

Education in Jamaica: A need for redefinition and a changing of the old philosophy of education

Paul Andrew Bourne, Ruth Owen-Wright

Northern Caribbean University, Mandeville, Manchester, Jamaica

**Corresponding Author:* Paul Andrew Bourne, Northern Caribbean University, Mandeville, Manchester, Jamaica

ABSTRACT

According to Peters (2001) among the legacies of imperialism in the Caribbean is the educational system, which still holds some of the philosophies of the British structure. This educational philosophy dates back to the Emancipation Act 1834 when metaphysics and idealism were the dominant paradigms. It was not until 1972 when Michael Manley became Prime Minister of Jamaica that there were any bold steps to reform education in Jamaica or for anyone to articulate that the education system then was for another time, people living in an agrarian economy. It was noted that the students at primary levels at the primary level performed poorly in English Language and Mathematics, which was evidenced in the selection examinations for entry to high and technical schools (Glasgow & Langley, 1989). Thirty-five years later since Michael Manley shifted the education paradigm the statistics are showing that students are failing in the area of English (reading, writing) and Mathematics. The Grade 4 Numeracy test for 2016 revealed that Of the 765 public schools, 764 entered 33,447 students to sit the Test with “approximately 57 percent attaining mastery; some 27.2 percent attaining almost mastery and 15.8 percent non-mastery. Rooted in the Caribbean educational system is metaphysical-epistemology and it impact the teaching-learning process—dominant teaching methodology (or the traditional teaching methodology). Such a philosophy explains why teacher is the center of the learning process, classrooms are so designed, textbooks are relied upon, pupils are substantially viewed as receptacles and why students rely upon the teachers for knowledge, and there is less experimental learning approaches being employed by teachers. The fact is, the teachers are trained in this dominant philosophy and so they repeat what they were taught and the cycle continues like that. Even with titles as ‘failing schools’, examinations such as GSAT, CSEC and CAPE are structured more in keeping with traditional teaching methodology than new philosophies such as existentialism; post-modernism; feminism; constructionism; analytic philosophy; phenomenology, or educational philosophies such as positivism, perennialism, progressivism, reconstructionism, behaviorism and essentialism. Based on the listing of educational philosophies, it is clear that general philosophy impacts on educational philosophies. In concluding, the high illiteracy of young people as well as innumeracy is a summation of the continued usage of ‘failed philosophy’ that goes into impacting on the educational practices of the society. Hence, politicians and policy-makers in the Caribbean must be held accountable for the continued usage of failed philosophy. The traditionalists have argued that there is an ‘absolute truth’ and this thinking has constituted educational practices. This fallacious thinking holds the key to understanding why the educational system has failed; but the paradigm that impacts educational practices is false and as such produce the current outcomes. It should be noted that “Human beings are manipulators of abstract symbols” (Knight, 2006, p. 171) and as such the traditionalists teaching methodology should be fundamentally change to reflect current trends in philosophies. It is reiterated that, there is no ‘failing schools’. What exists is a failed philosophy that has continued to dominate educational practices.

Keywords: Education, Philosophy of education, Secondary schools.

INTRODUCTION

When Jamaica exchanged the Union Jack for its own flag on August 6, 1962 the nation did not exchange the existing education system for its own. Like the other English-Speaking nations in the Caribbean, Jamaican continued to embrace the British colonial education philosophy (Bacchus, 1994; British Council,

2017; Coates, n.d.; Hunte, 1976). It was not uncommon for the former British colonies, post-independence, to continue to pattern the British system of education, which continues to be a fundamental part of their colonial legacy. According to Peters (2001) among the legacies of imperialism in the Caribbean is the educational system, which still holds some of

the philosophies of the British structure. This educational philosophy dates back to the Emancipation Act 1834 when metaphysics and idealism were the dominant paradigms. It was not until 1972 when Michael Manley became Prime Minister of Jamaica that there were any bold steps to reform education in Jamaica or for anyone to articulate that the education system then was for another time, people living in an agrarian economy. As such, the contemporary philosophy of education continues to bear the legacy of colonial British system, that of pre-independence Jamaica and some resemblance of what obtained in the 1970, particularly from vision of Michael Manley. Hence, this paper examines the philosophy of the Jamaican educational system, the labelling of schools, and the new for a new philosophy that will shaped education in respect to current realities of the society.

