

Equality through Education: A Review of Michael Manley's Vision for Jamaica

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ABSTRACT

Michael Manley envisioned a Jamaica that would provide equality for the working-class through education. This was done considering the socio-economic structure of the country which reflects its legacies of colonialism, slavery, and imperialism. Indications of this trauma are evident in racial divisions based largely in colourism and class inequalities, which have led to the stigmatization of manual labour. During what historians Chambers and Airey label the 'Socialist Era' in Jamaica (i.e. 1972 and 1980), Manley's People's National Party (PNP) government sought to embed ideals of self-reliance into vital socio-economic industries such as education, agriculture, manufacturing, and tourism. The ultimate goal of this was aimed at reversing the condition of psychological dependency that plagued many regions in the Global South. This policy review seeks consider the process by which Michael Manley implemented his administration's Free Education policy during the years of 1972 to 1980.



Ray Chen, "Young faces of Jamaica,"
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BIO

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Michael Manley envisioned a Jamaica that would provide equality for the working-class through education. This was done considering the socio-economic structure of the country which reflects its legacies of colonialism, slavery, and imperialism. Indications of this trauma are evident in racial divisions based largely in colourism and class inequalities, which have led to the stigmatization of manual labour. During what historians Chambers and Airey label the ‘Socialist Era’ in Jamaica (1972 - 1980), Manley’s People’s National Party (PNP) government sought to embed ideals of self-reliance into vital socio-economic industries such as education, agriculture, manufacturing, and tourism. The ultimate goal of this was aimed at reversing the condition of psychological dependency that plagued many regions in the Global South.¹ This policy review seeks to consider the process by which Michael Manley implemented his administration’s Free Education policy during the years of 1972 to 1980. Particular attention will be paid to Manley’s social democratic ideals, and the ways in which he promoted equality through accessible education as a solution to issues faced by poor inner-city youth.² The early twentieth century was a time of tremendous social and educational reforms throughout various leading Caribbean countries, including Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, and Cuba. In keeping with this regional trend, the Manley

Administration worked towards a mandate that demanded for the social elevation of the working class people.³ As a result, much like other policy mandates, the education policy enacted during this period reflects the PNP’s overall agenda of enacting increased state control over key areas of Jamaican society.

The Free Education Policy (1972-80)

Despite being born into a mixed-race upper-class household, Michael Manley was known for being sympathetic to the plight faced by the black majority living in Jamaica and as a result is remembered by some as a champion of social democratic policies. Arguably, the most famous of those policies was enacted in September of 1973 and labelled the ‘Free Education’ Policy.⁴ This policy meant that all fees associated with tuition were fully subsidized for all post-primary school children aged 10-19 as well as students enrolled in the island’s University.⁵

The former was the primary focus of the educational reform, as the majority of secondary school students lived in garrison communities plagued with violence and poverty. Manley posited that two things had to be facilitated in order to achieve his goal. First, a complete reconstruction of the Jamaican identity based on the communal spirit of black power (i.e. one rooted in African history) and secondly, a release of the traumas adopted from the British educational

¹ Donna Chambers and David Airey, “Tourism Policy in Jamaica: A Tale of Two Governments,” *Current Issues in Tourism* 4, no. 2-4 (2001): 94, doi: 10.1080/13683500108667884

² Khitanya Petgrave, “Equality in Education? A Study of Jamaican Schools under Michael Manley, 1972—80,” *Caribbean Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2011): 41, accessed April 16, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23050527>.

³ Anthony Payne, “The ‘New’ Manley and the New Political Economy of Jamaica,” *Third World Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (1992): 465, accessed July 7, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3992196>.

⁴ Khitanya Petgrave, “Equality in Education,” 31.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

system.⁶ In essence, in order to reach urban black youth and abide by his goal of equality through education, Manley offered a healing of collective trauma through policy reform in the shape of access to a free Afro-centric and practical education. Many aspects of free education appeared viable in theory, however, upon implementation, challenges arose. The following section will look at several factors that impacted the success of the Manley Administration's educational expansion program marketed in the form of free education.

