Neocolonialism and Education Reform: An Intersection between Moral Agency and Revolution

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Abstract

Inherent in neocolonial systems of power is the perpetuation of racism, injustice, and inequity reinforced in education systems. In Bermuda, this phenomenon is exemplified by the division between public and private education and the relative inequities and outcome deficits in public education. The divide is systemic and sustained by government policies, which preserve a racial stratification in educational and economic attainment by stopping short of transformational changes that would close the divide. The community at large inadvertently reinforces this divide when they attempt to circumvent the possible negative impact of a public education on their children. Transformative change requires a vision of what public education can and should become, accompanied by action to close the divide that transcends the bounds of the neocolonial legacy. Extracting the community from entrenchment in neocolonialism requires commitment to the development of human capital, understanding that excellence in public education is fundamental to creating avenues of change for the community at large and will contribute to the sustainability of Bermuda.

Keywords: Neocolonialism, public, education, reform, agency, Bermuda

Introduction

Change is needed in systems of power that thrive on the perpetuation of racism, injustice, and inequity. These systems exist relative to colonized people all over the world and are manifest in internal colonialism or neocolonialism in many countries. In the 1960s, Malcom X articulated neocolonialism as a global power structure that thrived on the economic and political suppression of people of colour (Malcolm X, 1965; Allen, 2005). One manifestation of this form of suppression occurred in the development of a black middle class as a vehicle for sustaining oppression that encouraged the illusion that institutionalized racism had gone away, but actually promoted economic and educational divides, and suppressed the unification of communities of colour in seeking self-determination and empowerment (Curtis-Tweed, 2005). The impact of this phenomenon persists in the 21st century and, in Bermuda, is exemplified by the division between public and private education and, in particular, the relative inequities and outcome deficits in the public education system.

The elimination of this divide requires not only changes in the delivery of education and in the structure of the system, but more fundamentally, a paradigm shift in perspectives and actions that preserve the legacy of neocolonialism as a proponent of capitalism and elitist systems in education. The divide is systemic and sustained by government policies, regardless of party majority, which maintain the status quo in public education and ultimately education outcomes by stopping short of transformational changes that would close the divide. The community at large inadvertently reinforces this divide when they take steps, like sending their children to private school, to circumvent the possible negative effect of public education on their children's educational development and attainment. Simultaneously, by this action, they engage in avoidant behaviour by removing themselves from the urgency of holding the system accountable and elevating educational opportunities for the public good. Systemic

change in education requires 'self-understanding' at the level of the individual that includes knowledge of Bermuda's history and awareness of the legacy of neocolonial power structures, as well as a collective sense of agency on the part of stakeholders to identify deficits and enact remedies undergirded by a commitment to eliminate inequities in education. Transformative change requires a vision of what public education can and should become accompanied by action that transcends the bounds of the neocolonial legacy.

Neocolonialism and Black Migration to Private Education: The Promotion of the Divide

The education of blacks in Bermuda has historically suffered from inequities in infrastructure, resources, and access, relative to the education opportunities for white Bermudians and the children of white guest workers/ex-patriates (Clark et al., 1978). While these factors might have been somewhat expected in a segregated Bermuda prior to 1960's, the inadequacy of buildings, paucity of resources, and inconsistency in the quality of education provided in schools delineated by the Houghton report (1963) were still observed in the Hopkins Report (Hopkins et al., 2007) almost fifty years later. References to the superiority of the education standards of private school, which still serve predominantly white and/or non-Bermudian populations, abound (Hopkins et al., 2007; Lawrence & Codrington, 2014).

In a context where data showed that private education is better than public education, it is no wonder that with the integration of schools, which started in the 60's, black Bermudians would increasingly send their children to private school. This action would provide children with the desirable educational opportunities that could translate into assimilation into majority culture and ultimately economic mobility (Lawrence & Codrington, 2014). People of colour still seek and feel somewhat individually elevated by educational and economic attainment although their attainments fall short at the hands of institutionalized racism (APA, 2012). In Bermuda, this has been historically exemplified by glass ceilings in job promotions or disparities in employment opportunities for qualified Black Bermudians relative to whites or guest workers. (Mincy et al., 2009; Lawrence & Codrington, 2014). Indeed, the opportunities in private school foster an illusion of assimilation, by means of education, with social and economic mobility among black Bermudians.

