

**New Markets or New Alliances?  
Distance Education, Globalization and Postcolonial Challenges**

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**Abstract**

Over the past 15 years, the Department of Educational Studies at Sheffield University has been working in partnership with educators in the Caribbean, developing teacher education programmes by distance learning. Using a dialogic approach, this paper discusses the University of Sheffield's involvement in teacher professional development in the Caribbean within the context of colonial history and the legacy of educational development in the region. It also explores recent trends towards globalization in education and the implications of this for collaborations between educators in post-colonial and post-colonized societies.

We have sought a mutual examination of our different local contexts and of the politics of globalization which situate the power relations between us. This examination has demanded and facilitated a reflective practice focused upon the struggle to understand 'difference' and transform the relations of power. We seek to challenge first-world values, assumptions and technologies of knowledge, questioning not only *who we are* as teacher educators in the twenty-first century but also *how that 'we'* is constituted. This requires not only a reconceptualization of teacher education but also a reconceptualization of the mission, role, and organization of those institutions involved in teacher education. Attention is given to the reflexive and critical engagements that have taken place through this collaboration as well as to the tensions and potential conflicts that arise from them.

**Introduction**

In this paper we discuss the involvement of the University of Sheffield in teacher education in the Caribbean. We trace the development of this involvement as a collaborative process and explore some of the key issues that we have faced. Attention is given to the reflexive and critical

engagements that have taken place through this collaboration, as well as to the tensions and potential conflicts that arise from them. Finally, the paper considers the possibilities that are currently opening up through the 'Caribbeanization' of the structures of the university, and highlight some of the implica-

tions of this 'experiment', for the way in which the mission of the university is being reconceptualized.

### **Origins of the Caribbean Collaboration**

The relationship between the University of Sheffield and the Caribbean had its genesis in the mid-1980s when a young special education teacher from Trinidad, Dennis Conrad, was an MEd student at the University of Sheffield. After Conrad returned to Trinidad, he vigorously advocated for the provision of recognized certificated courses for teachers in the field of Special Education. The Marge Report (1984) had estimated that 16.1 percent of children between the ages of 3 and 16 (approximately 28,500) in Trinidad and Tobago had 'some form of disability' and their educational needs were not being met (Education Plan, 1985). Moreover, the country was facing economic and social challenges brought on by a decline in oil revenue and there seemed to be an ever-increasing population of children at-risk who required special educational support. The Marge Report further identified the need for 736 professionally trained special educators to cater to the needs of the 16.1 percent, some of whom had spilled into the mainstream. Despite acknowledging the importance of this Report by including its general findings and recommendations in the Education Plan (1985-90), no commitment was given by the country's government, nor resources made available, to address the identified teacher education needs.

During the early 1980s, teachers in Trinidad and Tobago had been exposed to special education sensitization programmes offered by the University of Manitoba in conjunction with the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) (Chee Wah, 1998). These programmes had successfully raised the awareness of teachers in the country to the needs of children

with disabilities and learning difficulties (approximately 1,100 teachers participated in sensitization workshops between 1981 and 1984) and a much smaller number received training as workshop leaders. However, despite the large amount of money invested in this programme, sensitization workshops were insufficient to meet the need for rigorous training and internationally rated certification.

Conrad forged relationships with several special education organizations and the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association (T&TUTA) to explore the possibility of providing certificated courses in Trinidad and Tobago to address the shortage of trained special education teachers (Namsoo and Armstrong, 1999). A series of workshops and seminars were organized which served as a needs assessment exercise where the opinions of teachers were sought on the areas of training need. The successes of the workshops coupled with the demand for internationally recognized, certificated training encouraged a group of young teachers to put together their own course and recruit their own lecturers (comprising key lecturers from the University of the West Indies, Ministry of Education officers and senior special educators). The Certificate/Diploma course in Special Education began in July 1989 with an enrolment of 110 students (Namsoo, 1998) and was validated by the University of Sheffield.

