

EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN THE BAHAMAS - PART II PRE-INDEPENDENCE PERSPECTIVES (1958 - 1973)

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This is the second of a two-part paper on educational reform in The Bahamas during the post World War II era and in the period leading up to independence. The research on which the paper is based, was undertaken for the purpose of contributing to a book on post war educational developments in the English-speaking Caribbean. Part I of the paper which appeared in the 1996 Spring edition of *College Forum*, Volume VIII, Number 1, focused on the social content of educational reform and the status of the various levels of the education system during the period 1945-1957.

This presentation addresses educational developments from 1958 to 1973 against the backdrop of statutory reform. Among developments discussed are the establishment of the Ministry of Education, the White Paper on Education and the growth and progress realized within the tertiary system with particular emphasis on teacher education and technical and vocational education.

INTRODUCTION

Social Context

During the fifteen years prior to independence, Bahamian society underwent profound social and political changes which, in turn, had a major impact upon the development of education in the country.

By 1958, political struggles had taken on a more clearly defined bi-partisan form, for the organised political activism of the PLP had led the white majority group in the House of Assembly to form themselves into the United Bahamian Party (Hughes, 66). A general strike in Nassau in 1958 drew the attention of the international press and led the Imperial Government to take a more active interest in The Bahamas. This resulted in an unprecedented visit to the colony by the Secretary of State for the Colonies himself, who called upon the House of Assembly to pass appropriate labour legislation and measures of electoral reform (Hughes, 66). The first stage of the latter was effected in 1959, when a Bill extended voting rights to all adult males was passed. By the general election of 1962, women too had been accorded the right to vote.

Constitutional reforms in 1964 brought internal self-government to The Bahamas and introduced Ministerial government, abolishing the old system of public Boards (Hughes, 96). The sustained efforts of the PLP were crowned with success in the general election of January, 1967, when, with the collaboration of one independent and one

Labour candidate, the party achieved the necessary majority of seats and formed the new government. This was the first time a government representative of the majority of citizens of the country had assumed power, and it heralded the advent of a new era of social development for the country.

A majority plank in the platform of the new government was the extension of educational opportunity throughout The Bahamas and the strengthening of the quality of the system. Investment in education became a priority, therefore, for this was seen as essential to bolster the growing spirit of nationalism and to ensure that Bahamians should be equipped to take charge of critical aspects of their own affairs. This quest for national sovereignty was to culminate in the attainment of independence in 1973.

STATUTORY REFORM

The report of a study of Bahamian education commissioned by the Colonial Office in 1958 (later known as the Houghton Report) highlighted the many deficiencies of the system and pointed directions which should be followed to achieve needed improvements. The 1960-1961 Interim Report of the Board of Education articulated the Board's recognition of the inadequacies of the existing educational provision to meet the needs of the people of The Bahamas "either in range or quality" (Board of Education 1961, 28) and outlined plans to remedy those deficiencies.

A number of significant reforms ensued. A new Education Act came into effect in 1962 and this greatly extended the powers of the Board, creating for the first time a unitary system of education to cover the compulsory period of formal schooling which was now to last nine years instead of eight, beginning at age five and ending at fourteen. Under the provisions of the new Act, The Board was empowered to take responsibility for secondary and further education as well as libraries and other affiliated educational services. The Act also mandated the establishment of a Central Advisory Committee, whose members were to be drawn mainly from the independent school systems and whose function was to advise the board on educational matters.

EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

Establishment of The Ministry of Education

The advent of ministerial government in 1964 brought with it change and expansion in the central organisational arrangements of the education system. With the establishment of the Ministry of Education and the separation of the administrative and professional aspects of the duties, earlier initiatives to provide more structured supervision and support of the work of the schools were greatly strengthened, by the appointment of District and Subject Inspectors, the focus of whose work shifted from reporting on schools to providing assistance and guidance to them. The teaching force was steadily improved by the participation of more teachers who had received training at home and abroad.

Curricular offerings expanded steadily to include more cultural, technical/vocational and recreational subjects. They undertook initial efforts in surveying public records and archives. The Public Records Act of 1971 formally established a Public Records Office which, though it fell under the general direction of the Chief Justice, was for administrative purposes under the control of the Minister of Education (Ministry of Education and Culture 1973, 181).

