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Educating West Indian Society: Education For All

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EDUCATING WEST INDIAN SOCIETY : EDUCATION FOR ALL
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INTRODUCTION

The education of West Indians is a matter that has occupied Sir Alister McIntyre for most if not all of his professional life. His direct interventions and contributions have been most pronounced in the field of higher education. As a foundation member and leader of the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of the West Indies, as Director of the Institute of Social and Economic Research, and more latterly as Vice Chancellor of a University preparing itself for the next millenium, he has inspired and led by thought and by action the multifaceted contributions of the regional University to the education and training of West Indian society. It is therefore quite appropriate that a panel on educating West Indian society be included in this day of intellectual tribute to him.

Sir Alister is a man of grand vision and eternal hope. The title of my paper is intended to echo the grandness of his vision and durability of his optimism for West Indians.

My presentation takes the form of a series of thoughts on elements of the education situation in the West Indies at present. The theme is "Education For All", which presumes the desirability of universal education. I do not propose to defend that presumption.

THE UNDERPROVISIONING OF EDUCATION

Caribbean countries do not provide education for all their residents. Pre school education is minimally provided i.e. not provided on a comprehensive basis, is expensive, and is accessible mainly to the middle and upper income groups. Primary education is universal, if one believes the official statistics on gross enrollment ratios which indicate rates of 94% (Bahamas), 109% (Jamaica), and 121% (Belize) in 1995. There must be something wrong with the statistics or the methodology for how else can one explain the visible failure of many Jamaican children to obtain places in primary schools year after year, sometimes until they are 8 or 9 years old?

Secondary schooling is far from universal even by the official statistics. Gross enrollment ratios in 1995 ranged from a low of 49% in Belize to a high of 90% in the Bahamas. The World Bank's study on equity and efficiency in Caribbean education (World Bank, 1988) emphasized the low rates of transition from primary to secondary school which are typical in the region. The low rates may be attributed to poor student performance at the common entrance or other such national examination for secondary school placement. However only the grossly naive and unobservant would not interpret the entrance examinations as a particularly brutal device for rationing scarce places in publicly funded secondary schools. Low transition rates are the consequence of failure to provide enough school places.

Rates of transition from secondary school to tertiary and university institutions are much lower than rates of transition between primary and secondary schools. Many commentators, Alister McIntyre and myself included, have drawn attention to the fact that only small proportions of Caribbean populations receive tertiary education and

training. Despite vociferous and repeated complaints about deteriorating university entrance standards, well over one-third of applicants do not gain a place at the regional university. It would be surprising if non-admission rates to national tertiary institutions are significantly smaller. The United States college system, particularly the community colleges and variegated SUNY and CUNY systems, has been an absorber of last resort for countless West Indians, contributing positively to the tertiary-education proportion of the diasporic and West Indies resident populations. Privately-owned tertiary institutions, sometimes in partnership with foreign universities and colleges, have recently expanded options for Caribbean people in search of tertiary education and training.

The situation with respect to continuing education or lifelong learning is not better. Few adult education facilities exist in our countries. Moreover, access is constrained by geographical distance and inconvenience of programme delivery arrangements, including scheduled class times. Distance education as a modality for adult education and lifelong learning is not yet a part of the Caribbean education fabric.

WHAT KIND OF EDUCATION FOR ALL?

This question is really about the minimum educational requirements for success in the new millenium. It is a question about content, relevance and quality. The answers will inevitably be influenced by one's vision of the future.

From my perspective, (and I suspect that of Sir Alister), the Caribbean will be even more closely integrated into the world as an economic and socio-political entity than ever before. The modern technologies of travel and of transport and transmission minimise the influence of spatial separation as a barrier to the merging of cultures,

homogeneity of political value systems, international dissemination of knowledge and the emergence of global consumption standards and preferences. Production of goods and services itself is becoming more tightly integrated at regional and global levels. Contemporaneous with the integration of world economy and society is the prominence of issues of peace, security and environmental preservation and enhancement as global concerns.

There is another feature of the world of salience to the question of what kind of education for all. This feature is the dominance of science and the products of science in investment, production and consumption. Electronics not mechanics, polymers not natural fibres, chemical compounds not herbs, virtual reality not reality are the new or emerging staples of 21st century life.

The final features to which I draw attention are the openness of Caribbean markets and Caribbean export markets to competition and the sharpness of that competition. Protectionism at home or abroad is rapidly becoming a thing of the past. There is no telling whether it will reappear, but for the moment it is well and truly on its way out.

Education must at a minimum equip Caribbean people to cope with the situations envisaged above. The three Rs will not suffice. The bare minimum standards ought to be international communication ability, scientific and technological literacy (including computer literacy), and environmental awareness and understanding. These should be the bedrock of education policy, differentiated at progressive tiers of the education system only by degrees of completeness and expertise sought. However, I think that we as small island people have to acquire more than the minimum if we are to maintain a

favourable position in the world. We must know and understand the world. This is necessary for successful interface in the spheres of production, marketing, finance and policies, especially for those countries not well-endowed with natural resources.

This kind of education for all does not rule out the provision of special and differentiated education intended to produce pools of experts and to engender special skills and competencies. There is a great deal to be done in these areas as well. Certainly there is considerable scope for the expansion of tertiary and university education, for the development of the academic curricula of those institutions, and for the establishment of competitive positions in selected niches of education markets.

A point to be stressed, however, is the fundamental reorientation of primary, secondary and continuing education implied by the approach taken here. It is encouraging that the report on education adopted by Caricom Heads of Government in Montego Bay in 1997 is consistent with this approach, although it places too little emphasis on scientific and technological literacy and is too wedded to traditional structures for delivering education.

IS EDUCATION FOR ALL AFFORDABLE?

Education, even at existing levels of provision, is expensive. Public expenditures on education in Caricom countries were 4% and 10% of GNP in 1995. This compares with OECD ratios of 4% to 8% in the same year. Furthermore, a sizeable proportion of public expenditures in some countries are on education – between 10% and 22% in Dominica, St. Kitts-Nevis, Bahamas, St. Vincent, Barbados and Belize for the 1993-1995 period. The proportions for OECD countries are within a range of 10% - 14%. It is

worth noting however that in Guyana and Jamaica, only about 8% of public expenditures are on education.

Despite the strength of official commitment to human resource development, it is doubtful that the public sector will be able to finance fully the major expansion and transformation of education required in Caricom countries. Fiscal revenues are not sufficiently elastic and claims by contending expenditure sectors are no less compelling. The best one can hope for is Singaporean proportions for the share of educational expenditures in total public expenditures, i.e. 23%, which would itself imply a significant increase in educational expenditures as a proportion of GNP.

In the circumstances, there is merit in policies which encourage the establishment and spread of private providers of educational services. Already, one observes in several countries the growth of private supply in the tertiary sector and in continuing education, and the reemergence of private suppliers in primary and secondary education. The appropriate public policy response to these market developments would incorporate elements of encouragement, and guidance, assistance and regulation with respect to curriculum design and curriculum quality. The private sector should be allowed to do what the State finds itself unable to do. Private suppliers are turning out to be a market-driven important means of making education for all affordable.

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