DISCUSSION

Manley (1975, cited in Dean, 2009) suggested that the philosophy of education and the philosophy of education suitable for a developing nation like Jamaica were different. Manley contextualised that there are two types of philosophy of education, one based on tradition, which viewed education as the passing on a body of accumulated knowledge through a formal education system and the other designed to bring the change in attitudes and skills that would help to build the kind of economy that Jamaica desired. It was the latter that he believed resonated with the Jamaican people, the kind of education that would allow for the utilization of the country's resources, which could only be achieved by a paradigm shift in our education system. Manley's ultimate goal was a divorce from British education system which he believed "was designed to create small Jamaican elite with the basic ideas of the British political system ingrained in its attitudes" (Manley, 1982:31). Manley envisaged that this kind of education system was too restrictive for Jamaican people's future education and economic growth as well as social development.

Manley inherited an education system that emphasized the teaching of reading, writing and arithmetic, which according to Dean (2009) did not benefit the economy as it produced a vast number of white collar workers and too few skilled workers. Under his governance there were many policy changes to create egalitarian education system, which embrace the policy of free education and establishment of a National

Literacy Board, in 1972, to eradicate illiteracy in the unattached 15 plus age cohort. It is this Board that in 1974 morphed into the Jamaica Movement for the Advanced of Literacy (JAMAL) and is today known as the Jamaica Foundation for Lifelong Learning (JFLL) (Neita, 2013). For Manley, education was important because a literate workforce was easier to train (Manley, 1975) to meet the new paradigm in economic growth.

In 1972 when Manley came to power 500,000 Jamaicans, or 40 per cent, over the age of 15 were illiterate (Neita, 2013). According to Kaufman (1985, cited in Deans 2009) 70,000 graduated in 1976 from the literacy programme 80, 000 obtained the fundamentals of literacy through television and radio classes and another 90,000 enrolled in ongoing JAMAL in adult education centres and workplaces. Miller (1999) reported that a literacy survey conducted in 1981 revealed that functional literacy had reduce to 24.3 per cent of the population though the population had increased significantly over a 17 year- period.

In the pre and post-independence period the people of the English -Speaking Caribbean wrote British-based examinations. In a report from the Ministry of Education the failure rates in British -based General Certificate of Education ordinary level (G.C.E 'O' Level) examinations were high. In 1972 only 50 per cent of the candidates were successful in 30,876 papers taken, however at the Advanced level the candidates passed 42% of all papers taken. The Michael Manley led administration concluded that these high failure rates would impede their goal to increase the manpower needs, "it will be difficult to correct the country's shortage of higher and middle manpower unless there is much better flow through the secondary schools" Ministry of Education (1973:4-5, cited in Dean, 2009).

In 1973 Manley offered free tuition at both the secondary and university levels. At the same time the government instituted training for the development of teachers at the primary level. The aim was to increase the literacy rates and improve performance on standardized tests in schools. In addition, to meet the demands of the educational system the government embarked on a rigorous teaching training programme as well as the active recruitment of expatriate teachers to fulfil the specific curriculum needs at the primary and secondary levels (Dean, 2009).

It was noted that the students at primary levels at the primary level performed poorly in English Language and Mathematics, which was evidenced in the selection examinations for entry to high and technical schools (Glasgow & Langley, 1989). Thirty-five years later since Michael Manley shifted the education paradigm the statistics are showing that students are failing in the area of English (reading, writing) and Mathematics. The Grade 4 Numeracy test for 2016 revealed that Of the 765 public schools, 764 entered 33,447 students to sit the Test with “approximately 57 percent attaining mastery; some 27.2 percent attaining almost mastery and 15.8 percent non-mastery. The percentage of students achieving mastery decreased by four (4) percentage points when compared to 2015” (Ministry of Education, Youth and Information, 2017).

The test has five strands: Number - Representation and Operation, Measurement, Geometry, Algebra & Statistics. Overall mastery is determined by attainment in three combined areas Number - Representation & Operation, Measurement & Geometry and Algebra & Statistics. The Grade 4 Literacy test results “The 764 public schools with grade 4 enrolment entered 33,372 students to sit the Test with approximately 79 percent attaining mastery; some 17.6 percent attaining almost mastery and 3.7 percent non-mastery. The percentage of

students achieving mastery decreased by six (6) percentage points when compared to the previous year” (Ministry of Education, Youth and Information, 2017). The test focussed three skills word recognition, reading comprehension and writing.

The National Inspectorate 2015 reported on 950 primary and secondary schools inspected performances in English and Mathematics. The students’ attainment in English at the primary level is derived from students’ performance data in Grade 4 and the Grade Six Achievement Test (GSAT) language Arts, while the secondary level students’ performance is derived from the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) passes in English. The report states that though students’ attainment in attainment in English at both the primary and secondary level is improving, it is still low.

Table 1 below provides data on the performance of primary and high schools in English. Approximately 25.4 per cent of the primary schools and 34.6 per cent of the secondary schools inspected were rated as performing satisfactory and above. However, when aggregated approximately 26.9 per cent of the schools inspected were rated as performing satisfactory and above in English. The secondary schools outperformed the primary schools by 9.2 per cent.

