The roots of inequality in the Mauritian educational system

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ABSTRACT

In spite of free, universal and compulsory education, and a massive yearly investment (£4 billion/11% of Govt expenditure), the chances of success at the final primary level examinations in Mauritius are still very unequal. Some schools consistently score pass rates of 100% whilst others struggle to reach a mere 10%. This paper critically examines this inequality.

For the purpose of this work, the mixed-method approach has been applied and data about the performance of struggling schools and students have been compiled. Brainstorming sessions have also been organised with the teaching and administrative staff. Parents have also been conveyed to focus group discussions.

What emerges out of this study is that factors external to the school impact heavily on the performance of these children, in spite of the substantial support received from the government, the business sector, religious bodies and NGOs. Apart from the need for a minimum level of physical comfort, parental involvement is also viewed as a crucial prerequisite. It is also essential to improve their social environment, to inculcate the value of education, and to constantly monitor their progress so as to keep them on track.
1.0 Introduction

Mauritius is regarded worldwide as an economic success story, and the country’s reputation is even more pronounced in the African continent and in the developing world. Since its independence from Great Britain in 1968, Mauritius has moved from a low-income economy, based primarily on sugar-cane cultivation, to a middle-income economy with growing industrial, financial and tourist sectors. Other sectors, such as fish processing, information and Communication technologies and hospitality and property development are also fast expanding. The GDP per capita has reached $12,400 in 2009 (CIA, 2010), with a low level of unemployment, primarily frictional in nature. This economic success has allowed the country to develop one of the most comprehensive welfare systems amongst developing countries, and even in the world. Indeed, there are very few countries providing a free public health care system with a comprehensive network of medical units scattered throughout the island; A universal pension scheme has also been established for all those above 60 years of age, as well as widows, handicapped and socially vulnerable groups; Free public transport for all the elderly people (60 and above) on a 24 hr basis; A comprehensive social net to protect the poor, including state subsidies on essential items.

Over and above the provision of all these services, the successive Mauritian Government have constantly been devoting more funds and effort to the education sector, which is perceived as the key to success and to move up the social ladder. In fact, Mauritius still offers a system of free education for all, in spite of the pressure from International financing institutions for the opposite. Each and every Mauritian child has access to free education as from the pre-primary up to tertiary level. To demonstrate this commitment towards education, successive Mauritian Governments have maintained and even extended this system of free education system for all. In fact, over and above the free education system, students are also able to travel freely on public transport, and all the textbooks are provided to children at primary level, as well as those in need at secondary level. The Examination fees for students taking part at the Cambridge School Certificate and Higher School Certificate is also subsidized for those coming from working-class and Lower middle class families. Based on the above, it looks like even in wonderland it is not as ideal as under the Mauritian sun.

This paper, however, purposely focuses on the dysfunctions of the established system of investment on the part of the state. As it is presently, the chances of success at the final primary level examinations in Mauritius remain very unequal. Indeed, whilst some schools consistently score pass rates of 100%, others struggle to reach a mere 10%. This paper critically examines the factors behind this inequality.

2.0 Literature Review

Equal access to education is one of the basic human rights to which we all are entitled. At the individual level, education provides an opportunity to move out of poverty and a capacity to generate income, but also contribute towards an enhanced social status and self-esteem. At the level of a country’s economy, education plays a key role in facilitating economic growth but also in contributing towards social equity. The existing evidence in both developing and developed countries shows that better educated workers enjoy higher wages, lower rates unemployment and better career prospects (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 2004). The question that has to be raised, nevertheless, is whether we are all on the same footing with regards to
Inequality is said to take place when a resource is distributed among individuals or among groups in such a way that there is a feeling that some individuals or groups have got more than their “fair” share and others have got less (Sheret, 1991). In this context, Sheret defines “resource” as something with a positive value, such as the annual budget, and places in good secondary schools, and “groups” mainly in terms of socio-economic status or geographical location. Defining the term “fair” however, remains problematic as it brings in the notion of social justice or equity, which is quite difficult to quantify. Still, inequality is easily recognizable and is the extent to which a given distribution differs from the distribution which represents equality.

