

# EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN THE BAHAMAS - PART I

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*(This, the first of a two-part paper focuses on educational reform in The Bahamas in the post World War II era. The research on which the paper is based, in part, represents the Bahamian contribution to a collaborative effort to produce a book on post war developments in the English-speaking Caribbean. In this presentation, the social context of educational reform and the status of primary, secondary and tertiary education are discussed).*

*Part two of the paper addresses pre-independence perspectives on educational reform in The Bahamas and will appear in the next edition of College Forum).*

## INTRODUCTION

The Commonwealth of The Bahamas gained its Independence from Great Britain in 1973. It is a territory which consists of a chain of islands, cays, rocks and reefs stretching some 600 miles from the southeast coast of Florida in the north to northern Hispaniola in the south. Of the hundreds of islands and cays, more than thirty are inhabited (Sealey, 1), and on nineteen of these the Bahamas Government maintains public schools.

1990 census statistics reveal that in that year the total population numbered 254,685, of whom 171,542 or 67% lived on New Providence, the island on which the capital, Nassau, is located. A further 41,035 inhabitants (16.1% of the population) made their home on Grand Bahama, where the nation's second city, Freeport is found. The remainder of the population was distributed among the other islands in the chain (Department of Statistics, 1-3).

This uneven distribution of the population, while more dramatically marked in recent times due to substantial immigration from rural islands to the urban centres, has always been a pertinent feature of the Bahamian landscape. Combined with the distance of islands from one another, and the remoteness, small size and scattered nature of the settlements within each island, it has historically rendered an even delivery of educational and other social services extremely difficult and costly to sustain.

As early as 1931, a Board of Education Report detailed the enormity of the challenge:

**Of the many educational problems that confront the Board the most formidable is that of the Out Islands. It has remained unsolved for close upon a century, and it would be rash in the highest degree to predict the length of its continuance. No other colony in the British Empire would appear to be faced with proportionate difficulties - (Board of Education 1948,29).**

These factors have also impacted upon the equality of access to the full range of formal education which Bahamians throughout the country have historically been able to enjoy and upon the consistency of the quality of education provided in all parts of the country.

These difficulties notwithstanding, education in The Bahamas has progressed dramatically in the fifty years since World War II and the significant social, economic and political developments which have occurred over that same period have had a major influence upon that progress. These serve, therefore, as

an essential backdrop to the educational reforms which have been realized in the past five decades.

## **POST-WAR PERSPECTIVES (1945-1957)**

### **Social Context**

In the period immediately following the Second World War, the Bahama Islands occupied a relatively insignificant place among the colonies of Great Britain. They possessed no mineral resources, produced no major agricultural exports of note and relied mainly upon winter season tourism as a source of government revenue. The Islands had, however, come into some prominence during the war because their strategic geographic position had made them an ideal location for American and British military bases. Further, the former King of England, Edward VIII, known after his abdication as the Duke of Windsor, had been there as Royal Governor during that period.

In the 1940s white residents made up only ten percent of the approximately 69,000 inhabitants but they controlled both the government and the major part of the wealth of the country. The society was strictly segregated along racial lines, and access to major hotels, restaurants, theaters, some private schools and even churches was denied to people of colour. There were relatively few black professionals or business persons of major substance and, in the absence of a framework to established political parties, black political leaders were obliged to wage their struggle for social change on an individual basis.

The highest forms of employment to which the majority of Bahamians were likely to be able to aspire during that period were posts in the Civil Service (generally at clerical and lower technical or administrative levels), teaching, nursing or the church. Moreover, only a proportionately modest number actually achieved those roles. Expectations for the public education system, therefore, were limited, being largely defined by those realities. Even among the ruling elite, whose wealth derived mainly from trade, there was not generally a marked interest in the pursuit of education beyond secondary school. The University of Cambridge School Certificate was the highest form of qualification available locally, and represented in the main the acme of achievement to which those few privileged Bahamians who were able to receive a high school education could aspire (even in private schools). Those persons wishing to proceed beyond that level were obliged to travel abroad for the purpose.

