

**CHAD O. COATES****EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS IN THE BRITISH WEST INDIES:  
A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW****Abstract**

Formal education within the English-speaking Caribbean Community (CARICOM) may be traced back to the establishment of Codrington grammar school in Barbados in 1743. After more than two centuries of British colonial rule the educational systems within CARICOM states continue to reflect the academic traditions of their former colonizer. Prior to emancipation in 1838, the notion of providing education for the African slaves met strong opposition from plantation owners, despite the efforts of many Christian missionaries seeking to provide religious education to convert enslaved-Africans to Christianity. During the post-emancipation period, the education of ex-slaves within the British West Indies became one of the central issues of the day. Religious groups including the Anglicans, Baptists, Catholics, Methodists, Mico Charity, Presbyterians, and Wesleyans, together with financial support from the imperial government and the Negro Education Grant, drove and shaped the development of education at all levels of the British West Indian society. The purpose of this paper is to present a brief historical overview of some key developments in formal education within the English-speaking Caribbean during the period following emancipation.

**Introduction**

The Anglophone Caribbean Community (CARICOM) consists of a grouping of democratic states located in the Caribbean Sea that have a shared history of over 300 years of British colonization (UNESCO, 2001). CARICOM states are characterized by similarities in heritage, socio-cultural norms and values, as well as political, and educational systems. For example, the education systems throughout the Commonwealth Caribbean are based on the British model of formal education (Peters, 2001). The region is geographically composed of ten independent small island states: Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago; two independent territories located on the main land of South America: Belize and Guyana; and four British dependencies: Anguilla, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, and the Turks and Caicos Islands (Roberts, 2003). Shortly after World War II, the process of decolonization began to take place in the West Indies. Two key factors impacting the decolonization process included insufficient finance on the part of the British Crown following the war, and a growing aspiration for independence among individual states within the Caribbean (Millette, 2004). In August of 1962, the two largest British colonies, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, gained their independence (Cox-Alomar, 2004; CARICOM, 2005). Many of the remaining British colonies gained independence shortly thereafter – during the late 1960s and into the early 1980s (Millette, 2004; CARICOM, 2005).

During the decolonization period the demographic composition of the student population within the British West Indian education system changed rapidly as

many Whites chose to return to Britain. However, the British educational structures continue to be an essential component of many of the educational systems within the region. Within CARICOM, education plays an integral role in regional development. Historically, education has served the region as a catalyst for productive endeavors that support the creation, acquisition, and dissemination of the knowledge and skills necessary to stimulate and drive Caribbean economies (Leo-Rhynie, 2005). At the higher levels, education within the region serves to prepare graduates for taking on leadership roles in government, industry and commerce, research, strategic planning, and problem solving.

### **Early developments in formal education**

The British model of formal education within the Caribbean dates back to the 1834 Emancipation Act, which provided the first opportunity for mass schooling within the region for a population comprised largely of ex-slaves (Hunte, 1976). The Emancipation Act provided for the education of the ex-slaves within the British colonies and was backed by financial support from the Imperial Government and through the Negro Education Grant (Hunte, 1976). The Negro Education Grant was endowed by an inheritance left by Lady Mico in 1690. Lady Mico had willed her wealth to her nephew with the pre-condition that he married one of his cousins. Alternatively, the inheritance would be used for the “redemption of Christians captured and enslaved by Barbery pirates” (Gordon, 1963, p. 23). The nephew in question never married his cousin, and in 1834, Thomas Fowell Buxton and other abolitionists convincingly argued that the Mico inheritance should be used for the purpose of “Negro Education”. During the first two years, the Negro Education Grant was issued to religious groups solely for constructing schools. The Imperial Government contributed to paying two-thirds of the building cost while the religious groups contributed one-third. During the time of the Negro Education Grant, the Mico Charity had provided more educational funding than any other religious group, and had opened four Normal Schools for the training of native teachers.

Prior to emancipation, opportunities for the education of African slaves within the British West Indies were practically non-existent; and where they did exist, were met with harsh opposition from plantation and slave owners (Gordon, 1963; Phillippo, 1843). The majority of the White population, who could afford it, sent their sons to be educated in England as “there was no equivalent of a good English grammar school education to be had in the West Indies” (Gordon, 1963, p. 15). For less wealthy Whites, the demand for a grammar school education was met in part by planters and merchants, primarily in Jamaica and Barbados, who endowed local schools on these islands (Gordon, 1963). The most noteworthy donor was Christopher Codrington of Barbados, who bequeathed his estate to provide fiscal support for the Codrington grammar school for boys in Barbados. The school was founded in 1743 and opened in 1745 (Braithewaite, 1958).

At the start of the nineteenth century, the British Government provided new subsidies for West Indian education as part of a system of imperial grants. Following emancipation in 1838, there were rapid increases in educational enrollment. There was also an increase in the number of elementary, and subsequently, secondary schools (Gordon, 1963; Bacchus, 1994). For example, prior to 1823 there were fewer than three schools in Jamaica that were dedicated solely to

educating the Black population (Phillippo, 1843). By 1841, there were approximately 186 day schools, 100 Sabbath schools, and 25 evening schools (for the instruction of adults) being operated by the Baptists, National Church, Wesleyans, Mico Charity, London Missionary Society, Moravians, and Presbyterians (Phillippo, 1843). Between 1836 and 1858 approximately 278 teachers were trained at Mico normal schools (Bacchus, 1994). There was a significant shortage of trained teachers to meet the growing demands for education, which significantly impeded the quality of education provided. In an attempt to improve the educational quality within the West Indies, in 1867 the Commissioners of Education implemented regulations, which mandated that individuals must obtain a professional certificate of competency in order to be appointed as a schoolteacher.