The establishment of a central repository of important historical records provided a previously absent focal point for educational and social research, and annual public exhibitions enabled ordinary Bahamians to become more fully acquainted with the aspects of their own history - most of which previously had been conspicuously absent from the school curriculum. The heightened consciousness of and pride in the Bahamian experience strengthened the growing tide of nationalism engendered by the move towards independence.

White Paper on Education

In 1972, the Ministry of Education published "Focus on the Future", its White paper on Education, in which were outlined the plans for the development of education in an independent Bahamas. This document characterised the inherited Colonial system as "narrow, meagre, ill-suited and irrelevant" (Ministry of Education and Culture 1972, 1-2). It proposed a revitalised approach to the delivery of educational services which would address more appropriately the challenge of preparing Bahamians to take full advantage of the wider range of employment opportunities available to them and to assume greater responsibility for the conduct of the nation's affairs. The new government had adopted a deliberate policy of "Bahamianisation", i.e. the replacement, wherever possible, of expatriate workers by appropriately qualified Bahamian nationals. For its effective implementation, this policy demanded larger numbers of more adequately educated, highly qualified Bahamians. The aims of educational development in the period leading up to independence were, therefore, to fashion a system to enable the people throughout The Bahamas to gain wider access to progressively higher levels of quality education. This process was intended to enable Bahamians to gain greater personal fulfilment from the educational experience and to contribute meaningfully to the task of nation-building.

The Schools

Pre-School/Early Childhood Education Despite the Ministry of Education's recognition of the importance of pre-school education, problems of staffing, accommodation and material resources continued to militate against the provision of public pre-schooling during this period. The numbers of private institutions offering this level of education continued to increase, however, with the Ministry accepting responsibility for the supervision of such schools, for the provision of assistance in the upgrading of skills of pre-school operators, and for encouraging the community at large to recognise the importance of pre-schooling.

By the 1970-71 school year, preliminary surveys indicated that there were some forty-five private institutions in New Providence catering to children under five years of age. These included reception classes in independent primary schools, as well as church and privately operated pre-schools. It was estimated that by that time approximately one-third to one-half of all children three to four years of age were in attendance in such schools. This level of participation resulted both from the desire of parents to give their children better educational opportunities and from necessity, arising from the greater involvement of women in the workforce.

Fees for pre-school education in the church-administered establishments, averaged about \$1.50 per week. In privately operated institutions they ranged from \$80 - \$180 per term. In these more expensive schools, members of staff tended to be better qualified and facilities and resources more appropriate for this level of education. In many of the other establishments, however, available facilities continued to be limited and staffs and proprietors sadly lacking in formal training for the work (Ministry of Education 1973, 95).

The overall results of this unevenness of provision and the differential access to early childhood education by the age cohort as a whole was predictable and children of more affluent families generally began the compulsory period of formal schooling with a decided advantage over their less fortunate peers.

Primary Education Prior to the coming into effect of the New Education Act in 1962, existing legislation referred to all Board of Education schools as "Primary". As was pointed out in the Houghton Report, however, only the Infant and Junior divisions of those schools could legitimately be characterised as "Primary" and from 1960 this new interpretation was observed in practice. Under the provisions of the 1962 Education Act, the starting age for primary schooling was lowered to five years and by 1968, continuous six-year primary schools had replaced the Infant and Junior divisions. Most schools in the Out Islands, however, continued to be of all-age structure and in smaller ones the classes were of the multi-grade variety.

A new primary school curriculum developed by committees of teachers was introduced in the 1961-62 school year. This was devised to be more relevant to the needs of the children attending the schools and was extended to include General Science, Art, Music, Handicraft and Physical Education. The use of visual aids and supporting materials was fully encouraged. Preparation for the implementation of the new curriculum was undertaken in the 1961 summer courses for teachers which took a professional rather than academic focus. Through the cooperation of the Department of Education at the University College of the West Indies, two specialists from Jamaica participated in the delivery of the courses in the use of Visual Aids (Ministry of Education 1960-1961, 20). In the early years of this period, however, the effective implementation of the new curriculum was hampered by the persistent problems of overcrowding, inadequate staffing and shortage of equipment and supplies (Ministry of Education 1961-1962, 7). Despite these circumstances, the new approaches indicated a major step forward in the evolution of the system.