In Bermuda, there has been an increase of blacks at upper income levels sending their children to private schools at a cost often in excess of 20k per year (Lawrence & Codrington, 2014). Additionally, parents of high achieving children who may not be able to afford the tuition, often seek scholarships to send their children to private school. One impact of this migration on public education, as indicated by the Hopkins Report (Hopkins et al., 2007), is that higher achieving students might have left the public education system leaving a largely more academically challenged population to be educated in an already challenged system. One might argue that this bifurcation fostered further declines in public education commensurate with decreased use over time by the politically and economically influential who might otherwise be personally and more urgently invested in improving public education for their own children.

This situation exemplifies Malcolm X's point that the actions of the middle class or economically-able sustain economic and educational divides by promoting attainment in one group. Malcolm X (1963) said "the wealthy, educated Black bourgeoisie…never reach back and pull the rest of our people out with them. The Black masses remain trapped in the slums." Almost sixty decades after Malcolm X's insightful observation, the systemic division persists and becomes further entrenched when social mobility via education remains elusive for those at lower economic levels (Robinson, 2016), who, in this particular case, are predominantly black Bermudians. The subsequent growth within the middle class and ultimate entrance into the workforce of privately educated people of colour gives the illusion that institutionalized racism has gone away because they appear to have assimilated

into the dominant culture. In actuality, the division by class has suppressed the possibility of communities of colour uniting in self-determination and empowerment to rectify problems in public education in terms of infrastructure, resources, and educational attainment. Bermuda has a public education system that writhes from the pains of the legacy of neocolonial oppression. While the under education of black people in Bermuda is a facet of colonialism, it becomes a pawn in sustaining the neocolonial power structure in a capitalist system when poor education is systemically perpetuated. Robinson (2016) similarly describes this phenomenon in the context of global capitalism. Bermudians are not unified in attending to the improvement of the public education system which currently reinforces the ongoing disempowerment of users of the system. This situation reinforces the notion of two Bermudas: Separate and unequal in public and private education.

This is not an indictment of black Bermudians who send their children to private school or the existence of private education. Rather, the focus here is to draw attention to the importance of developing public education that will empower the entire community regardless of economic status or race, and the need to unify the community toward that end. Just as challenges in education are a part of our history, such unification is also a part of Bermuda's history. In the 18th century, concerned about the inequity of educational opportunities available to black Bermudians, a group of well-educated and economically successful black men of vision took on the moral responsibility to improve education. Over eighteen years, they raised money, worked with churches, black and white community leaders, and other organizations to create an educational institution which they intended to be integrated to benefit the community-at-large. Due to their vision and sense of moral agency, the school they developed would remain sustainable beyond their existence (Robinson, 1962). This kind of unification could pave the way to transform the neocolonial power structure.

Government's Role in Maintaining the Status Quo in Education in a Neocolonial System

Prior to the Education Act 1954, all education was private and segregated, with all schools receiving public funds from the government (Christopher, 2009). Schools for white children had better facilities, more resources, and trained teachers, while schools for black children were overcrowded, poorly resourced, and staffed with untrained teachers (Houghton, 1963; Clark et al., 1978). White students were afforded generous scholarship opportunities and, generally, limitless academic and professional opportunities, whereas black students had few scholarship opportunities and were streamed towards domestic and vocational training or, at most, could enter civil service, mainly as educators (Government of Bermuda, Education Reports, 1958).

Post segregation, with schools under government control, racial stratification has become systemic with sufficient integration to allow some people of colour to join white counterparts in attaining the small percentage of the academically elite and economically advantaged in the population. Lawrence and Codrington (2014) demonstrate this racial stratification in their report of the small number of black Bermudians in senior official and managerial positions compared with the white population which dominates the economy.

