

Gender and political-economy in Caribbean education systems

An agenda for inclusion



Barbara Bailey

Caribbean education: post emancipation

Anglophone Caribbean countries share a common political history, and their education systems to a large extent represent the same package, albeit in a somewhat different wrapping, handed over to them as part and parcel of the post-emancipation, political-economic settlements.

At the turn of the 19th century, education for ex-slaves was established with the explicit aim of retaining them as a compliant labouring class through maintaining 'power over their minds' (Gordon, 1963). This objective was effectively achieved through the establishment of a two-tiered, dual system of education that was intended to maintain social separation of two social groups: grammar schools for the children of the colonisers and an inferior elementary system for the children of the colonised ex-slaves. From the outset, therefore, race and political economy played an important role in access to formal education in the Caribbean.

The rift between race and social class in post-emancipation Caribbean society, however, masked hierarchical relations of gender, which was effectively achieved through an intentional sex segregation of curricula offered in both tiers of the education system that ensured differential socialisation of males and females into gender-related roles. The consequences of the differential education of girls and boys from the two social strata are self-evident. Lower-class girls learned how to be mothers or paid servants in upper-class homes, while lower-class boys were groomed for manual labour on the plantations. Middle-class girls were prepared to be good wives, clerical workers or teachers, while boys from this social class were prepared for commerce and politics, among other things.

Since the very beginnings of formal education, race, political economy and gender have thus been basic interlocking hierarchies determining differential access to educational resources and knowledge. The distribution of both material and symbolic power associated with the 'educated man' was therefore regulated through systems of education explicitly structured and organised in ways intended to maintain the white, male, upper class status quo; which, in spite of sporadic pockets of resistance exerted by subordinated groups, remained intact up until the turn of the 20th century. Education, established as the means of social cohesion in post-emancipation Caribbean societies, was paradoxically at the same time structured and organised in ways that were deliberately divisive and exclusionary.

Caribbean education: pre and post independence

By the 1960s and early 70s, many English-speaking countries had gained political independence from Britain. These independence movements and the quest for national identity and sovereignty were, in no small measure, influenced by movements of the 1970s, beyond the Caribbean, which drew attention to class, race and gender inequalities and brought into question the role of social institutions, including schools, in reproducing and reinforcing these inequities.

It was against this backdrop that during the second half of the 20th century, a number of English-speaking Caribbean countries embarked on successive educational reforms aimed at democratising the system and dismantling its elitist nature. In many countries, this was achieved through expanding capacity at the secondary level and increasing opportunity for tertiary level education primarily through the establishment of the University of the West Indies. The overall intention was to increase opportunities for working-class students and to produce a skilled workforce that could sustain initiatives geared at accelerating development of Caribbean nation-states.

21st century Caribbean education: different wrapping, same package

But what has been the net result of these educational reforms? Have the interlocking structural hierarchies of race, class and gender of the 19th century been regulated to ensure more equitable distribution of educational resources in 21st century Caribbean societies? Are our education systems any more inclusive and equitable now than they were then?

Although the political and economic wrappings of 21st century Caribbean societies are now quite different to those of the 19th and 20th centuries, the educational package continues to be controlled by the same interlocking hierarchies, primarily of class and gender.

The education of Caribbean girls

Currently, there is universal provision at the primary level and enrolment favours males in the majority of Caribbean countries. By the upper secondary and tertiary levels, however, gender parity indices (GPI), that is the ratio of females to males, favour females (Caricom, 2006), and at the University of the West Indies, the only



Schoolgirls in
Trinidad and Tobago

regional tertiary level institution, the GPI was 2.2 in the 2006/07 academic year (The University of the West Indies, Official Statistics 2006/2007).

Several factors account for the shift to female dominance at the higher levels of Caribbean education systems. The international women's movement and the several associated conferences held over the last four decades, with their focus on critical issues facing women and the dismantling of male hegemony, have been driving forces that have forced governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to move towards strategic goals identified for women's advancement. Caribbean governments have endorsed many of these outcome documents and ratified instruments such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

The Commonwealth Education Briefing Note on Gender and Education in the Commonwealth,¹ however, points to the fact that education is not a silver bullet and warns that studies indicate that the potential for education to transform women's lives can be overstated. Data from the Caribbean reinforce this observation.