An ambitious building programme was undertaken in New Providence and in the Out Islands throughout the period to alleviate overcrowding and to provide additional school places. The new schools in New Providence represented an important departure in design, in that the previously prevalent open plan structures were abandoned in favour of two-story buildings containing self-contained classrooms. Pre-fabricated schools were also introduced as a temporary measure, to allow for more rapid construction of needed classrooms.

With the establishment of the Curriculum Division at the Ministry of Education in the latter years of the 1960, initiatives in curriculum revision and development continued to be undertaken to suit the needs of the evolving school system, i.e. with the aim of preparing all students to proceed to secondary education. Wherever possible, moreover, the concept of team teaching was introduced and new primary schools constructed in the late 1960s and early 1970s were planned to incorporate this methodology.

The Primary School Leaving Certificate, which had been taken at Grade 6 of All-Age and Senior Schools, was abolished after 1963. From 1966, the Government High School entrance examination was expanded into a competitive Common Entrance Examination taken in Grade 6 of the primary schools or by students aged 11 - 13 years in grade 7 of the secondary schools. Its purpose was to select pupils for admission to the Government High School and other Ministry schools, for scholarships to independent schools, and to provide a basis on which the Headteachers of independent schools could admit students (Ministry of Education and Culture 1970-1971, 114).

Secondary Education. The period witnessed unprecedented progress in the provision of secondary education. The Government High School moved into a new, well-equipped facility which enabled it to provide a wider range of curricular offerings and to expand its "A" Level programme which was also made available to graduates of other high schools in the country.

The former "Senior" schools of the public system were converted into junior secondary schools, preparing students up to the level of the Bahamas Junior Certificate. In New Providence, many new structures were built, especially in the rapidly developing new residential areas of the island, in order to make available a larger number of secondary school places. These new schools were provided with science laboratories and facilities for craft subjects. Large, multi-purpose gymnasiums were built at three of the new schools and larger auditoriums were incorporated into other school structures. Three of the new schools were designed as full high schools and were staffed and equipped to enable them to offer courses leading to GCE Ordinary Level examinations for students who had successfully completed the Bahamas Junior Certificate examination (Ministry of Education and Culture 1970-1971, 63).

The first central secondary school in the Out Island was constructed at Colonel Hill, Crooked Island, in 1965. Also, in that same year, the government introduced a new scholarship scheme intended to increase the numbers of Out Island students seeking to pursue secondary education. The scheme allowed for the award of 250 government

scholarships (50 per annum) for Out Island students to attend private high schools in New Providence. Selection of scholarship winners was based upon performance in the Government High School entrance examination. In 1967, the scheme was extended to include New Providence students as well.

In the period 1965-1973, another six secondary schools were opened in islands throughout the archipelago, thus making considerable progress towards achieving the national goal which the new government had set for extending significantly the opportunities available for secondary education throughout the country. This goal was later formally reiterated in the pre-independence White Paper on Education.

An important feature of the development of secondary education in the Family Islands (as the Out Islands were now known) was the active involvement of local communities, which helped to raise funds for the construction and equipment of such schools.

At the beginning of the 1970s, all public secondary education in New Providence was organized into a structure incorporating junior secondary schools (for children aged 11-14), whose programmes culminated in the Bahamas Junior Certificate examination, followed by Senior high schools whose curricula led to external examinations — i.e. University of London General Certificate of Education "O" Level, Royal Society of Arts and Pitman examinations.

In 1972, as another demonstration of the growing national pride, all the public schools in New Providence (other than the Government High School) were renamed in honour of Bahamians who had made significant contributions in the field of education (Ministry of Education and Culture 1971-1975, 45). Because of the tradition of excellence with which the name of the Government High School had come to be associated, it was decided that this name should be retained. That school continued to be a selective school during the period prior to 1973, admitting students on the basis of the Common Entrance Examination. Fees at the Government High School were abolished, however, from 1967 onwards.