Government members, most of whom are educated and/or economically advantaged, regardless of race, have participated in maintaining this status quo in a neocolonial system in which they have power and control of public education. Education legislation has been shared across political parties in control of the government: the Education Act of 1996 occurred under the United Bermuda Party (UBP); the transition to middle school was implemented under the Progressive Labour Party (PLP), although developed under the UBP; the middle school system remained in place under the PLP even though reviews of public education, culminating with the Hopkins report (Hopkins et al., 2007), indicated that middle schools were ineffective; and the same middle school system was maintained under the One Bermuda Alliance (OBA) government. Since 2017, the PLP has circulated a narrative to Bermuda which

states that the government is reforming education to create a more equitable system. However, the transformation plan intentionally stratifies children, post-primary, into subject area streams, called 'signatures,' that will delimit their possibilities for educational and economic attainment. This design will also foster the existence of a strata in the workforce with little autonomy, creativity, and critical thinking abilities. These actions are in keeping with global capitalist ideology in education, as described by Robinson (2016), which requires education to produce a strata of humanity with "basic numeracy and literacy skills and not much more alongside training for high-skills and knowledge workers" (p.10). Robinson (2016) observes that this type of education results in "an intensification of the very capitalist development that had generated the social conditions to be eradicated" (p.11). In Bermuda, responsibility for the resultant educational barriers is shared across political parties invested in the same capitalist ideology, which thrives on and, consequently, perpetuates inequalities.

The Psychological Legacy of Neocolonial Power Structures

In Bermuda today, the deep-seated entrenchment in neocolonialism impedes the development of a vision to transform the education system among black people and other users of this system. Fanon (1963) noted that in many cases, minorities simply want the things their oppressors kept from them, like power and wealth, and therefore tend to replicate the same structure that they found to be oppressive. Even in places, like Bermuda, with a semblance and illusion of autonomy, the structures of oppression, as described by Fanon (1963), are often repeated by people of colour once in power or economically successful due to a complex psychological desire to basically trade places with one's oppressor. This is practically evident in the institutionalization of systems of power that results in oppressive behaviour within races, such as when people of colour are complicit in perpetuating an inequitable system of education (Curtis-Tweed, 2020).

Further, people of colour, particularly black people, still grapple with an internal conflict regarding a duality of self as described by Dubois' conceptualization of double consciousness (Dubois,1903). According to Dubois, African Americans struggle to reconcile their perception of self as African American and self as American in the context of oppression by white America. Gilroy (1993) suggests that DuBois "produced this concept… to illuminate the experience of post-slave populations in general" (p.126). Therefore, to extrapolate Dubois' perspective to the broader context, one might claim that Black people, or in fact, oppressed people, experience an internal struggle with their perception of self as a distinctive racial, ethnic, and/ or cultural being and another self that struggles to be accepted in majority culture. The latter self, consistent with Fanon's perspective, tends to participate in dominant culture structures that oppress others (Fanon, 1963). This phenomenon is about assimilation and the manifestation of the power of the dominant culture. This is quite remarkable in Bermuda where whites are the minority population but hold the majority of the wealth. Blacks comprise the majority of the population but, on average, earn less than whites (Lawrence & Codrington, 2014). The sustained perception that white culture is perceived to be the dominant culture attests to the economic power of neocolonialism (Lawrence & Codrington, 2014). How else, in an island as small as Bermuda, could there be a division in the quality of education, and who has access to the better quality education, when education itself is regulated by the government? What does it take to stimulate unification toward change in a context of such well documented relative deprivation?

