

# Outcomes and outputs in Caribbean education systems: the case of Jamaica

**Suzanne M Charles Watson**

Like every other developing region, there is now widespread recognition in the Anglophone Caribbean region that its capacity to achieve the requisite competitive edge to survive in a fast-changing world economy hinges fundamentally on the quality of its human resources.

As the region prepares to commemorate 50 years of political independence, it finds itself at a challenging developmental crossroads. The realities of globalisation, in which external variables are now inextricably linked to domestic agendas, have removed (in part) the ability of its small island developing states to focus on the creation of self-sustaining socio-economic policy and have narrowed the scope for national choices. High unemployment rates, migration and its consequent depletion of intellectual and social capital, susceptibility to the impacts of climate change as well as current global economic trends all now present themselves as concerns in urgent need of attention. Not the least of these concerns is the persistent weaknesses in regional education systems, characterised – according to Knight and Rapley<sup>1</sup> – by ‘failures, drop out and matriculation rates which emphasize how our current educational system is not serving our current and eventual needs’.

As far back as 1997, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Secretariat noted<sup>2</sup>:

*An analysis of the performance of students at the primary and secondary levels indicates some disturbing trends. There is evidence of repetition, drop-outs, absenteeism and truancy which are indicative of the quality of services offered ... At the secondary level, less than 12 per cent of the candidates pass five or more subjects in the CXC while 36 per cent pass no subjects at all. This level of passes is considered to be inadequate to meet the needs of the job market or entry to university education.*

More than a decade later, the Concept Paper of the 2008 Inter-American Development Bank Regional Policy Dialogue around Education<sup>3</sup> reiterated that the state of Caribbean educational systems remained wanting, indicating that:

*Evidence has accumulated about the fact that a large number of children enrolled in schools ... do not learn to read adequately and on time ... Some students have not acquired the basic competencies in literacy and numeracy and hence ... might have ... difficulties in finding gainful employment.*

These regional trends have traditionally been mirrored at the local level, with Jamaica being no exception. Despite significant reforms

and some advances in the education system, Jamaica continues to face serious challenges in its efforts to provide quality learning opportunities. According to the Jamaica Vision 2030 Education Draft Sector Plan<sup>4</sup>, 13 persistent areas of challenge remain in the Jamaica education system in its current dispensation, with underprivileged and differently-abled children, particularly in rural and poor urban areas, suffering most from unequal access to education.

The disparity within the system becomes glaring when one considers that over 25 per cent of children of the poorest quintile are out of school by age 16 compared with only 2.2 per cent of children in the wealthiest quintile. Similarly, daily attendance at school was estimated at only 62 per cent for the children of the poorest quintile, far from the 92.5 per cent national average. Of these about 62 per cent of absences were due to ‘lack of money’.

Carlson<sup>5</sup> makes the point when she notes that:

*[The] reason for ... drop-off ... is the lack of motivation to stay on in school and the various costs and foregone earnings involved. This particularly affects ... pupils from poorer families. Pupils from richer families usually continue to grade 11, but for the poorer students, the drop-off begins after grade 9 ... Upper secondary places need to be made more available and, in particular, accessible to and affordable by children of poorer families, and secondary education needs to be made more relevant and more attractive so that poorer pupils will want to stay on.*

These challenges, which operate in direct contradiction to objectives of Jamaica’s Vision 2030 plan<sup>6</sup> to create a ‘well-resourced, internationally recognised, values-based [education] system that develops critical thinking, and effectively contribute[s] to an improved quality of life at the personal, national and global levels’, include:

1. The inability of some parents to afford the fees charged under the Cost Sharing scheme, despite the ‘no child should be left behind’ policy.
2. Inadequacy of some schools to ensure fully qualified staff, particularly in rural areas.
3. Increase in violence and other forms of criminal activities in and around schools.
4. Inability of government to respond to students who drop out of the education system.

There is now ample evidence<sup>7</sup> that this disparity of access not only contributes to social inequality through the marginalisation of poorer, less performing students but also leads to compromised performance in the short term and varying levels of dislocation and youth *unattachment*<sup>8</sup>, now widely recognised as having far-reaching socio-economic implications.

The implications become obvious when one considers that 17 per cent of the Jamaican population falls within the productive age range of 15–24<sup>9</sup>. Inequities in education systems that leave large percentages of youth who are not enrolled in school, have no form of training and are not currently employed could not only signal an immeasurable decrease in potential economic productivity but, more critically, the reversal of socio-economic gains scored over the last 50 years.