In the field of education, however, an unequal distribution system under a competitive model can impact very negatively on specific socioeconomic groups, and this can be exacerbated by the school curriculum (Luker et al, 2001). As Deming (1993) has put it, competition, while harmless (and in fact quite beneficial) in some games, is destructive to teaching and learning, and antithetical to social justice. A study of the disparities in basic education among counties in China between 1994 and 1997 showed that there was widening educational inequality between urban and rural counties and that poor counties were significantly disadvantaged in terms of per student recurrent expenditure, teacher quality and physical conditions of schools (World Bank, 1999).

A study of the progress of school education in India by Kingdon (2007) reveals the same trend. At a First Post-Independence Census in 1951, only 9 per cent of women and 27 per cent of men were literate. Since, then, significant progress has been achieved. There has been a constant overall improvement in enrolment rates, which is now close to universal, given that 93.4% of Indian elementary school age children were enrolled in school in 2006 (Pratham, 2007). However, whereas at the surface, interesting signs of progress can be observed, a deeper insight in fact reveals that the problem of growing inequality in the educational system still prevails. Indeed, the National Sample Survey data shows great disparities in terms of access to secondary schooling for the poor living in the states lagging behind in many indicators of social development. The poorer states also experience acute inequality in terms of gender. In States such as Bihar and Rajasthan, girls are only half as likely to enroll in secondary school as boys.

Those who have the means are determined to pay more in order to secure access to the best education system for their children. In a study of Inequality in the Greece education system, Tsaklogou (2005) reveals how parents’ keen interest in the success of their children in University entry examinations have given rise to a large number of costly private schools operating in parallel with the official education system. However, private spending per student and, hence the quality of private tuition obtained varies considerably according to the ability of the household to pay for such services.

2.1 Education in Mauritius

As mentioned in the introductory part of this work, the Mauritian educational system seems, at first glance to be meeting the expectations. The state spends a significant percentage of its
total expenditure on education. For the financial year 2008/2009, government expenditure on education was estimated at about £160 Million (11% of total govt expenditure).

Table 1- Total Government Expenditure, Republic of Mauritius

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Government Expenditure</th>
<th>Rs(Millions)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>of which expenditure by:</td>
<td>2008/2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Education &amp; Human Resources</td>
<td>8,020.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CSO, 2010

There are some 1024 schools in the pre-primary sector in Mauritius (CSO, 2009), with a total of 2518 teachers and 933 non-teaching staff involved. The average number of pupils per teacher was of 14, and the gross-enrolment ratio stood at 96% in 2009. With regards to the primary level, there are some 289 schools in Mauritius, and the majority (220) of the schools is being run by the Govt, with 51 under the management of the Roman Catholic Education Authority. The primary school population stood at 117,922 in 2009, and the Gross-enrolment rate (primary enrolment as a percentage of the population aged 6 to 11) has been of 100% for a number of years. Some 5454 teachers were employed at primary level as at March 2009 (CSO, 2010).

There were 179 schools providing secondary education in the academic stream as at March 2009. The secondary school enrolment was 116,226 (48% boys, 52% girls) and the number of teachers was 7,564. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (number of students enrolled per 100 population aged 12-19) works out to 69%.

For those who are unable to make it through the mainstream channel, the state has also established pre-vocational classes. Pre-vocational education was dispensed in 131 schools in March 2009 with an enrolment of 8,033 students (64% boys, 36% girls) and 622 teaching staff. Vocational centres have also been set up in various part of the island to cater for students who want to acquire skills in a variety of trades. Finally, the tertiary sector has also been showing constant signs of progress in terms of intake. The level of enrolment went up from 35,023 in 2007 to 38,623 in 2008.

Even if the system described above seem to be well-structured and inclusive, a deeper insight reveals that this is not necessarily the case. A typical example will be described at this stage: In fact, out of the 289 schools operating at Primary level, more than 20% score less than 50% of passes at CPE level (60 schools out of 289). The percentage of passes amongst school candidates at CPE level is very alarming as well. Taking 2008 as the base year, some 22662 school candidates took part in the CPE examinations. Out of these, the past rate achieved was of 75.8%, meaning that some 4273 students faced a clear failure. In 2009, the pass rate for students at a second attempt was of 40% only. Assuming that all the failing 2008 students re-registered for year 2009 CPE examinations, out of the 2008 cohort of 22662 students, some 2563 students, representing 11.3% will never cross the first educational barrier, as they would have failed twice. They will already be drop-outs of the system at 12 years, and will have to be diverted to other educational and training alternatives.
As such, in order to fully understand and analyse the sources of inequality in the Mauritian education system, there is a need to take a much deeper insight into the sector. This is the main aim of this work. The approach to be used for that purpose is fully described in the following section.