In Bermuda, private schools' test results are often compared with those of public schools with the caveat that public schools' results are lower because public schools serve everyone regardless of ability. While this may be true, reviews of public education also indicate deficits in teaching and learning. While the Hopkins report (Hopkins et al., 2007) noted that Middle Schools were the least effective component of the public system and that reading scores tended to decrease after children entered Middle School, they indicated that the majority of primary schools were satisfactory. By 2018, the Department of Education reported a startling decline to unsatisfactory levels in primary

schools' scores in reading and mathematics (Johnston, 2020). This situation does not bode well for achievement in upper grades. However, it does serve to perpetuate racial stratification by limiting possibilities in education attainment. This state of public education becomes a form of oppression that denies access to quality education and should elicit outrage among those who depend on it to educate their children and stimulate motivation and peaceful revolt to foster change.

Unfortunately, from a moral and psychological standpoint, the sense of outrage, may create cognitive dissonance with our knowledge of the experiences of others, but it does not necessarily have a deeper moral or ethical meaning, nor does it necessarily create a desire to change one's day to day life. It is easier to back away from or suppress that sense of dissonance and seek equilibrium in prior structures than to engage in the rather nebulous path of deconstructing and reconstructing a new way of being. On a psychological level, this phenomenon may undermine the commitment to change. In education, this translates into elaborate plans for solutions that are only partially implemented or easily derailed by transitions in leadership (Curtis-Tweed, 2020)

For example, in the United States in response to the Civil Rights Movement of the 60's, changes in education, including integration, equal opportunity policies, and affirmative action were all steps in the right direction but always limited by economic shortfalls or other changes in political agenda that caused the possible solutions to fall short of enacting broad changes (Allen,1969). One such effort, Head Start, has seen limited success since being implemented in the 60's. However, the elements of Head Start that would have transformed the lives of families in poverty were never fully implemented. Therefore, while some children in poverty have been well served by the programme, the transformative societal changes that could have resulted were never realized. Changes remained at a level where they did not impact the economic and political systems of the nation that are the heartbeat of capitalism.

Similarly, in Bermuda, the Bermuda Technical Institute, which succeeded in developing black businessmen in the trades, was closed after only 14 years in operation. Ebbin (2018) notes that the school had successfully provided programming for 2500 people, during 1956-1969, between the high school and evening programme; it had ensured that young men were employed. Bermuda Technical Institute was thriving in 1969 when the government decided to close it in favour of moving technical education from high school to the college level. This measure created a gap of several years before technical education became available at Bermuda College. No explanation or reason for this puzzling change is documented but the impact was devastating. Many in the community believed this action was because the effectiveness of the school threatened the balance of socioeconomic power structures on island (Wasi, 2018).

More recently, Middle Schools were extensively planned and implemented but ultimately ineffective in Bermuda. According to the Hopkins report (Hopkins et al., 2007) the inadequacies of Middle School were associated with transitions in leadership, lack of appropriate structure and deficits in teacher training. In short, the plan was not fully implemented.

In the case of education, in equilibrium-seeking, government members and other stakeholders maintain the status quo and avoid transformative change by deflecting attention onto areas of related concern that are not the actual problem. It becomes easier to focus on the poor quality of buildings than to closely examine and correct what goes on inside them or to blame children for not learning and teachers for not teaching than to identify systemic deficits and correct them. These maladaptive tendencies prevent transformation of the system and true resolution of the problems.

Although outrage may unite people in acknowledging a collective responsibility to demand change, the path to change remains unclear, as if at an intersection between moral agency and revolution. Fanon (1967) stated that

fervour is the weapon of the impotent. If only fervour or outrage occur, the momentum dies. To extend Fanon's comment, fervour must be transformed into sustainable action by developing shared understanding and agency to effect social change.   If that does not occur, the political machine will once again establish equilibrium and destabilise society as it has in the past. Inequities in public education will remain. How can we stimulate outrage matched with sustainable action?

Movement toward Closing the Divide

On the surface, improving public education in Bermuda requires an understanding of all elements relevant to education including student characteristics, the proximal and distal influences in their lives and their level of readiness for education; teaching and learning, possible barriers to student success; and leadership. The plan to change must also engage all stakeholders, elicit external consultation, connect, and collaborate across public and private school leadership as suggested over the years in reviews of the public education system (Houghton 1963; Clark et al., 1978; Hopkins et al., 2007). Viewed in the context of systematic assessment and strategic planning that addresses both short term and long-term educational needs, the resultant plan must reflect a vision that looks towards Bermuda's future and promotes the sustainability of public education.