The Common Entrance Examination was also used by certain independent secondary schools to screen students whose attendance would be supported by government scholarship provision. By affording financial support to students who would otherwise be unable to attend private school, the Bahamian Government further expanded the opportunities available to young people in the country to gain access to secondary schooling.

Independent schools which also operated primary departments provided direct transfer to the high school departments for students completing those levels. Most of the independent schools followed a pattern of comprehensive secondary education, covering a continuous period of five or six years and offering a curriculum which encompassed academic, cultural and various technical/vocational subjects which could cater to the abilities and interests of a wide range of students.

By 1967, when two single-sex Roman Catholic secondary schools merged to form a single large comprehensive high school, all independent schools, like their government-run counterparts, had become co-educational. In the late 60's, moreover, two of those schools also developed boarding facilities for students from the Family Islands. This move further extended the opportunities available to Bahamians as a whole to pursue secondary education.

Statistics for the period show steadily increasing numbers of students entries for both the local Bahamas Junior Certificate and for the overseas "O" and "A" Level examinations. Numbers of subject passes obtained in these examinations also increased, although the percentages of passes obtained (except at "advanced" level) did not improve concomitantly. As a result, critics argued that despite the major investments made in education, the performance of the system was still less acceptable (at least as measured by education successes) (Hughes, 180). Complaints were made by various elements in the society- including the teachers' union and Ministry of Education itself - that the inherited system of education, which still in many instances prevailed, was "alien and irrelevant" (Hughes, 180). Nevertheless, having a larger number of people gain access to full secondary education enabled more Bahamians to enter areas of work which had formerly been closed to them - both in the public sector and in the rapidly developing private sector - and to proceed to tertiary education both at home and abroad.

Tertiary Education

As in the other levels of the systems, during the period leading up to independence significant growth and progress were realised in tertiary education in The Bahamas. The Education Act of 1962 gave the Board, and later the Ministry of Education, responsibility for further education - i.e. for full-time or part-time education of persons over the compulsory school age.

Teacher Education

The move which was to have an important impact on the development of the system as a whole was the reopening in the academic year 1961/1962 of the Bahamas Teacher's College, as had been recommended in the Houghton Report. During the previous year land was identified and plans drawn for the construction of a specially designed building and the acting Principal travelled to Jamaica to study teacher training there, with the assistance of the Department of Education at the University College of the West Indies. A senior Bahamian teacher attended a one-year University College of the West Indies course on the emergency training of teachers. The Director of Education visited the United Kingdom and recruited a Principal, Vice-Principal and lecturer for the College. Twenty-eight students entered the College in 1961 to begin the first year of a two-year course. In 1962, in addition to the second intake of students for the two-year training course, a group of mature teachers was accepted to undergo a special one-year emergency programme (Board of Education, 1961, 17).

These developments locally were paralleled by an extension by the Board of Education of its scholarship support for overseas study via the Commonwealth Scheme for the training of teachers, the introduction of a scheme to support the training of specialists teachers and by the expansion of the numbers of normal awards for overseas teacher training.

From the early 1960s, therefore, the flow of Bahamian teachers returning from studies abroad (especially in Arts and Vocational areas) began to grow steadily. These initiatives reflected the government's recognition that only through a substantial increase in its investment in teacher training could the unacceptably low standards in Bahamian schools be improved. By the 1962-1963 academic year, some 82 teachers were recorded as being in training as opposed to the ten recorded for the 1958-1959 year.

After The Bahamas became a contributor to the University College of the West Indies, training undertaken at the local Teachers' College was offered in association with the Institute of Education at that institution, which "endorsed" the certificate awarded. Certification for the one-year emergency courses, however, was awarded by the Ministry of Education itself.

In addition, during the 1960s the Ministry extended its commitment to assisting teachers to obtain degrees by offering scholarships to the University of the West Indies for this purpose. Students who took advantage of those new opportunities represented both in-service trained teachers and high-school graduates who were able to profit from the expanded programmes of Advanced Level studies offered locally. The 1966 -1967 Ministry of Education Annual Report optimistically anticipated that these moves would "enable the Ministry to provide itself eventually with all the teachers it requires" (p. 17). The scheme also enabled degreed teachers to pursue post-graduate teacher training at the University of the West Indies and in the United Kingdom, in this way contributing further to the development of a professional cadre of indigenous educational leaders.