Public spending on education and other social services was controlled directly by the legislature which raised revenue and authorized expenditure. Despite the strengthening of the economy which occurred due to the expansion of tourism, the large part of resultant financial benefits accrued to the mercantile elite, and although widespread employment, particularly in lower-level, tourism-related jobs, was possible for the population as a whole - especially in New Providence - actual investment by the Government in social development remained modest.

### **Status of Education**

#### **Primary and Early Childhood Education**

Statutory authority for the oversight of public primary education was vested in a five-member Board of Education, appointed by the Government-in-Council and consisting mainly of serving members of the House of Assembly. The Board maintained schools throughout the islands and provided free primary instruction for children aged 6-14 years. Via a system of grants-in-aid, it also provided financial assistance to communities which established schools of their own where no government institutions existed. These were usually to be found in the "Out" Islands, as islands other than New Providence were termed at the time.

Most of the major religious denominations also maintained primary schools in New Providence and in the Out Islands. These were financed in the main through funds or special grants made available from their affiliates in the United Kingdom or the United States, and they charged modest fees.

Education for children between the ages of six and fourteen years was compulsory and under the clauses of the Education Act, the Board was required to satisfy itself that any child of school age not in

attendance at a Board school was in receipt of efficient instruction (Board of Education 1948). The Board was, therefore, responsible for the certification of private schools and for ensuring that parents fulfilled their obligation to send their children to school. The compulsory clauses of the Act also allowed for parents who did not ensure their children's attendance at school to be brought before a magistrate for suitable action which usually took the form of a fine.

In 1947, the total enrollment in Board supported schools (including monitors who received part-time instruction) was 12,473. By the end of the period (1957) some 23,000 pupils were enrolled with the average rate of attendance being recorded at 87% (Board of Education 1958, 5,6).

Truant Officers, in cooperation with Welfare Nurses, monitored school attendance in New Providence, where truancy occurred mainly when cruise ships were visiting the island. In the Family Islands, absenteeism usually resulted from travel to New Providence, the need for older children to assist in the harvesting of crops, and the incidence of colds which prevented children living at some distance from their schools from attending on "days of inclement weather" (Board of Education 1948, 14).

Public schools in the capital were divided into preparatory (infant) schools, which catered to pupils aged 6-8 years, junior schools, for children aged 9-11 years and senior schools attended by children aged 12-14 years (Board of Education Report 1947, 14). Student movement from one grade level to the next did not depend upon age, however, but upon mastery of subject material and it was not usual at any level to find children aged three or four years above the average age of the grade.

In the outlying areas of New Providence and in the Out Islands, where the numbers to be catered for in individual settlements were often quite small, the all-age school model prevailed.

Generally, it was acknowledged that the quality of education provided in the Board of Education schools was not of a very high standard and, in many cases, that available in grant-in-aid schools was even poorer. Schools were often overcrowded and located in inadequate physical facilities. Prior to 1947, moreover, pupils in Board schools received only twenty-two hours of instruction per week as contrasted with the thirty hours per week prevalent in the United Kingdom. In that year, teachers voluntarily agreed to raise the hours of attendance to twenty-seven and a half (Board of Education 1948, 3). Teaching materials were limited and in short supply. The majority of teachers had received little or no training and possessed only modest academic backgrounds (Board of Education 1956). The monitorial or pupil teacher system was widespread, and particularly in urban schools, class size were generally large. The Minutes of the January, 1956, Board of Education meeting report, for example, teacher/pupil ratios of 1:40 in some Nassau Preparatory school and 1:50 in Junior and Senior schools (Board of Education 1956).

Various means were employed to try to raise the standard of schools: the introduction of training schemes for teachers both locally and abroad; the recruitment of qualified staff from the United Kingdom and later, from the West Indies; the provision of additional school places via building programmes. These initiatives were, however, seriously limited by the levels of funding available.