Increased opportunities for female participation in education have to be viewed against the backdrop of the resilience of patriarchal systems and structures to change; as well as the increasing gender vulnerabilities that women face in the education and formal economic sectors which continue to serve traditional interest and motive. Bailey (2004) points to the fact that:

In spite of their [women's] overall higher levels of participation and performance at the secondary and tertiary levels of

Caribbean education systems, the majority of the women in the region continue to be positioned in the lowest sectors of the capital market, earn lower wages than men, suffer higher rates of unemployment, experience greater levels of poverty, are under-represented in decision-making positions at the meso and macro levels of social and political institutions and lack real personal autonomy. (p.136)

These patterns may be partly due to the fact that, in spite of the numerical dominance of females at the higher levels of Caribbean education systems, class and gender hierarchies mediate their positioning and participation in the school's curriculum and ultimately in the labour market and in positions of governance in ways that continue to be exclusionary. A sex segregation of the curriculum is still discernible, with female pupils predominately clustered in the humanities, business studies and the domestic crafts, propelling them into lower-paying, service-oriented occupations, such as teaching, nursing, clerical work and sales.

The education of Caribbean boys

What about the boys? Generally, drop-out rates at the lower and upper cycles of the secondary level are higher for males than females. Data therefore indicate that boys are under-represented at the higher levels of the education system. What must be noted, however, is that those who remain in school are clustered in the more critical areas of the curriculum – the sciences and technical crafts – and that their performance is very much on a par with that of their female counterparts. For this reason, a distinction needs to be made between male under-achievement and male under-participation.

The question then is: Which males are under-participating and hence under-performing in the educational process and why? This leads to a focus on 'within group' differences rather than on 'between group' differences, an interrogation of macro-level structures and processes and the relationship of education to the political and economic context in which it occurs. In this regard, ways in which the structure of opportunity in Caribbean economies act as a disincentive for boys to remain in school are of paramount importance.

Fewer qualifications, higher levels of employment

Data for 2000 indicate that unemployment rates for women aged 15 and over exceeded that for men in nine Caribbean countries for which data were available; this in spite of the fact that the statistics show that females in these formal labour markets are the better prepared source of human capital. This trend is confirmed by Gayle and Levy (2007) in their study of three working-class communities in Jamaica, where they note that there is a demand for low-skilled male labour above that of low-skilled female labour. They contend that this pre-harvesting of males into the paid labour force acts as a disincentive for boys to remain in school. On the other hand, girls recognise the way in which the economic system privileges males and so remain in school in an effort to be equally competitive with the males who enter the labour market at an earlier age with fewer qualifications. Girls are also retained in school as a custodian measure intended to delay early pregnancy. Males also dominate in positions of leadership and decision-making in the political, business and social spheres.

The wage gap

A further disincentive for males to remain in school is the wage structure. Census data from Jamaica indicate that at all levels of education, except where the response was 'none', males, on average, earn more than females. Similar patterns are also evident in other Caribbean countries.

High reward opportunities in the informal economy

Particularly relevant to the phenomenon of the alienation of working-class males from formal education is the seizing of opportunities for economic gain associated with illegal globalised activities such as the trade in drugs and small weapons. These opportunities, although risky, offer immediate gratification and cannot be ignored in the search for explanations of male under-participation in the formal education system. In fact, reports coming out of Jamaica indicate that schools are targeted by this criminal element and schoolboys are actively recruited as 'middlemen' in the movement of these products both inside and outside of schools.

The sport and music industries

Engagement in the music and sport industries is a further disincentive to boys remaining in school. With the pervasiveness of media images emanating from local and cable networks resulting from cultural globalisation and the appeal of personalities in the multi-million dollar music and sports industries, when interviewed, many boys who had dropped out of school identified music and sport personalities as their role models, and, little wonder, given

the level of income that, with limited educational attainment, performers in the Caribbean, mainly male, can generate through these activities. Further, opportunity to engage in these endeavours is now being supported by arrangements under the Caribbean Single Market (CSM), which facilitates the free movement of musicians and sports persons across borders and therefore potentially could exacerbate the problem of male drop-out from formal education.