3.0 Methodology

This paper aims at contributing to the scarce literature on inequality in the education system in the Africa by identifying the root-causes of these inequalities in the case of Mauritius, a developing island state economy. Data collected provides valuable information with regards to the from these inequalities take on the ground and their impact on educational achievements. These will be very helpful in working on measures to be taken so as to remedy the present unfair situation.

3.1 Research Design

For the purpose of this research, a mixed-methods approach has been applied (Puxty et al., 1987). This method helps to bridge the gap between quantitative and qualitative research (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2004a). Proponents of mixed-methods research adhere to the compatibility thesis, sharing the view that both quantitative and qualitative research can be used in a single research only. They also share the philosophy of pragmatism, putting forward that researchers should use the approach or mixture of approach that works best in a real world situation (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The combination of methods also provide for complementary strengths and nonoverlapping weaknesses (Brewer and Hunter, 1989).

3.2 Data Collection Method and sampling design

For data-collection purposes, therefore, mixes of quantitative and qualitative research tools have been applied. First, quantitative data about the Government involvement in education over the past years, on the performance of students at different levels, and on general sources of inequality within the system have been compiled. Data from a representative sample of struggling schools and students have also been collected for analysis purposes. However, in order to take advantage of the mixed methods approach fully, data of a more qualitative nature has also been collected through brainstorming sessions that have been organised with the teaching and administrative staff working in the poor-performing schools. This provides information from another angle to better understand the source/s of the perceived inequality. Parents of children enrolled in these schools have also been conveyed to focus group discussions so as to gather their views about under-achievement in the educational system.

Out of the 60 primary school identified as being poor performers at the Certificate of Primary Education (CPE) examinations, a sample of 20% was selected on a simple random techniques. 12 Primary School were therefore selected for a deeper analysis of the Mauritian primary schools. Amongst the 30 lowest performers at School Certificate level, a random sample of 20% was also selected. As such, in all, 12 primary and 6 secondary schools participated in the study. The main outcomes of this study are described in the following section.
4.0 Findings and discussions

At the very outset, it has to be emphasised that the funds committed to education is not being distributed in a rational way. Indeed, there is an over-emphasis on the secondary and tertiary level, as compared to primary education. For the financial year 2008-2009, the 117,922 students at primary level had a share of Rs 2,182 M of public spending, whereas a sum of Rs 4,115 M was committed to the 116,226 students at secondary level. The Tertiary level was allocated some 643 M for the 38,623 students at this level. The breakdown in the allocation of funds is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Allocation of Education Funds, 2008.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Island of Mauritius</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Education &amp; HR</td>
<td>8,020.3</td>
<td>94.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-primary</td>
<td>125.1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>2,182.2</td>
<td>25.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>4,114.8</td>
<td>48.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical &amp; Vocational</td>
<td>370.8</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary Education</td>
<td>642.7</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education Programmes</td>
<td>285.8</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>298.9</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CSO, 200

The same trend is followed for the period July to Dec 2009. Out of the total budget on education and training of Rs 4,208 M, 49% has been allocated to secondary education, 27% to primary education, and 7% to tertiary education, 4% to technical and vocational education, 2% to pre-primary education and the remaining 11% to other expenses. This is depicted in table 3 below:
Even if it is true that the expenditures are higher for secondary and tertiary students, it is unfair that primary school children are sacrificed so as to provide more facilities to those who are able to make it through the final year primary examinations (CPE). In fact, in terms of public spending per student at primary level, according to the UNESCO on a list of 126 countries, Mauritius only occupies the 88th position, and is lagging behind 17 African countries. It is not surprising, therefore that each year, there are more than 10% of those having taken part in CPE are sacrificed, not having been able to cross this barrier twice. On the other side, full-time university students who could have worked part-time to finance their studies are encouraged to remain idle, given that no lecture fee is charged for full-time students.