The school curriculum was confined throughout to the "basic" subjects of English Language, Arithmetic, History, Geography and Scripture. "Practical" subjects offered were Domestic Science, Handicraft, Hygiene and Nature. Little time was devoted to cultural, vocational or recreational subjects, although a number of schools cultivated gardens. Some efforts were made during the early 1950s to support the curriculum by means of school broadcasts, and by strengthening school-based and circulating libraries through schools' fund-raising efforts and through assistance in the latter case from the British Council.

The qualification which marked the successful completion of compulsory schooling was, for most students, a locally designed School Leaving Certificate, issued by the Board of Education. Success rates in this examination were not encouraging as a rule. In 1950, for example, only 245 (approximately 38%) of the 658 candidates were awarded certificates (Board of Education 1951, 45). By 1958, despite the efforts made to improve the quality of instruction provided in Board schools, the percentage of successful candidates for the School Leaving Certificate had risen only to 53% (Board of Education 1958, 7).

The more able Senior school students were permitted to write the University of Cambridge Junior Certificate examination and later the Bahamas Junior Certificate examination which in 1954 replaced the Cambridge examination. Results in these examinations were even less impressive. By 1958, only 31% of the 212 candidates entering the Bahamas Junior Certificate examination were successful (Board of Education 1958, 7).

The responsibility for monitoring the quality of education delivered in the schools resided with the Inspectors of Schools. The scattered nature of the islands made regular inspection of Out Island schools very difficult, however, and in order to alleviate that situation to some degree, several of the trained teachers who had been recruited from the United Kingdom to be Headteachers in the Out Islands were used as supervisors of schools in their islands. Further, during the period, a number of new schools were built in settlements throughout the Out Islands to allow children to attend school closer to their homes and to enable the Board more adequately to fulfill its responsibility to ensure that primary education was made available to all children of eligible age.

Nurseries or pre-schools for children below the age of six were not maintained by the Board of Education and approaches made to the Board to take responsibility for this level of education were consistently rejected (Board of Education 1945 and 1957).

Such Nursery or pre-schools as were available, therefore, were operated by churches or private individuals. Of the individually-run private pre-schools which existed, most were conducted in the homes of their proprietors, often in less than desirable physical surroundings (Board of Education 1948, 85). The quality of education provided varied and depended entirely upon the competence of the persons responsible for the schools, most of them had little or no formal training in the area.

The importance of the early years of schooling was recognized, however, and the Board did take measures to have some of its teachers specially trained in infant methods for posting in preparatory schools in New Providence. Efforts to introduce similar provision in Out Island schools were entirely dependent upon the availability of suitable accommodation for separate infant classes and of teachers who would volunteer for the work (Board of Education 1948, 30).

### **Secondary Education**

At this time, secondary schools did not fall under the control of the Board of Education and virtually all schools offering secondary education were located in New Providence. Most secondary schools were privately run, and the one government supported secondary school, the Government High School, was managed by a school committee which reported directly to the Governor-in-Council. This school had been established in 1925 with a view to providing a higher level of educational opportunity for prospective teachers and other potential candidates for employment in the Civil Service. Most of the students served were drawn from the black population, although less affluent white students, particularly from Out Islands, also gained access to secondary education through this school.

Entry to the Government High School was based upon performance in a competitive examination and enrollment remained quite small (just over 100) throughout the early years of this period (Board of Education 1951, 48). Even by the end of 1957, students enrolled at the Government High School numbered only 268 (Board of Education 1958, 8).

Like most other government and private schools of all levels in the country, the Government High School was co-educational in nature. It was not a free school during this period, though the fees charged were modest (ten pounds per year). Eight government scholarships (four for children in New Providence and four for pupils from the Out Islands) were awarded annually by the government, however, and in addition the Board of Education offered special assistance to students identified as potential teachers.

The curriculum of the Government High School, which covered the four years of secondary schooling offered, was largely academic, being determined by the requirements of the Cambridge Junior and Senior School Certificate examinations. Physical facilities and material resources were limited, but the

school was staffed by trained, well qualified, competent staff, and the quality of education provided was perceived to be high.

