

Historical Context of Education in Bermuda: Perspectives of a Participant Observer

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Abstract

During the 20th century, government education policy followed a utilitarian philosophy, providing only those facilities, programmes, and changes considered necessary at the time or for improved educational outcomes in the near future. Some people and schools reacted with an elitist response. They separated their children, on the basis of family wealth or prior achievement, and sent them to schools that usually followed different curricula and assessments they considered to be internationally superior.

KEY WORDS: *Bermuda, education policy, utilitarian, elitist*

Introduction

During the first half of the 20th century, the structure of the education system in Bermuda remained relatively static. School attendance was compulsory between 7 and 13 years of age. Only a small proportion of the school population was in post-primary education – 11.2 per cent in 1949 (Gilbert 1949).

The economy of the island was based on agricultural exports with a small, but viable tourist industry serving clients who arrived on the island via ocean liners that docked in Hamilton. However, after the Second World War and the construction of the airport at Castle Harbour, the relative ease of overseas travel resulted in rapid expansion of the island's economy.

Before 1950, all schools were segregated on the basis of race and all schools were fee-paying. Some, but not all, schools received financial assistance from government. A few schools had higher than average fees and tended to utilise competitive admission examinations, especially for post-primary facilities.

It should be noted that all schools for white children that provided post-primary education provided primary education as well. There were several white schools that provided only primary education, and parents would seek to gain admittance of their children into the post-primary section of other white schools. These conditions influenced the educational environment of Bermuda in the second half of the century.

There were three occasions in that period when government determined there was a need for change in the structure and/or operation of its education system.

Structural changes, 1950-59

In the aftermath of the war, the new airport at the eastern end of the island was used by tourists wishing to holiday in Bermuda. The resulting enlarged clientele was drawn mainly from the northeastern United States, a relatively wealthy and populous area situated close to Bermuda. In addition (1946), the prohibition on motorised vehicles

on Bermuda's roads was lifted. Both factors required workers who were trained beyond what was needed in an agricultural economy.

Gilbert's (1954) education report noted that primary schooling had been made free in government schools in 1949. It also mentioned that there were plans to provide two vocationally/technically oriented post-primary schools in the near future, along with additional secondary schools. The following actions came out of this report.

The Bermuda Technical Institute and the Bermuda Hotel School (1955) were established as desegregated schools. The Technical Institute was designed to prepare master craftsmen for the automotive and construction industries, as well as for general maintenance in the expanding business and tourism economies. The Hotel School was designed to produce master chefs, hotel operational staff, as well as managers for the tourism industry.

St George's Secondary School (1955) was established for Black children only in the parish of the same name. The Prospect Secondary School for Girls (1958) and the Prospect Secondary School for Boys (1959) were established for Black children only on the Prospect plateau.

There was general acceptance of the changes. Students were proud to be enrolled in the Technical Institute as well as in the Hotel School. Enrollment in the three general secondary schools was taken up readily. Williams (1959) reported an increased proportion of the school population – 19 per cent – in post-primary education.

Structural changes, 1963-84

The increasing sophistication of the island's economy, along with the political changes following the 1959 movie theatre boycott, led to the appointment of a commission to investigate the training needs of Bermuda. This commission recommended that a suitably qualified educationist from the United Kingdom be invited to examine and report on the quality of education in Bermuda. As a result, the Houghton Report (1963) was prepared.

This report, which was presented to government, stated that schools for black children were provided with inadequate buildings, instructional material, and financial support compared to schools for white children. It criticised the segregated school system and recommended desegregation. The report proposed that primary school admission be based on school zones and proximity of residence to school. No government school should provide both primary and post-primary education. It suggested the use of a common selection entry examination for all post-primary government schools, which would prepare students up to the Ordinary-level examinations. A Sixth Form Centre would be established to prepare students for Advanced-level examinations.

In response to the Houghton Report, many changes were enacted.

- Bermuda High School for Girls (1963) and later Saltus Grammar School (1971), historically white schools, decided to forego government assistance and become fully private schools. They increased their school fees in order to compensate for the loss of income from government.
- The Education Act was amended in 1965 to lower the start of compulsory education to five years of age and to raise the ending of compulsory education by one year on each succeeding alternate year until it reached a maximum of 16 years of age in 1971. It also required the creation of a common entrance examination for government secondary schools, the Secondary School Entrance Examination (SSEE), which started in 1967.
- In 1968, the Academic Sixth Form Centre was established on Roberts Avenue, and Warwick Secondary School was established on Middle Road, Warwick Parish.
- The Education Act (1971) made it illegal for any school in Bermuda, either government or private, to base admission on race and also separated the primary and secondary sections of government schools.

- In 1974, the Bermuda Secondary School Certificate (BSSC) programme commenced. The education minister required government and private secondary schools to participate in the BSSC assessment programme. Bermuda College was established as a single institution to incorporate the Bermuda Technical Institute, the Bermuda Hotel School, and the Academic Sixth Form Centre.