In 1966, the Teachers' College admitted married women to the two-year training programme for the first time, thus substantially increasing the enrollment. In the following year, students from the Out Islands further swelled the ranks.

In 1968, a second teachers' college was opened to provide academic education and professional training for uncertified teachers who could not be accommodated at the Bahamas Teachers' College in Nassau. It was established in San Salvador, the most easterly island of the Bahamas chain. This residential college, located in a rural setting, was intended to cater primarily to the needs of Out Island teachers, allowing them to be trained in an environment similar to that in which they would return to teach. By the 1970-71 academic year, some 155 teachers were enrolled at the College. Sixty of the first intake of sixty-three students graduated in 1971. Graduates of the San Salvador College were to make significant contributions to the gradual improvement of Out Island schools. The influence of graduates from the Bahamas Teachers' College was

similarly felt in schools in New Providence and other parts of the country

Technical and Vocational Education

Initiatives in technical and vocational education were also significantly increased over the period for it was recognised that a skilled work force was essential to support an increasingly sophisticated economy.

The Nassau Technical Institute was established in 1961 when the classes of the former Technical School were transferred to the Government High School, and the facilities and curricula were restructured to provide evening and day-release courses in technical areas. A Principal and teaching staff were recruited from the United Kingdom in 1962 and the institution continued to grow throughout the 1960s. The institute was amalgamated in the academic year 1970-1971 with a technical centre which had been set up in 1968 to relieve overcrowding in the higher grades of secondary schools among students sixteen and older, and to provide full-time vocational training which had not previously been available.

All departments of the amalgamated institution were accommodated on a single site in 1971-1972 and the Institute was renamed the C. R. Walker Technical College. Hotel training, however, which had formed part of the curriculum of the Technical Institute continued to be offered at the facilities which had earlier been specially constructed for the purpose and eventually developed into a full-fledged Hotel Training College (Ministry of Education 1971, 162).

Adult Education

Following the affiliation of The Bahamas with the University of the West Indies in 1964, an office of the Department of Extra-Mural Studies was opened in 1965. The Department provided general interest classes, courses and professional seminars for adults, taught by full-time staff of the University and part-time local staff. Important opportunities for the further education of the adult population were thus provided, and a centre for intellectual debate established.

Scholarship for University Study Abroad

Over the period, increasing numbers of scholarships were provided by The Bahamas government to enable Bahamians to pursue university education in a range of disciplines. The majority of these were offered for study at the University of the West Indies but support was also given to students proceeding to the United Kingdom, Canada or the United States to undertake programmes not available at the University of the West Indies. The awards took the form of either bonded scholarships (where recipients undertook to work in the public service upon return from study), or loan scholarships (given for areas of study deemed important to The Bahamas, but in which the Government could not itself employ graduates) (board of Education 1961, 173).

In addition to those provided by the Government, growing numbers of private scholarships were offered and other awards were made available through Commonwealth and International agencies.

By the academic year 1971-1972, a total of 268 Bahamians were receiving scholarship assistance for overseas study as compared with 69 in 1967. The growth in numbers of students able to pursue full secondary and "Advanced" Level studies enabled more and more of such students to qualify for admission to University abroad and, in addition to those who were successful in acquiring scholarships, many Bahamians pursued university study (mainly in North America) at their own expense. Increasingly, also, Bahamians sought post-graduate qualifications in specialist academic or applied areas of importance to national development.

All of these developments resulted in the steady emergence of a growing cadre of Bahamian leaders in significant areas of both public and private sectors of the society. They also signalled the opening up of a major avenue of social mobility and expansion of an influential black middle class.

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Her research and publications have been mainly in the area of education and she has presented numerous papers at professional seminars and conferences both locally and internationally. Dr. Bethel has been instrumental also in helping to bring about some of the educational reforms discussed in this paper.

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