. I had to prepare and estimate for a skilled construction worker as well as accompany the plumber to the bank, outlined his misfortunes and insisted that an alternative be found which made him the sole account holder.

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