Table1. Students’ Attainment in English by Educational Level

Inspection Ratings	Primary Level	Percentage (%)	Secondary Level	Percentage (%)	National	Percentage (%)
Exceptionally High	1	0.1	19	12.0	20	2.1
Good	41	5.2	18	11.3	59	6.2
Satisfactory	159	20.1	18	11.3	177	18.6
Unsatisfactory	583	73.7	81	5.9	664	69.9
Needs Immediate Support	7	0.9	23	14.5	30	3.2
Total	791	100.0	159	100	950	100.0

Source: Ministry of Education, Youth and Information: NEI Inspectorate 2015 Report

Students’ attainment in mathematics is calculated by using their performances in Grade 4 Numeracy and GSAT Mathematics at the primary level as well as CSEC passes in mathematics at the secondary level, over the last three years. At the primary level 23.1 per cent and 24.5 per cent of the secondary schools inspected were rated as performing satisfactory and above. The secondary schools outperformed the primary schools by 1.4 per cent. Table 2 below shows that data for students’ performance in mathematics.

The NEI report indicated that “students’ achievement in English and Mathematics was above the Ministry of Education’s target, in only six per cent (6%) of the schools inspected; at the targets in sixteen (16%); satisfactory in fifty-two per cent (52%); unsatisfactory in thirty per cent (30%); and needs immediate support in one per cent (1%)” (p. 7).

According to Dean (2009) primary school education is deemed to be the greatest predictor of overall academic success. Campbell (2014)

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stated that a major think tank, Educate Jamaica, reported that 75 per cent of the Island's secondary schools are underperforming; while only 25 per cent of graduates from all post-primary schools are producing graduates capable of passing five or more subjects at the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) level inclusive of English and

Mathematics. Graduates of these institutions require a minimum of five CSEC subjects, including English and Mathematics to matriculate into tertiary-level institutions or access the labour market. Interestingly, 75 per cent of the secondary schools are unable to meet this minimum requirement.

Table 2. *Students' Attainment in Mathematics by Educational Level*

Inspection Ratings	Primary Level	Percentage (%)	Secondary (%)	Percentage (%)	National	Percentage (%)
Exceptionally High	1	0.1	8	5.0	9	1.0
Good	30	3.8	15	9.4	45	4.7
Satisfactory	152	19.2	16	10.1	168	17.7
Unsatisfactory	597	75.5	76	47.8	673	70.8
Needs Immediate Support	11	1.4	44	27.7	55	5.8
Total	701	100.0	159	100.0	950	100

Source: *Ministry of Education, Youth and Information: NEI Inspectorate 2015 Report*

It is therefore no wonder that educators have added to their lexicon the term failed schools or failing schools. Muijs (2007) suggested that the key determinant for labelling schools as failing “appears to be the academic achievement of the pupils, specifically their achievement on national tests” (p.78). Muijs' definition appears to harmonise with the Ministry of Education, Information, and Youth's identification of failing schools. But should there be failing schools, when the philosophy of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Information is ‘*Every Child Can Learn, Every Child Must Learn*’? Has the Michael Manley's philosophy of education outlived its time? Is it time for a new paradigm?

Rooted in the Caribbean educational system is metaphysical-epistemology and it impact the teaching-learning process—dominant teaching methodology (or the traditional teaching methodology). Such a philosophy explains why teacher is the center of the learning process, classrooms are so designed, textbooks are relied upon, pupils are substantially viewed as receptacles and why students rely upon the teachers for knowledge, and there is less experimental learning approaches being employed by teachers. The fact is, the teachers are trained in this dominant philosophy and so they repeat what they were taught and the cycle continues like that. Even with titles as ‘failing schools’, examinations such as GSAT, CSEC and CAPE are structured more in keeping with traditional teaching methodology than new philosophies such as existentialism; post-modernism; feminism; constructionism; analytic

philosophy; phenomenology, or educational philosophies such as positivism, perennialism, progressivism, reconstructionism, behaviorism and essentialism. Based on the listing of educational philosophies, it is clear that general philosophy impacts on educational philosophies.

Knight opined that “Philosophy, therefore, is a basic constituent in the foundation of educational practice” (p. 33) and so this goes to the core of current dilemma in Jamaica. In Jamaica, the dominant educational philosophies go back to idealism or positivism, and pragmatism. This explains why many of the educational philosophies employed in classrooms are in keeping with the traditional philosophies that developed from the Enlightenment era, and therefore accounts for impact of logical analysis in thinking, solving problems and training teachers.