The demand for classical secondary and higher education during and after the mid-1800s was bolstered by economic decline due to weakened sugar revenues, growth of the local middle class, and the increased availability of lower level white-collar jobs to non-Whites (Bacchus, 1994). During the latter half of the nineteenth century, a vast number of secondary schools were established across the British West Indies. These newly emerged secondary schools included the Antigua Girl's High School founded in Antigua in 1886; St. George's High School and St. Joseph's Convent established in Grenada in 1872; Saffron School founded in 1878, the Kingston High School for boys and Trinity High School for girls established 1895 in British Guiana; York Castle High School established in the 1870s, and Jamaica High School founded in 1882 in Jamaica; and Catholic College of St. Mary's established in Trinidad in 1863. As secondary school enrollment increased several proposals were discussed regarding the need for creating tertiary education opportunities within the region. At the core of these debates was the issue of whether there was a pressing need to establish a university in the West Indies.

### **The Beginnings of Caribbean Higher Education**

In 1830, the Codrington grammar school became a theological college for the training of Anglican priests and was renamed Codrington College. The college was the first higher education institution in the Commonwealth Caribbean (Braithwaite, 1958; Gordon, 1963). Between 1830 and 1950, when the transition to independence began, there were no more than ten small colleges training teachers, five even smaller colleges training ministers of religion, a few for the preparation of nurses, and one college training agriculturalists in the entire British West Indies (Miller, 2000). Some of the major landmark institutions that emerged to meet the demand for and to facilitate the development of higher education within the region included Calabar, a Baptist theological college, established in Jamaica in 1843; the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture (ICTA) established by the colonial authorities in Trinidad in 1921 (Roberts, 2003); and the University College of the West Indies (UCWI), currently the University of the West Indies (UWI), established in Jamaica in 1948 as a regional institution with a mission to meet the higher education needs of the Anglophone-Caribbean and to promote regional identity (Cobley, 2000). At the time the UCWI was founded, the chief purpose of higher education within the British Caribbean region was "to cultivate skills, dispositions and social identities consistent with the imperatives of [a] nationalistic ethic" (Sylvester, 2008, p. 273). UWI currently has three regional campuses that are located in Jamaica, Barbados,

and Trinidad and Tobago, University Centers in the non-campus countries (NCCs), and a Center for Hotel and Tourism Management in the Bahamas (UWI, 2006).

Beginning in the late 1960s through the 1990s, there was a rise in the number of higher education institutions in response to the growing demands for higher education within the region. In the 1980s and 90s increased demand for higher education resulting from pressure for access by larger numbers and more diverse groups of students resulted in the emergence of new universities, multi-disciplinary colleges as well as specialized non-university tertiary institutions (Roberts, 2003). During the late 1960s through the 1990s, there was a rise in the number of higher education institutions within the Caribbean in response to the growing demands for higher education within the region (Miller, 2000). At the dawn of the twenty-first century, increased demand for higher education within the Caribbean was being met by the emergence of new universities, multi-disciplinary colleges as well as specialized non-university tertiary institutions (Roberts, 2003). At present higher education within the Anglophone Caribbean consists of a diverse mix of over 150 higher education institutions, approximately 60% of which are publicly or nationally funded; 30% are completely private; and 10% are privately owned but receive some government funding (Howe, 2003).

## Conclusion

The British academic traditions are still an integral part of the education systems within the English-speaking Caribbean (Peters, 2001). Hunte (1976) contended that the British academic traditions had resulted in the creation of “a higher education system in the West Indies that was highly competitive, selective, and largely unresponsive to the needs of the area” (pp. 189-192). There is a strong belief among CARICOM states that education, and particularly, higher education provides the capacity to move beyond cognitive and intellectual development by utilizing the teaching and learning environment and the academic experience to enhance the autonomy, maturity, and character of the individual in a holistic manner (Nettleford, 2002). CARICOM’s ongoing imperative to expand educational access at all levels is a proactive response to “anticipated demand for local leaders, professionals and technocrats in the newly emerging nation states and semi-autonomous dependencies” (Miller, 2000, p. 123).

As CARICOM governments continue to chart national goals of social and economic development, careful attention must be placed on improving educational quality and ensuring that education policies support the development of robust education systems that are equipped to meet the changing needs of the region. Jules (2010) cautioned that CARICOM education reforms often prove problematic to implement, as reform agendas are often inconsistent and are likely to change when local governments change. Regional governments must, therefore, take into consideration the needs of CARICOM as a whole in their prediction of national education requirements and in the formulation of local education policies.

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Chad O. Coates  
PhD Candidate  
Bowling Green State University  
USA  
[chadc@bgsu.edu](mailto:chadc@bgsu.edu)