All other schools offering secondary level education were independent, fee-paying schools, run by or affiliated with various religious denominations. Under a special "Act to encourage and assist Secondary Education in the Colony", the Governor-in-Council was authorized to pay a grant to approved schools, based on specific criteria of enrollment, numbers of qualified teachers, and examination success in overseas examinations (Board of Education 1951, 29). As in the case of the Government High School, their curricula were generally determined by the syllabuses set for the Cambridge School examinations. The private schools, were staffed, in the main, by qualified teachers and tended to offer a more diversified range of extra-curricular opportunities than their government counterpart.

Overall, within the general framework of educational provision of the period, the quality of secondary education available was of a reasonable standard and offered a sound foundation from which those who had the opportunity to do so might proceed to further studies abroad. Access to secondary education was, however, severely limited, because of its cost, the few school places available and, in some instances, by admissions policies which excluded certain students on racial grounds. Out Island students were further disadvantaged as there were few boarding facilities available and their attendance at secondary schools depended on their ability to find accommodation with relatives or friends in Nassau. In 1947, therefore, only 804 students were enrolled in secondary education. By contrast, some 16,287 students were receiving education at the primary level (Board of Education 1948, 18,19). By 1957, the number of secondary school students had only increased to 1447, while more than 23,000 were engaged in Primary Education (Board of Education 1958, 20,21). The vast majority of Bahamian students, therefore, could not look forward to receiving education at the secondary level.

### **Tertiary Education**

Throughout this early post-war period, there was relatively little that was available in the colony in the way of tertiary education. Persons wishing to pursue studies at levels beyond high school traveled to the United Kingdom, Canada or the United States for the purpose and by 1958 there were some 134 Bahamians studying at universities and colleges abroad (Board of Education 1958). Although the University College of the West Indies had received its Royal Charter in 1949, only very few Bahamians took advantage of opportunities for study provided there. Contact with and influence from the University College grew steadily during the 1950s. however, as teacher recruitment for Board of Education schools spread to the West Indies and scholarships for studies at the University College of the West Indies began to be made available to Bahamians.

In 1950, a college was established for the training of teachers. A training school and a facility for developing schools' broadcasts were also attached to that institution. Unfortunately, the college encountered a variety of problems and in July, 1957, after just seven years of operation, was closed by order of the House of Assembly (Ministry of Education 1973, 50). Promising candidates who were able to gain entry to Teachers' Colleges in Britain were sent abroad by the Bahamas Government to receive teacher training there. Summer school courses and evening classes were organized throughout the period to provide opportunities for teachers unable to gain acceptance to college programmes to acquire further academic education and some professional training.

Technical and vocational training was provided mainly through a school for domestic and hotel workers and a technical school which offered day-release and evening courses for persons in the work force, as well as day time courses for senior school boys.

Nurses' training was delivered through a school of nursing operated by the Bahamas General Hospital, and aspiring policemen were trained for the force in a local police college.

## General Comments

Expenditure on education during this period represented on average some 8% - 9% of total government expenditure with a gradual increase to a 10% level during the mid-1950s.

In 1957, for example, of the total government expenditure of 4,193,544 pounds, some 412,411 pounds were spent on education (Ministry of Education 1973, 13). Of this amount, 57.7% of the education budget was committed to teachers' salaries, and another 3.7% was spent on administration - i.e., on salaries of Board of Education officials and clerks, costs of school inspection and transfer of teachers (Board of Education 1958, 3). The remaining 38% of the budget had to cover the costs of upkeep of buildings and grounds, construction of new schoolhouses and teachers' residences, scholarships, grants-in-aid and the provision of supplies and equipment for schools. The efforts of the Board to improve the material support of instruction throughout the country (through provision of more adequate materials and appropriate learning resources) were therefore significantly hampered by the low levels of funding available. Attempts to persuade the House of Assembly to increase allocations to education were largely unsuccessful.

A number of significant factors occurring during this period had considerable impact upon the development of the educational system. One was the appointment, in 1964, of the first professionally qualified Director for Education whose mandate was to assume responsibility for the planning and oversight of education in the colony. This marked the beginning of the gradual professionalization of the system which was to continue throughout the succeeding decades.