As a result of these actions, there was a further separation between private and government secondary schools. As noted Bermuda High School and Saltus Grammar School, formerly part of the government system, decided to become private schools. These schools introduced bursaries following public concerns about the impact of the sudden increase in school fees on students. Both Blacks and whites were admitted to Saltus with bursaries, as the law did not permit racial discrimination in admissions processes. Both schools offered significant bursaries based on test performance to students from less wealthy families.

For those secondary schools that remained part of the government system, the SSEE was used as the filter for students who applied, in effect stratifying students by prior achievement. Those government secondary schools with higher reputations for excellence accepted students who performed at a higher level on the SSEE. The BSSC provided some level of comparability across all secondary schools in terms of curriculum and assessment, despite the nature of the admissions process. By 1983, the minister of education rescinded the requirement for all private secondary schools to participate in the BSSC, and the BSSC became a certification programme for government secondary schools only.

Structural and organisational changes, 1987-2003

During much of the 1980s, the business community expressed concern about the lack of local staff with the technical skills required to support business infrastructure. In addition, there was a paucity of local staff with the intellectual development and work ethic required of effective employees in the offices of international businesses. See Table 1 for an indication of the change in occupational demand from 1970 to 1991.

Table 1: Flourishing of International Businesses

Occupation	1970	1980	1991 Bermudian	1991 Non-Bermudian
Accountant	306	809	463	433
Lawyer	41	82	98	66
Craftsmen	1,553	1,055	952	101

Note: Data provided by the Department of Statistics from census records. Bermudian status was not recorded before 1991. The craftsmen category does not include all crafts, but the selection of crafts is consistent across censuses.

The minister of education (1987) appointed an Education Planning Team (EPT) to examine the situation regarding intellectual and technical skills development and to make recommendations on the way forward for public education. The EPT report recommended the following:

- Reorganisation of the school system: establishment of middle schools, abolition of SSEE and addition of a 13th year of schooling. This set of recommendations was designed, inter alia, to improve racial and economic diversity in each government school.
- Enactment of a new Education Act with the inclusion of mandatory services for children with special needs;

- Introduction of programmes to meet the needs of functionally illiterate adults;
- Implementation of a more effective programme to identify and meet the needs of students at risk;
- Improvement of school facilities and equipment; and
- Improvements in curriculum and assessment at all levels, particularly the secondary level.

As a result of these changes, the Montessori Academy (1991), now Somersfield Academy, was established as a private school. Warwick Academy (1993), an historically white school, decided to forego government financial assistance and become a fully private school. Thus two additional private schools were made available. All private schools used tests as part of the admissions criteria.

The Education Act was finalised in 1996 and formalised the EPT recommendations that were accepted by government, including the following:

- Students transferred from primary to middle school based on the location of the primary school they attended, using the “Family of Schools” concept;
- Tests were eliminated as part of the admission criteria for all government schools;
- The new middle school system started in 1996;
- A new senior school, CedarBridge Academy, started in 1997;
- A new senior school certification programme, the Bermuda School Certificate (BSC), started in 1999; and
- A second new senior school building (2003) was completed and housed the Berkeley Institute.

Bermuda College

Bermuda College is not part of the system of compulsory education. It has been consistent in assuming two roles as the focus of its operation. The core role is the provision of a liberal arts education terminating in an associate’s degree for those students wishing to pursue further education overseas at a four-year college. In this role, articulation agreements have been finalised between the college and overseas universities/colleges for students who wish to gain specialist qualifications in education, business, advanced technical areas as well as other areas of study. The college continues to pursue additional articulation agreements.

Senior school graduates have always had the option of attending Bermuda College before going overseas for post-secondary education. Enrollment at Bermuda College over the decades appears to have varied within narrow limits based on anecdotal evidence. However, Table 2 shows that the percentage of utilisation by public school graduates decreased from 36 to 30 per cent, while utilisation by private school graduates decreased drastically from 30 to 6.3 per cent from the 1990s to 2000s.

Table 2: College Admittance by School Type

School Type	College Admittance	Senior Enrollment	Percentage Admittance
Admission Year - 1996			
Government	122	337	36
Private	62	207	30
Admission Year - 2006			
Government	88	293	30
Private	13	207	6.3

Note: Data on senior school final year enrollment obtained from Ministry of Education and college admissions from Bermuda College

The second major role, in consultation with local employer organisations, is to provide skills-upgrading courses for current employees and appropriate entry-level training to potential new employees.

It can be seen from these two roles that the college aims to serve the total needs of the community. First, it aligns students via a liberal education with higher education goals. Second, it prepares students to maximise opportunities for career success.

Conclusion

This historical overview of Bermuda's education system from 1950 to 2003 shows that the changes in that period were consistent with the political trends of the time. This is evidenced by the focus on utilitarianism and elitism, followed by a focus on desegregation, and finally an emphasis on reorganising the structure of education.

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