

School-to-work transition in the Caribbean: social efficiency or active citizenship?

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'The global youth unemployment rate, which has long exceeded that of other age groups, saw its largest annual increase on record in 2009; at its peak, 75.8 million young people were unemployed' (ILO, 2011a). Even after finding work, young people continue to confront job instability, few opportunities for skills development and advancement, and joblessness. They are more likely to be in vulnerable jobs, which can further adversely affect their future livelihood and income prospects. In fact, young people make up a disproportionate number of the world's working poor. While data on the working poor are limited, since many of them work in the informal economy, 'youth accounted for 23.5 per cent of the total working poor, compared with only 18.6 per cent of non-poor workers' in 52 countries with available data (ILO, 2011b: 5).

It is now widely accepted that the worsening global youth employment situation 'poses an urgent challenge with long-term implications for both young people and society' (Delvoye, 2012). Disturbingly high rates of youth unemployment have emerged as one of the most contentious topics in national political dialogue. They are also cited as a major source of social discontent among significant sections of the youth population in many Commonwealth member countries. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the subject of youth employment has assumed greater significance in the global development discourse. The youth employment dialogue has revolved around many themes and policy considerations. However, for the purposes of this article, we focus on the issue of school-to-work transition (SWT).

School-to-work transition: purpose and relevance of education

'The transition of young people into work marks a critical period in the life-cycle. It signifies a crucial stage of independence, the application of academic learning, and social and economic productivity, as well as sets the stage for an individual's potential in terms of earning capacity, job options and the possibility of advancement' (ILO, 2011a).

Employers lament the relative inability of many young people to cope with the demands of the workplace. They frequently express the view that schools hardly provide students with the requisite skills for effective transition into the labour market. Their anxiety is aptly reflected in Zemsky's human resource request: 'What I want in a new worker, no high school can supply – a twenty-six-year-old with three previous employers' (1994: 5.). Such concerns have fuelled widespread debate on the purpose of education and indeed the relationship between education policies and labour market

demands. Kelly (1995) asserts a prevalent perception of the function of education, namely 'the proper preparation of students for the roles and responsibilities they must be ready to take on when they reach maturity'. However, some proponents of the SWT perspective consider the preparation of graduates for a successful transition into the workforce as the principal function of the education system (Gordon, 1999).

Early proponents of career education provided the springboard for the discourse on the transition from school to work. Snedden purported that educators should channel their energies towards the effective operation of society, that is, social efficiency (as cited in Drost, 1967). Conversely, Dewey (1916) a vociferous critic of Snedden's social efficiency framework, proposed 'education for democracy'. He argued that workforce education should be part of the comprehensive curricula to help students develop a wide range of personal competencies. From Dewey's standpoint, policy-makers should design workforce education to meet the needs of students rather than corporate demands and prepare learners for social challenges instead of occupational roles (ibid.). Evidently, his thesis speaks to a holistic purpose of education that facilitates the preparation of students for active participation in all aspects of life.

Contemporary discourse on the concept of education for employment is largely influenced by the challenges of the labour market, especially issues related to the escalating youth unemployment situation noted above (ILO, 2011a). The discourse of SWT is examined in this article from a Caribbean perspective. It highlights some of the challenges and emerging opportunities for SWT strategies and makes recommendations for a seamless transition from school to work.

SWT in the the Caribbean context

The Caribbean's most valuable resource is its human capital, and its greatest hope for the future lies in the holistic development and strategic engagement of that resource. It is therefore imperative that the education system is appropriately positioned to facilitate this process.

The concept of preparing students for the labour market existed in the Caribbean even before the phrase 'school-to-work transition' became fashionable. Until the 1980s, access to secondary education was relatively limited in most Caribbean countries. All that many persons hoped to achieve was a primary education and the possibility for employment in the trades, general and clerical services sectors of the labour market. As a consequence, many parents, often aided by school teachers and other community

leaders, facilitated the enrolment of their children in informal apprenticeship and mentoring arrangements. Many of these informal arrangements were facilitated during official school holidays and at weekends. In recent times, school-based career guidance services, apprenticeship schemes, work experience and mentoring initiatives have increased and become more formalised. However, alarming increases in youth unemployment have intensified interest in, and ignited greater scrutiny of, these and other youth employment policies and strategies.