Policy Implementation Challenges

During the eight years of the Manley Administration, the Minister of Education changed eight times, making it one of the most difficult positions to navigate or implement.⁷ This posed a critical challenge to policy implementation and stemmed from Manley's challenge of distributing power through the governing party, in a way that would satisfy all intra-class interests. In 1974, Manley spoke at the Sixth Commonwealth Education Conference and outlined his objectives for education in Jamaica. He placed an emphasis on promoting practical attitudes towards work, self-reliance, acceptance of responsibility, and community building at the forefront of how he planned to execute this goal.⁸ One of the main strengths of the Free Education Program was that it

One of the main strengths of the Free Education Program was that it facilitated access to all schools in the country⁹ which led to an increased rate by which primary school aged kids could enter secondary (or elitist grammar) schools. The number of candidates gaining subsidized tuition into grammar schools after passing the Common Entrance Examination (CCE), "rose from 2,180 in 1972 to 4,782 in 1974, [and peaked] at 9,470 in 1978."¹⁰ Even with national numbers reflecting growing expansion of school attendance, passing any reform also came with the fine balancing act of appeasing PNP's multi-class power dynamics with local capitalist interests. Recognizing that nothing of this stature happens in one fell swoop, there were inevitable caveats embedded within the Education Policy that ensured the poor urban youth that Manley was trying to raise out of the garrison communities did not actually ever get past a certain level of the gatekeeping. Furthermore, considering the high turnover for the cabinet appointment of Education Minister, some argue that Manley sought to glean the capital and support of local business elite via appointments. As such he appointed Eli Matalan, a local businessman with no prior political experience, as Education Minister, a move that likely caused ripples within the Manley government.¹¹

⁶ Michael Manley, *The Politics of Change. A Jamaican Testament*. Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1974, Chapters 2 & 3

⁷ Khitanya Petgrave, "Equality in Education," 31.

⁸ Davis E Carlton, "Michael Manley: Some Visions That Still Remain Relevant." *Caribbean Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2011): 59, accessed April 14, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23050528>.

⁹ Khitanya Petgrave, "Equality in Education," 31.

¹⁰ Khitanya Petgrave, "Equality in Education," 32.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 31

The educational reforms rolled out by Manley were under constant threat mainly from class conflict. For example, Manley's proposition to have an increase of both technical and vocational subjects taught on a scientific level, at the expense of literary studies, directly clashed with the desires and interests of the Jamaican bourgeoisie.¹² Specifically, as the needs of the middle and upper-class Jamaican elites were prioritized, the working-class population slowly withdrew their support for the PNP government.¹³ Policies that were highly favoured by the PNP government often directly conflicted with the local capitalist policy desires, which ultimately threatened the socio-political order of society. The instability of society by the late 1970's was reflected in the division along class and racial lines, international pressures promoting anti-socialist rhetoric, and erupting violence in the garrisons which contributed to a collective atmosphere of psychological trauma, confusion, and vulnerability. Although Manley strove to embed a culture of pro-African, black pride and sophistication through education, factors such as ministerial disorganization, class and political related conflicts, and intensifying economic crisis, all placed limitations on the quality of, and access to, free education.

Conclusion

The totality of ministerial disorganization, class and political related conflicts,⁹ and intensifying economic crisis prevented the schooling system from acting as an outlet by which marginalized youth could attain equal access to education. Ultimately, the most devastating weakness of the Free Education Policy under PNP was the fact that poor students did not actually get granted access to elite grammar¹⁰ schools just by passing the CEE exam; therefore, the explosive acceptance numbers shown above in the early 1970s were not reflective of equality of access to education for all. Essentially, education was increased but longstanding improvements to class relations were not realized as elite grammar schools remained inaccessible overall.

¹² Ibid., 35.

¹³ Carlene J Edie, "Domestic politics and external relations in Jamaica," 72.

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