A second important factor was the gradually increasing commitment on the part of the Board of Education to recruiting a number of trained teachers from overseas (the United Kingdom and later the West Indies) to serve as Headteachers in Out Islands. This reflected a growing recognition of the urgent need to effect improvements in the system, and of the central importance of the role of qualified teachers in achieving such improvements.

The third factor was related to the foregoing, and resided in the growing numbers of Bahamians (many of them serving or aspiring teachers) who were receiving higher levels of education and training, both at home, through the fledgling Teachers' College, and at colleges and universities abroad. The impact of the improved knowledge and skill of newly qualified teachers began very gradually to be felt in Bahamian schools. Further, the influence of this new group of Bahamian intellectuals also manifested itself in the wider society, where they began to be forceful in their demands for social and political change and for greater educational opportunities for the masses of the Bahamian people. In addition, the Bahamas Union of Teachers, founded in 1945, continued to press for improved conditions of service, for the professionalisation of teachers and the improvement of the system as a whole.

The establishment, in 1953, of the first Bahamian political party, the Progressive Liberal Party, was to have far reaching effects upon the future of Bahamian society in general and upon the development of Bahamian education in particular. This party was formed to represent the interests of the masses of the population and in particular those of the majority black population which to that point had been effectively marginalised in the Bahamian society. The party provided an organized focal point for the energies and aspirations of young Bahamian professionals whose social consciousness had been raised by their exposure to new knowledge and ideas abroad. In addition to bringing home the benefits of their enhanced skills and abilities, they also brought to the society new notions of decolonization aroused by the constitutional changes occurring in the British Caribbean and elsewhere (Saunders 1992, 86).

During this period, also, large numbers of ordinary Bahamian men (and some women) traveled to the United States to work on farms in that country as a result of a contract made between the United States and Bahamian governments. The experiences of racial discrimination which many of them were obliged to undergo (especially in the segregated southern states) brought home to them more forcibly the indignities of their own segregated society, and they too joined the movement for change (Saunders 1992, 86).

These returning workers also strengthened the struggling labour movement in The Bahamas, whose efforts in previous decades had been fragmented and inadequately organized. Supported by the new

political party, the unions became more militant in their demands for more equitable working conditions and rewards for their workers. Like the members of the Progressive Liberal Party they were strong in their press for improvements in the educational system, recognizing that education was crucial to the social advancement of the Bahamian people. The union leadership particularly urged that The Bahamas should become affiliated with the University College of the West Indies. In the early years of its existence, however, that institution was viewed by the ruling elite as a dangerous source of racial thinking, and they were reluctant for Bahamians to become involved with it. Nevertheless, a visit to Jamaica in the mid-fifties by the Chairman of the Board of Education resulted in an increased realization on the part of the Board of the potential benefits of such an alliance. The deficiencies of Bahamian education were particularly recognized, in addition, and it was patently clear that enormous improvements in the standards achieved in Board schools would be needed if Bahamian students were to qualify for entry to the University College of the West Indies. The ambitious intentions of the Board were not met by concomitant investment on the part of the House of Assembly, and little progress was actually achieved in this regard at that time.

Two other occurrences during the period had significant impact upon the development of education in The Bahamas. One was the opening up to children of all races entry into the oldest and, at that time, largest private secondary school. This afforded increased access to secondary schooling by middle-class children of color.

The second came in 1956 when the House of Assembly accepted a resolution abolishing discrimination in public places. It should be noted, nevertheless, that despite this official ending of racial segregation, a number of subtle discriminatory practices persisted (Saunders 1992,85), and the importance of education as a means of equipping Bahamians to combat the inequities of their society became more and more forcibly recognized.

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## **AUTHOR**

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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 about which she writes.

Her immeasurable contribution to education in The Bahamas has been widely recognized. She is the recipient of several prestigious awards, including Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George (CMG) and the "Women That Make A Difference" Award from the International Women's Forum.

Dr. Bethel undertook studies in Spanish and French at the Baccalaureate and Master's levels at Cambridge University, Cambridge, England. A Ph.D. in Educational Administration was earned at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.