The teacher pupil ratio is also another element contributing to reinforce this feeling of inequality during primary schooling. Indeed, at the Pre-Primary level, the teacher-pupil ratio stands at 14 pupils per teacher. The secondary education teaching staff in the academic stream was 7,564 and the pupil/teacher ratio works out to 15. The pre-vocational education teaching staff stood at 622, giving an average of 13 pupils per teacher. However, at primary level, the average pupil/teacher ratio for 2009 stood at 29 pupils per teacher (CSO, 2009). It is clear that this situation is clearly detrimental to the weaker students, who will not have the special attention that they need in order to put in more efforts. In fact, the weaker students have to be sacrificed in favour of those aspiring to have good grades at CPE level, and who are going to contribute to extend the percentage of passes and to the prestige of the school.

The transition from primary to secondary level has to be closely monitored. In fact, official statistics from the UNICEF (2008) and the CSO (2010) reveal that whereas the Gross Enrolment Ratio (primary enrolment as a percentage of the population aged 6 to 11 years)
works out to 101%, in 2009 the Gross Enrolment Ratio (secondary education enrolment as a percentage of the population aged 12 to 19 years) for the academic stream stood at 69% in 2009. It is clear that there are more than 30% of children who are either diverted to other paths in between (pre-vocational) or are left outside the system. It is even more worrying to note that many children even abandon their studies before reaching their end of primary examinations. Even if it is legally mandatory for all those who are below 16 years to remain within the school circuit, statistics available reveal that some 5981 children were are out of school at primary level in 2008 (Nationmaster, 2010).

Members of the staff outline the fact that schools not delivering the goods in terms of percentage of passes at CPE level do receive a closer monitoring on the part of the school inspectorate and are provided with additional funding under a Priority Zone Scheme. Students in these schools receive all the necessary educational material freely, and have a daily meal as well. Teachers are provided with a special allowance to work with the weaker students and to motivate them in making the necessary effort. As such, several steps have been taken by the authorities to give a better chance to the weaker students. However, the percentages of passes in these schools have not been showing any significant signs of progress over the years. When queried about the possible reasons behind this almost fatalistic situation, the academic staff generally points towards factors outside the classroom as being primarily responsible for the on-going failures and very poor pass rates. Table 4 below shows the present situation as far as the pass rate at primary level is concerned:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yr 2009 % Pass</th>
<th>No. of schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90-99</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80-89</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-79</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-19</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: MES, 2010

From the above table, it is clear that some 55 schools out of the 289 (19 %) have a % pass below 50%, meaning that over 50% of their students having taken part at the CPE examinations have failed. Given that all the teachers working in the 289 primary schools undergo the same training, and have more or less the same academic qualifications, the question that had to be raised is whether their teaching and their approach does make a difference. There are conflicting views on this issue: on one side teachers queried did not perceive teachers as being able to make any major difference, given the perceived unwillingness and reluctance of students to learn, and the refusal of many parents to take their responsibility seriously. On the other side, parents questioned tend to support the view that the teacher has a key role to play in the success or failure of their children at CPE level.
In addition, even before the introduction of the mandatory CSR programs, business organizations (led by financial institutions and the hotel sector) have been contributing massively to the educational system each and every year so as to improve the situation in terms of passes in specific schools and regions. Their contribution is recognized and considered to be very positive, both from the perspective of the staff and of parents. NGOs, and religious bodies are actively involved as well, and are doing their very best to educate parents about the importance of their children’s studies. However, in spite of all the facilities granted to these schools, and all the efforts being put it, the pass rates have so far only increased marginally in a few schools. For the majority of schools, the percentage of passes fluctuates from one year to the other, but without any sustainable improvement in academic performance noted in the long-run. Millions of rupees are being devoted to ZEP school projects each year by business organisations, but without much tangible benefits.

To what extent are these CSR programmes effective? When queried about the form this school/business sector collaboration takes, the majority of respondents agreed that it is primarily in the form of sponsorships and donations. Is the social role of the business organisations limited to the financing/sponsorship of school projects, or do they have a crucial role to play in terms of establishing long-term and sustainable links with the local community, and try to work together to find solutions to the more pervasive social issues, for the mutual benefit of both parties? What can be deduced out of this study is that failure at school is only one of the symptoms of a situation of social urgency that characterizes several localities in Mauritius, where drug addiction, high unemployment and criminality rates, and a culture of dependency/easy money has been established. As such, young children growing in this background find it even more challenging to make it through the mainstream education system.