The 2010 Jamaica National Youth Survey (JNYS), which captured data on youth between the ages of 15 and 24, listed as one of its key objectives the completion of a situational analysis of Jamaican youth ‘to facilitate the transition of unattached youth through training, on-the-job experience, information dissemination and labour intermediation services’. It also underscored the issue of unattached youth<sup>10</sup> and the attendant implications for labour market participation and broader national development.

The significance of dislocation is further underscored when one considers that recent statistics show that the youth unemployment rate (25.9 per cent in 2008) was more than twice the overall rate of 10.6 per cent. Moreover, while the overall unemployment rate went up by less than a percentage point in 2009, youth unemployment moved up by 2.2 points<sup>11</sup>.

Blank and Minowa<sup>12</sup> (2001) assert that factors, which must be considered in any assessment of education systems, include the extent to which youth are at risk for unattachment in relation to:

1. Lack of economic security for many youth.
2. Deficiencies in the education and training.
3. Lack of employment opportunities.
4. Health-related problems, including reproductive health problems, mental health problems and accidents and injuries.
5. Unstable home environments and deficiencies in parenting.
6. High levels of crime and violence, including domestic violence and sexual abuse.

This echoes Wilson’s (2003) admonition that ‘a consideration of gender equality in education therefore needs to be understood as the right to education [access and participation], as well as rights within education [educational environments, processes and outcomes], and rights through education [meaningful education outcomes]’.

For us in the Caribbean, as we celebrate our 50 years of independence, Jules<sup>13</sup> counsels:

We are at a juncture in the Caribbean when we must take careful stock of where we are, where we seek to go and how we intend to get there. So much has happened internationally in the global economy, in society and in technology, and so much has happened on the regional front ... that necessitates deep reflection on our options and our possibilities. Taking these challenges into account, the Caribbean today needs an education system which is an effective vehicle of human empowerment and social transformation.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Educational Reform in Jamaica: <http://www.capricaribbean.org/sites/default/files/text/Education%20Reform%20Working%20Paper.pdf>
- <sup>2</sup> [http://www.caricom.org/jsp/communications/meetings\\_statements/citizens\\_21\\_century.jsp?menu=communications##](http://www.caricom.org/jsp/communications/meetings_statements/citizens_21_century.jsp?menu=communications##)
- <sup>3</sup> <http://www.iadb.org/en/research-and-data/regional-policy-dialogue/documents-education,3266.html>
- <sup>4</sup> [http://www.vision2030.gov.jm/Portals/0/Sector\\_Plan/Microsoft%20Word%20-%20Education.pdf](http://www.vision2030.gov.jm/Portals/0/Sector_Plan/Microsoft%20Word%20-%20Education.pdf)
- <sup>5</sup> Social Assessment: Reform of Secondary Education in Jamaica: <http://www.cepal.org/ddpe/publicaciones/sinsigla/xml/2/13802/Social%20AssesmentFinal.pdf>
- <sup>6</sup> [http://www.vision2030.gov.jm/Portals/0/Sector\\_Plan/Microsoft%20Word%20-%20Education.pdf](http://www.vision2030.gov.jm/Portals/0/Sector_Plan/Microsoft%20Word%20-%20Education.pdf)
- <sup>7</sup> [http://www.caricom.org/jsp/single\\_market/services\\_regime/concept\\_paper\\_primary\\_secondary\\_education.pdf](http://www.caricom.org/jsp/single_market/services_regime/concept_paper_primary_secondary_education.pdf)
- <sup>8</sup> The Ministry of Education defines “unattached youth” to be young people between 15-24 who are not currently participating in formal education, technical/vocational training, the country’s National Youth Service Program and/or regular employment
- <sup>9</sup> <http://statinja.gov.jm/EndofYearPopulationbyAgeandSex2008.aspx>
- <sup>10</sup> Youth who are not enrolled in school, have no form of training and are not employed.
- <sup>11</sup> <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20090524/cleisure/cleisure4.html>
- <sup>12</sup> [http://www.sedi.oas.org/ddse/puente\\_caribe/documents/Youth%20at%20Risk%20in%20Jamaica.pdf](http://www.sedi.oas.org/ddse/puente_caribe/documents/Youth%20at%20Risk%20in%20Jamaica.pdf)
- <sup>13</sup> Reinventing Education in the Caribbean: <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20110126/news/news1.html>

**Suzanne M Charles Watson** is a Fulbright Scholar who has worked extensively with international development agencies, including the United Nations, the Caribbean Development Bank, the CARICOM Secretariat and the Commonwealth Secretariat.

She has published on issues of gender and development in the Caribbean, gender and the family, and also on issues of gender and education systems in the Caribbean.

She is attached to the Regional Coordinating Unit of the Institute of Gender and Development Studies at the University of the West Indies as a Research Fellow, and is currently completing an MPhil/PhD in Gender and Development Studies.