Economic restructuring and the loss of male working-class jobs

A further explanatory framework is advanced by Willis (2003), a noted British sociologist who has worked extensively on working-class boys and education in Britain. He examines waves of modernisation in Britain associated with distinct shifts in the economy and traces how these shifts have been accompanied by particular forms of youth culture. He highlights the rise of the post-industrial society and the shift away from reasonably paid semi-skilled and skilled industrial work to much lower paid service-oriented jobs. Boys who are interested in engaging in manual work, in what Willis describes as traditional 'masculinist' and 'anti-mentalistic' ways, no longer have access to such jobs and they are left in suspended animation. This, he contends, drives them to develop a macho-type masculinity that provides a shield from the stigma of failure and finds its fulfilment in the street and in the physicality of sports, music and even crime and violence.

Similar trends are identifiable in the Caribbean economies with the focus now on services, a traditional female area of work, as the engine of economic growth. As in Britain, boys from the lower socio-economic groups recognise the inability of schooling to connect them to real prospects in the world of work, and many opt to exclude themselves and withdraw, both physically and psychologically, from the system because for them education has little functional or symbolic value. Economic restructuring and the inability to find work in the formal sector, coupled with the shifting terrain of gender relations in Caribbean societies, is seemingly creating confusion for adolescent males; particularly as it has to do with the concept of the male breadwinner, which is such a fragile dimension of Caribbean masculinity.

Summary

In short, although Caribbean countries have made steps towards expanding and reforming their education systems, opportunities for inclusion and strategies to facilitate social cohesion continue to be mediated by socio-economic status, gender and race/ethnicity. Generally, despite more females seizing the opportunity to participate in further education, which has improved their access to material resources, females continue to be under-represented in capital markets and in leadership and decision-making positions, particularly in Caribbean parliaments, and thus have little access to symbolic power. On the other hand, although males are under-participating in education and are generally less qualified than females, they enjoy greater access to formal employment; to alternative routes for generating capital; to higher incomes; and to decision-making positions and therefore to both material and symbolic power.

Gender and an agenda for inclusion

The anomalous relationship between educational outputs vis-à-vis outcomes, for males and females, points to the fact that gaining qualifications does not carry the same social currency for males and females. Explanatory frameworks that focus primarily on cultural determinants of observed patterns of male under-participation, particularly at the higher levels of Caribbean education systems, as well as the continued subordination of the majority of women in both the economic and political domains, have serious limitations. These trends have to be assessed in relation to ways in which institutionalised macro-level political-economic structures and systems privilege some and subordinate others. The discourse also has to be informed by an analysis of race and class hierarchies that mediate and articulate expressions of Caribbean masculinity and femininity and determine access to resources.

Lewis, a noted Caribbean scholar, cogently points to the shortcoming in this regard and posits that:

...it is precisely this systemic nature of the problem that is overlooked in many (academic) discourses of gender. Rather than contextualise the nature of the problem faced by men and women in terms of structural determinants, many reduce the problematic to the level of the individual or the collectivity, so that the issue becomes conceptualised as pathology to be corrected without reference to wider social (economic, political) considerations. (Lewis, 2004, p.251)

Persistent gender inequalities in Caribbean education systems are more political and economic than they are educational, and more structural than ideological.

In this regard, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) has developed and endorsed a Gender Mainstreaming Strategy (GMS)² that adopts an integrated approach to analysing and addressing issues of inequality and disadvantage at both the programmatic and policy levels in three main areas that impact regional development: health, education and labour.

Any gender mainstreaming strategy, however, is dependent on a proper diagnosis of the situation and context in which mainstreaming is being attempted and must therefore involve an 'a priori' research stage. In the area of education, the main concern, particularly in light of persuasive arguments in support of the male under-achievement and male marginalisation theses, is to get a better understanding of precise points of gender difference in participation and performance at the secondary and tertiary levels of Caribbean education systems and how a range of personal and school-related factors can influence observed patterns. This initiative is already well under way. The ultimate goal is to improve the effectiveness of educational institutions across the region, transform power relations in these institutions and increase returns on investments in education for both females and males.

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End notes

- 1 Commonwealth Education Briefing Notes, prepared by the Commonwealth Consortium for Education. No. 6. *Gender and Education in the Commonwealth*.
- 2 *Plan of Action to 2005: Framework for Mainstreaming Gender into Key CARICOM Programmes*. Prepared for the CARICOM Secretariat by Andaiye. Georgetown, Guyana: Caribbean Community Secretariat, 2003.

BARBARA BAILEY, Professor of Gender and Education, is University Director of the Institute for Gender and Development Studies, University of the West Indies. Her research focus is on the complex nexus of factors that interact with gender to determine educational outputs for both sexes and ways in which these link to wider social, political and economic outcomes.