Poverty is known to be a major factor impacting on educational success. There is an agreement on the part of parents and teachers queried that, even if a number of children from poor families are able to make it to the top, these are mere exception to the general rule, which is clearly in favour of those from wealthy backgrounds. There is a direct link between the social class of parents and the academic achievement of children, as well as their length of stay at school, and it is not different in the Mauritian context. Those who have the means and are able to finance the studies of their children will be at an advantage as compared to parents from a poor social background, who are often unable to devote sufficient funds their children’s studies. In fact, even if theoretically, education is said to be free in Mauritius, there is a high hidden cost associated to it: students can hardly make it without private tuitions, and this is a heavy burden on families with tight financial constraints. As such, those who are able to afford can have the best teachers in town to coach them, whereas the poor will have no alternative than to do without these private tuitions. Over and above this definite advantage in terms of private coaching, both parents and teachers recognize the fact that the cultural capital to which children from rich families has access, also contribute towards their success. Indeed, on one side, there are children from stable, middle-class backgrounds who have travelled to more developed countries, who have access to books, newspapers, computers, to the internet and to cabled-TV, who have parents with a high level of education themselves, and attaching a high value to the educational results of their children, and on the other side, we have children from a poor background struggling to have the basic necessities to attend school, and who do not have access to any of those facilities. It is clear that the odds are tilted in favour of the middle and upper-class. The situation is even worse in the case of broken families or cases where one of the two partners is in prison, or is unable to work as a result of an illness or drug-addiction.
What emerges out of this study, therefore, is that factors external to the school impact heavily on the educational performance of children from poor backgrounds, in spite of the substantial support received from the government, the business sector, religious bodies and NGOs. The Mauritian educational race is very unequal, given that as from the starting-line those coming from upper-classes are already at an advantage as compared to those from the lower classes. In fact, there is also untouchable elite, who is running a different race, attending fee-paying schools that have been set up according to French or British rules, and which do not fall under the aegis of the Mauritian Ministry of Education.

5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Based on the above, it is clear that inequality is deeply rooted in the Mauritian education system, in spite of all the efforts being made, and all the funds being committed to the sector by all the stakeholders involved. Even if there is an equality of access to education, the chances of success is far from being equal under the present education system. Children from poor families are definitely at a disadvantage as compared to those who are well-off.

One of the main sources of inequality identified resides in the unfair distribution of resources committed to the education sector. Whereas the secondary and the tertiary sectors are receiving a fair share of the funds, this is not the case for the primary sector. With regards to the pupil/teacher ratio as well, the system is very unfair against the primary sector. The end result is the high drop-out rate that characterizes the final primary level examinations each year. The gap between the primary and the secondary level of student enrolment is a clear indication of the damage being caused by the present primary education system, and the number of children coming primarily from the deprived areas of the country, that are rejected by the system at 12 years old. In fact, out of the 289 primary schools, 55 have been found to be regularly generating more failures than passes. It is true that most of the stakeholders involved have at heart the well-being of the Mauritian child and are genuinely committed. However, for too long, this fatalistic attitude towards failure at CPE level has been institutionalized. Even worst, a high number of school drop-outs are reported to be completely illiterate. The majority of those rejected by the system obviously come from the lower levels of the social hierarchy.

Recommendations

It is high time, therefore to completely review the present system of education. There is a need to bridge the gap between the school and the family, which is also a primary stakeholder in determining failure or success at work. At present, many parents from the working-class have transferred their responsibility for the education of their children to the school and the teacher. There is a need to involve them in their children’s education, as this will motivate the child to keep track of what is being covered at school and he/she will be motivated to perform better as well.

However, it is not only the family involvement that need to be reviewed, but also the social environment in which children are growing. At this level, the religious institutions, as well as the NGOs and the local authorities have a key role to play, in collaboration with the business
organizations (which have the necessary funding to do so). Transforming a neglected working class neighbourhood into an area that is conducive to learning and valuing education is not an easy task. This is the challenge ahead.

The education system, and the distribution of resources committed to it, has to be reviewed as well. The sources of inequality identified within the system have to be re-visited so that the system is not perceived as serving the interest of a specific social group only. These changes cannot be implemented on a piece-meal basis. It requires a long-term commitment and a genuine willingness to fight against the present sources of inequality within the education system, which is perceived by many as the only way of getting out of poverty.

REFERENCES