The concept of SWT is now an integral component of the Caribbean youth employment dialogue. Yet there is much work to be done to enhance the relevance and effectiveness of existing SWT strategies.

The way forward

The relevant authorities could choose to continue with a social efficiency approach to SWT programmes, with the aim of producing more efficient wage labourers in basic trades, clerical and general services than is now the case and simply effect incremental changes to improve the structure, management and efficiency of these programmes. We propose, however, a more holistic approach fashioned on Dewey's philosophy of education for democracy. Re-defining the vision, scope and purpose of SWT is of paramount importance. This will necessitate a comprehensive transformation and repositioning of existing SWT programmes. The new vision and purpose must transcend the narrow concept of

SWT as a strategy to simply ensure a continuous supply of wage labourers for the private and public sectors. SWT must instead become a vehicle for the development of active citizenship.

We further propose:

- Integrating school-to-work initiatives in the education system with clearly defined learning outcomes.
- Exposing young people to opportunities in areas of social entrepreneurship, community economic empowerment and cultural anthropology.
- Continuing the development of more strategic employability skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, peace-building and participatory social assessment.
- Developing programmes to cultivate effective leadership skills that can contribute to the enhancement of leadership competencies in the workplace, industry and governance spheres.
- Gathering empirical evidence on the efficacy of SWT programmes and use of best practices that display seamless school-to-work integration.
- Broadening the range of opportunities to reflect the diversity of the emerging labour market.
- Integrating issues related to food security, diversification and sustainable agronomic practices.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) and school-to-work transition

Dealing with trade, debt and other macro policy areas can ensure sustainable economic development that young people can drive and benefit from. Growth alone is not enough. Self-employment through isolated enterprise programmes is not enough.

Sara Elder (ILO), speaker at the Commonwealth Secretariat's 'Investing In Youth' conference, 2011.

Work is central to young adults' well-being. As well as providing income, work can lead to broader social and economic advancement, strengthening individuals, their families and communities. Such progress, however, assumes that the work is decent. The economic crisis is reflected in the largest ever cohort of unemployed young people. Between 2007 and 2008, it increased twice as fast as non-youth unemployment and 20 times the average over the previous decade.

School-to-work transition (SWT) indicators are designed to measure the ease or difficulty with which young people are able to access decent work: for example, the progression of a young person from the end of schooling to the first 'career' job or 'regular' job with decent work characteristics. The stage 'in transition' comprises youth who are unemployed, or employed and planning to change jobs or return to education – for example, people in a non-career job, those employed but exposed to decent work deficits (measured in terms of job satisfaction and type of contract), and those currently inactive or not in school but seeking work. The 'transited' stage includes young people actively employed in a career job and wanting to stay there.

Prior SWT surveys (see www.ilo.org/youth) have shown they can provide a solid basis for the formulation of youth employment policies and programmes. For instance, the survey in Kyrgyzstan served to integrate youth employment policy interventions in the country's National Employment Programme. In Egypt, Kosovo, Indonesia, Mongolia and Sri Lanka, the findings of the survey were used for the design of national action plans on youth employment and for assigning priority to youth employment in national policy-making. A recent synthesis survey of eight countries has shown that:

- More than two-thirds of unemployed youth in Egypt and Nepal would consider emigrating for employment purposes. The shares in the other countries – Azerbaijan, China, Islamic Republic of Iran and Mongolia – averaged around 40 per cent.
- Those with higher education are not guaranteed an easier transition from school to work. Egyptian youth with higher education remained in transition 33 months after graduation.
- The expected relationship between hours of work and earnings is an upward sloping curve. However, only in Azerbaijan and Egypt was the relationship positive, while in the other countries there were no obvious relationships. Assuming the findings are accurate, no matter how long youth worked, their total earnings at the end of the month did not change considerably. This probably indicates low-productivity work, taken up as the only option for earning some income.

Source: Jones-Parry, R. and Robertson, A. (eds.) (2012). *Commonwealth Yearbook 2012*. Cambridge: Nexus/Commonwealth Secretariat.

In conclusion, SWT must become a vital cog in the wheel of sustainable development and transformation of our societies. The turbulence in our economic systems and social landscape, daunting as it may seem, presents invaluable opportunities for such transformation. We must grasp those opportunities to explore new paradigms and more strategic approaches to our development ethos.

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