Almost all the classrooms in Jamaica are designed where the teacher is the leader or centre—atop the pyramid structure of the room—and the curricula reveal this teacher-centered dominant paradigm. Both the public and private-educational institutions in the Jamaica reflect a similar metaphysical-epistemology. As a result, the educational issues—nature of the students; role of the teacher; curriculum; teaching methodologies, and social function of educational institutions—are expressions of the social system. The educational system is a mere sub-system of the system and means it is impacted upon by the socially agreed structure. It follows that without a paradigm shift in the system's

dominant philosophy, the educational system will continue to reflect this thinking that dates back to pre-Independence in Jamaica.

Christian education is no different in the English-Speaking Caribbean as it is by large fundamentally impacted on by the traditional philosophy of the social system. Although Christian philosophies are not in keeping with idealism, pragmatism, and metaphysical-epistemology; Christian-education equally designed around secular-philosophies with it thinking being on the outskirts. In fact, even the Adventist philosophy has not fundamentally fashioned their educational institutions as the secular philosophies are the core used in these schools. This perspective is brought to light by this comment made by George Knight, “What goes by the name Christian education is sometimes a program of ‘pagan education with a chocolate coating of Christianity’” (2006, p. 164).

This can be used to explain why Christian philosophy is not the building blocks of Christian-education because of the dominance of secular philosophical perspective—the social system to which religion is a subset. Like the philosophical dilemma experienced by Christian-education in the Caribbean, the wider schools are still a part of the general structure and this goes to the crux of why they are subtly fashioned into acceptance of the social system. This is done by way of the examination (GSAT; CSEC; CAPE; A’Level). The fact the Christian-educational institutions have not designed their examinations; they are still subscribed to the social system and its philosophy. This begs the question, ‘What is the problem that continues to elude educators and policy-makers in the Caribbean as it relates to revert the under-performance of students in schools?’

The answer is simply the philosophy of the social system. Over the last one-half centuries, there have been the development of countless educational philosophies and philosophies that have shown their positive influence on educational outcome, increased human motivation and yet the dominant paradigm still goes back to Enlightenment era or 19-th Century. Instead of employing modern or contemporary philosophies—such as existentialism; reconstructionism; progressivism; perennialism; essentialism; multiculturalism, postmodernism—Caribbean societies have continued to hold steadfast to the legacy of slavery’s educational system and this direct contemporary educational practices. Yearly, a

new Band-Aid is placed over the ailing educational system of the English-Speaking Caribbean because the root cause, the paradigm or driving philosophy, is not correctly identified as reason for the problem.

The question is then asked “If the past educational system is correctly designed for its time; why have we not framed one in keeping with the current era?” Instead of designing an educational system around current philosophies, the English-Speaking Caribbean has continued to lambast the system, use a traditional philosophy that is not working, and then wonder why the results are mysteriously as they are. The educational system is not the failure; but it is the traditional philosophy that has died a long time ago that is being used to influence educational practices that is the failure. There is no ‘failing schools’, the reality is a ‘failed philosophy’.

For decades, stakeholders have been lamented the status of secondary level education in the world, including the United States, and Finn aptly summarizes the reality of the situation this way:

That more and more people are discontented with today’s high schools and their results is surely a good thing. This issue deserves to be on the national stage. But first it has to play in the provinces, in summer stock, and in off-off Broadway theaters, where actors, directors, investors, critics, and audiences alike can come to understand it” (Finn, 2006, p. 32)

Since teenagers are animated by things with tangible rewards and sleeves-rolled-up engagement, we need to get practical. Focus on tech-prep programs, ventures that join high schools to community colleges, work-study, schedules that blend school with jobs, voluntarism and community service, and kindred ways of tapping into the “affective,” pecuniary, and social sides of young people.

It can be deduced from Finn’s perspective that current philosophy is not in keeping with the desires, demands, expectations, and focus of the current population—in high school. The present philosophy of education is surrounding the past population’s desires, demands, expectations, and focus—educators and this is the problem. There is need for an affective contemporary philosophy of education at the secondary school that fits the new generation. The reality is, were are pouring wine in dirty vessel and expects a wholesome output.

CONCLUSION

In concluding, the high illiteracy of young people as well as innumeracy is a summation of the continued usage of 'failed philosophy' that goes into impacting on the educational practices of the society. Hence, politicians and policy-makers in the Caribbean must be held accountable for the continued usage of failed philosophy. The traditionalists have argued that there is an 'absolute truth' and this thinking has constituted educational practices. This fallacious thinking holds the key to understanding why the educational system has failed; but the paradigm that impacts educational practices is false and as such produce the current outcomes. It should be noted that "Human beings are manipulators of abstract symbols" (Knight, 2006, p. 171) and as such the traditionalists teaching methodology should be fundamentally change to reflect current trends in philosophies. It is reiterated that, there is no 'failing schools'. What exists is a failed philosophy that has continued to dominate educational practices.

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