### **Forging New Alliances**

Building upon this initial collaboration between educators in Trinidad and Tobago and the University of Sheffield, a distance education programme was subsequently introduced which offered master's courses in Special and Inclusive Education and Educational Studies. The University of Sheffield's Department of Educational Studies began to develop a distance education profile in

the late 1980s and early 1990s. These programmes were developed by the department on a relatively small scale (though they were soon to account for the great majority of the department's work in the area of in-service teacher education). Although the programmes differed in significant ways among the different locations they were characterized by pedagogical diversity (which included face-to-face study schools, local tutorial support networks and specially produced distance education materials) and by an attempt to develop curricula with both an international and local relevance. This system of consultative collaboration ensured that the Caribbean programme was firmly rooted in the on-going discourse between teachers and their organizations and the university.

The taught modules of the programme were collaboratively designed to address specific local concerns (such as the organization and administration of special educational services in Trinidad and Tobago), as well as international issues (difference and difficulty). Moreover, the local tutorial system, which was of central importance in the development of the Caribbean identity of the programme, was staffed by leading local educators in the field. The first cohort of students, who graduated in 1995, included many of the leading figures who had struggled to introduce the initial Certificate/Diploma programme. In 1999, at the behest of the St. Lucia Teachers' Union and with the active support of the Ministry of Education of St. Lucia, the university introduced a new distance education Master's Programme in Educational Studies for teachers in that island. Recognizing that research is an integral part of national development, the university has also entered into new partnerships with the Ministries of Education of Trinidad and Tobago and St. Lucia to provide certificated school-based staff development programmes in a number of pilot schools. These programmes are supported

by distance education materials developed in part and taught by local staff of the university in the Caribbean.

The central role played by Caribbean educators in developing the university's work in the region was to give the necessary impetus that in 1998 led to the launch of a joint T&TUTA/University of Sheffield Centre for Research and Professional Development in Trinidad and Tobago; and, in 1999, to the foundation of a University of Sheffield Caribbean Institute for Research and Professional Education, built upon partnerships between teachers, education ministries, teacher associations, and other non-governmental organizations, researchers and professionals in Trinidad and Tobago, St. Lucia, Barbados, the Turks and Caicos Islands, and elsewhere in the Caribbean.

### **Key Issues Arising from the Collaboration**

Many issues and challenges have faced us in developing our work in the Caribbean. In this final section of the paper we identify three key areas and discuss the ways in which we have attempted to address them in our practice.

#### ***1. Collaboration or the Tyranny of Distance?***

Open and distance learning programmes raise questions of both access and invasion. The growth of distance learning as a means of creating international markets for educational institutions, emphasizing generic and transferable skills, provides evidence of how educational practices are contributing to and intensifying the process of globalization. Blainey (1966) referred to this process as 'the tyranny of distance'. Mass education, provided through distance learning, is fast becoming a major vehicle through which a global technological civilisation is being formed.

One consequence of this can be the destruction of local culture and expertise as programmes are developed in one national/cultural context to be applied in another (Rowan et al., 1997). Yet, distance education may also be seen as opening up new opportunities for educational access. Bolton (1986) referred to 'the opportunities of distance' as a means of overcoming 'the tyranny of educational distances' and there has been a proliferation of institutions offering access, often to adult, nontraditional, students.

In providing access to educational resources on an international scale, distance learning programmes create opportunities for the free flow of information and knowledge and for internationally accredited certification of learning. On the other hand, as invasions they can be seen to weaken national initiatives to develop local educational provision which might be better suited to local needs.

The main impetus for the development of the University of Sheffield's distance education programmes came from teachers in the Caribbean working collectively through non-governmental and governmental organizations to address the shortage of trained teachers. Access to training opportunities was made possible through a firm foundation of collaboration between Caribbean educators and the university. The process of this struggle contributed to sustaining the momentum and vitality of a shared vision. This vision was part of a self-liberating movement where teacher-participants were encouraged to become reflective practitioners through self-empowerment generated by the struggle for social justice and rights (Namsoo and Armstrong, 1999). Thus began the revolutionary thought of changing schools and, by extension, the education system from within. In an interview with a former first vice president of T&TUTA, Jennifer Lavia, Conrad emphasized the importance of the

collaboration with the University of Sheffield:

The partnership between a teachers' union, [a] community based organization and a university, and the focus on teachers shaping and constructing their own professional development, emerged as the first of its kind. The project is evidenced by the commitment of a people to shape its destiny in a collaborative-consultative capacity with a highly respected university. There is a clear policy of mutual respect and regard for each partner in the collaboration. The acknowledgement of the local special educators as experts on the professional needs of special educators in Trinidad and Tobago has been realised through their consultative role in the development of programme curricular and local administration. (Lavia, 1998)