At a deeper level, Bermuda must grapple with the undergirding elements that sustain the divide, including neocolonial power structures embedded in political ideology and internalized racism. Ultimately, improving public education requires closing the divide. To this end, elements that sustain and perpetuate the divide must be identified and addressed:

- De-politicize and clarify government control of education. Deliberations on reform should consider Bermuda's history in education including structures, intents, and results, with an awareness of capitalist ideology and its impact on education. This knowledge base is relevant to enhancing self-understanding and to developing a collective sense of agency in defining change. The objective of change should be to transform the education system. However, including members of the community in conversations, research, or planning teams to reform education becomes no more than a public relations exercise if its underlying purpose is to encourage groupthink to endorse a given political platform or agenda. Therefore, the authority of an independent education oversight group which mainly comprises experts in the field of education should be legislated to empower the group to focus on education goals as opposed to a political agenda. Independence from political control would sanction the collective sense of agency to transform the education system and eliminate deterrents, such as groupthink, by encouraging critical thinking and engaging the uncomfortable and difficult questions about education in Bermuda.

- Address Race relations. Collaborations across public and private education should be designed to develop a mutual culture of excellence in education. Conversations between users of both systems should stimulate cognitive dissonance regarding white supremacy in private education, and the inequity in public education by sharing experiences, exploring the various meanings of privilege and the lack thereof, and seeing each other as equal. These efforts should enhance empathy for the other, an understanding of diversity and develop solutions for change.

- Recognize internalized inferiority. The remnants of neocolonialism are still extant in economic disparity and internalized inferiority on the part of oppressed people relative to the dominant society and culture. Fanon (1967) indicated that the source of inferiority is economic largely and subsequently the internalization of the sense of inferiority. To Fanon this is the existential issue for individuals. These existential questions about cognitive dissonance and the self are relevant to chartering the path forward.

- Act with agency in moral action. The moral imperative in this context is the need for moral action. This

kind of transformation requires a heightened sense of agency so that change can occur, understanding that the sense of agency is differentiated by the individual's experiences. Differences in participants' sense of agency could limit possible outcomes and the definitions of prospective change (Curtis-Tweed, 2003). Therefore, in addition to the heightened sense of agency, a shared understanding of concepts and goals will undergird moral action (Curtis-Tweed, 2020). Developing a shared understanding of possible solutions is essential to agency development. Concepts like reforming education, axing Middle Schools, closing primary schools are all frightening if there is a lack of understanding and agreement about what the concepts mean, how their implementation will impact everyone's lives, and how they will improve education. A shared understanding should increase a collective sense of agency in taking steps to move toward closing the divide (Curtis-Tweed, 2020).

Conclusion

Finally, people of colour should be empowered to eliminate the psychological struggle of a double consciousness in which one represses the authentic self in order to fit in or not offend others in the dominant culture. There is a sense of agency that undergirds but is also heightened by unapologetically embracing the self and not internalizing the concept of being a minority, especially when actually in the majority, or having to assimilate into a dominant culture. This sense of agency allows the person of colour to participate in redefining social norms (Curtis-Tweed, 2003), including those pertaining to public education. At the same time, the onus should not be on the individual, to resolve the psychological conflict of unifying dual selves born of oppression, but on society to eradicate the factors that stimulate the internal conflict. To that end, public education should foster the attainment of excellence and the realization of potential for all students rather than exist as a vehicle for a few to trade places with an other in a capitalist system in which someone is always oppressed. Ideally, education reform should transform the system to embrace and empower all members of the community to realize their potential.

Extracting the community from this entrenchment in neocolonialism requires commitment to the development of human capital, regardless of race, ethnicity, and/or class, understanding that excellence in public education is fundamental to creating avenues of change for the community at large and will contribute to the sustainability of Bermuda.

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