## ***2. Distance Education and the Commodification of Knowledge***

As the world has physically contracted through the growth of new communication and transport networks, 'knowledge' has become a commodity that is traded on an international scale. Ideas capable of mass consumption increasingly have value as commodities in the marketplace. To maximize the financial returns on 'knowledge', it must be produced and exported cheaply. In consequence, local contexts, including local intellectual and cultural life, may become increasingly irrelevant to the dominant systems of knowledge production. The potential is therefore created for postcolonial dependency on the global providers of the 'virtual campuses'.

By contrast, the University of Sheffield's programmes have been built upon local collaborations and contextualized curricula, reflecting on-going debates about the changing character of universities in the twenty-first century. This work is not without its challenges. As Michael Apple (1996, 33) has argued:

A democratic curriculum and pedagogy must begin with a recognition of the different social positionings and cultural repertoires in the classrooms, and the power relations between them.

This argument is applicable to the cultural repertoires within which collaborations around teacher education are situated. It is also applicable to the power relationships between countries that provide both a historical and a political context for those collaborations and in some measure even define them. Moreover, the globalization of knowledge may reinforce patterns of behaviour born of the history of colonialism which have given rise to 'ways of thinking' that frequently lock people into a dependency syndrome.

Freire (1985) has discussed the character of this dependency on the first world and the inequality of knowledge production as evidence of a 'culture of silence'. However, Freire's argument focuses upon institutional relations of power. It does not deal adequately with the complexity of conflict within the dominant societies and how this opens up the possibility of new alliances being forged across cultures through engagements that challenge the culture of silence in both dominated and dominant societies. It is at the juncture of the local and the global that empirical analysis is appropriate, examining the character of specific interactions and alliances, rather than making sweeping, universalistic assumptions about the hegemonic character of globalization. Freire's argument is mistaken, both in its characterization of the work of educators based in the first world as globalizing (rather than as an engagement across localities) and in undermining the role of teachers who enter into such alliances to shape their own professional identities.

An example of our engagement with this issue can be seen in our use of the Educational Enquiry Module as a catalyst for the writing of a social

history of education in St. Lucia by the current MEd students. This history is being researched and written using life historical methodologies and will be published by the university in its series *Teachers Voices from the Caribbean*.

### ***3. The Changing Role of the University***

Universities around the world are facing challenges brought about by globalization and the development of new forms of communication and the flexible systems of access that derive from them. The modern university can be understood in terms of one of three models. The traditional university operates as a highly centralized institution to which students attend on campus. Other universities are taking advantage of new technological developments to become 'virtual universities' with a clientele distributed across the world. This model remains highly centralized, adopting common curricula. An alternative model to the above builds on the opportunities for international collaboration that have arisen from new modes of communication, whilst respecting the integrity of social and cultural practices of the students. Though it is acknowledged that the globalization of educational provision through distance learning carries its own inherent dangers as a colonizing and controlling process, it can be argued that developments in distance education pedagogies do offer genuine opportunities for engaging in collaborative, yet critical initiatives and interventions.

Critical pedagogy must be based upon a theoretical and practical engagement with the politics of post-colonialism, incorporating a mutual analysis of the lived experience of educators and students in the different locations. When building partnerships between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', there is a need to identify the tensions that could exist or might be created through the power embedded in the university as a 'validator of

knowledge'. Contesting Eurocentric curriculum content and materials is of paramount importance to countries that have a history of colonial rule, especially since distance education practices could very well be frowned upon and perceived as another form of 'instant' consumption, by traditionalists who received their tertiary education in a traditional university. The reconceptualized university must develop both curriculum and pedagogy which are de-centred through the creation of partnerships. Rather than enhancing the centre through an expansion of the international student body (that is, more effective marketing of the university as a virtual entity), it is about the need to enhance international and intercultural collaborations through teaching and learning engagements based upon a shared vision and mutually determined goals.

## Conclusion

These are challenging issues and they do involve tensions and dilemmas. However, we believe that it is important to move away from a mere structuralist interpretation of neocolonialism and reflect upon the actual practice of educators who are collaboratively engaged in contesting the politics of domination using the opportunities made possible through distance education.

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