



PUBLIC SECONDARY EDUCATION IN RURAL AREAS IN HAITI - DOMINANCE AND ABUSE OF POWER THROUGH THE LENS OF POLARITIES OF DEMOCRACY THEORY

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Abstract:

Public secondary schools are scarcely available to children in rural Haiti who want to continue their education beyond primary school. While some remote communities may offer private schools, poor families simply cannot afford to send their children to private schools or even move to a city where they have options to attend public secondary schools. The research examined the perspectives of well-informed Haitian educators and other educators who were familiar with the issue of limited access to public secondary education in rural areas of Haiti. The research further determined that the problem can't be solved unless we look at how the country's educational system was affected by Dominance and Abuse of Power by the Elites and other oppressive factors. 20 educators in Haiti and the United States participated in semi-structured interviews to compile data that were analyzed through the prism of Benet's Polarities of democracy theory. The findings indicated that Education for rural residents is undervalued by the government. Political and personal agendas are given more priority. Closing the gap between urban and country life is critical. More public secondary schools for rural areas need to be established, which will need a paradigm shift in the education system of the country.

Keywords: Education System in Haiti, Dominance, Inequity in Education, Literacy, Oppression, Public Secondary Education, Polarities of democracy, Rural Haiti, Social change

Introduction:

Prominent Haitian Intellectuals such as Jean Price-Mars and Anténor Firmin, who were considered the pioneers of Haitian Studies in the twentieth century, have written scholarly books, published articles and pamphlets, and delivered speeches advocating for the education of the underprivileged and rural populations (Shannon, 1989) to both the elite and the Haitian government.

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They viewed ethnology and anthropology as a way to attain a patriotic education (Magloire & Yelvington, 2005). Additionally, the founders of Haiti held a firm belief in the significance of public education, as seen by its explicit inclusion in the first constitution of 1805. This constitutional provision required every commune to build and offer cost-free public institutions to meet the educational requirements of the school-age population. Similarly, Alexandre Pétion, a significant actor in the founding of Haiti, advocated for prioritizing public education in all government efforts to promote an authentic democratic system, as stated in Bellegarde's work in 1941. Bellegarde (1941) posited that the architect of Haiti believed that universal education possesses the capacity to elevate individuals to a superior level of dignity.

Nevertheless, the education system in Haiti has undergone a hasty transition towards privatization. This phenomenon has played a role in continuing illiteracy and its adverse impacts on the people. Numerous rural areas experience a scarcity of public secondary schools, which restricts educational prospects for youngsters who desire to continue their studies after completing primary school. In addition, poor families encounter financial limitations that hinder their ability to afford tuition fees or relocate their children to urban areas with accessible public secondary schools. Private schools dominate Haiti's educational system, comprising almost 92% of the country's educational institutions (World Bank, 2017). The proliferation of unregulated public, private, and faith-based schools, commonly referred to as "écoles borlettes" in French or "lekòl bòlet" in Kreyòl (lottery schools), contradicts the goal of ensuring widespread access to public education. A significant number of these institutions are deemed unlawful and fail to meet the fundamental requirements set by the Ministry National of Education (Prou, 2009). Based on the 2019 national sector assessment conducted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2020), the dropout rate continues to be a cause for concern. Approximately 10% of Haitian students discontinue their education before reaching Grade 6 of basic education, while around 40% drop out before completing Grade 9, as indicated by the estimations derived from the 2019 national sector analysis. Furthermore, there were differences between rural and urban regions. Haiti Libre (2021) stated that the rate of enrollment in primary schools is lower in rural areas (80%) compared to urban areas (91%) and notably lower in certain departments.

Nonetheless, given Haiti's abundance of natural resources and its relatively young population (54% of the population is under the age of 25 (World Population Review, 2022)), numerous scholars (Bhambra, 2016; Polyné, 2013; Schuller, 2012; Trouillot, 1995) have contended that the rural areas of the country should not be as impoverished as they currently are, and the country's illiteracy rate should not be as high. Furthermore, considering the significant value placed on education by Haiti's founders, who sought to establish a lasting educational foundation for future generations in the 1805 constitution, it is imperative that public secondary education becomes a key political focus for Haitian leadership, not only in urban areas but also in rural regions of the nation. Hence, this study can be utilized to construct an advocacy plan aimed at tackling the issue of limited availability of public secondary schools in rural areas while also fostering inclusive social change for educational fairness.

Dominance and Abuse of Power by the Elites

Given the dynamics between the dominance of the Elites and the lack of public secondary education in the rural areas of the country, a conceptual framework was employed. Johnson (1992), in his polarity management theory, distinguished between a problem that can be solved and a dilemma [polarity] that needs to be managed. To comprehend the polarities of democracy theoretical framework Benet's (2006, 2012, 2013) identified five polarity pairs that require management in a democracy: (a) freedom and authority, (b) justice and due process, (c) diversity and equality, (d) human rights and communal obligations, and (e) participation and representation. While the entire polarity of democracy theory was considered in the study, the focus was on the diversity and equality pair, the human rights and communal obligations polarity pair, and the participation and representation polarity pair (see Calixte-Hallworth, 2023).

The existing socioeconomic inequalities that continue to prevent students from gaining access to the formal structures of the educational system are the outcome of injustice, a negative consequence of the failure to effectively manage justice and due process polarity. While the elites have access to the greatest education available, whether in Haiti or overseas, rural students do not even have access to quality secondary public education (Trouillot, 1995). Another perspective is that when their interests are threatened by democracy, they launch coups (Naidu et al., 2016).

Moreover, the Haitian elites establish connections with Europe and the United States while dissociating themselves from the country, thereby exemplifying their prolonged history of entitlement amidst severe destitution. Additionally, they have never aligned themselves with the general population, as noted by Trouillot (1995). Per Porter's analysis, empirical evidence suggests that the chasm between the rich and the poor with regard to their ability to obtain high-quality education is progressively expanding (Porter, 2015). It could be contended that the unequal distribution of learning opportunities within the nation's educational framework is not viable and serves as evidence of the economic inequality that exists between the elites and the rest of the population.

According to the World Bank (2022), the richest 20% of the population owns more than 64% of the country's total wealth, while the poorest 20% own only 1%. "Haiti has one of the highest numbers of millionaires per capita in the Western Hemisphere, while the majority of the population lives on less than \$2 a day" (Quran, 2019, para 18). Furthermore, in 2018 Haiti was rated fourth in the world for income inequality with its significant wealth imbalance by the CIA World Factbook. In Haiti, without a genuine commitment to construct a truly inclusive democratic society, the elites, who predominately comprise a group of Syrians and Lebanese who moved to Haiti in the 20th century, continue to rule at every level, particularly the educational systems (Plummer, 1988). The Haitian political and economic elites, commonly referred to as the *politique de doublure*, exercise supremacy over the nation while adeptly concealing their powers. These individuals constitute a collective who have collaborated with authoritarian regimes, thereby augmenting their personal enterprises via governmental contracts (Quran, 2019). Thus, the dominance of the elites and the inability of the Haitian government to provide rural children with excellent public education on the same level as students in the urban area has hindered the students' capacity to enhance their

literacy or even to improve their financial and productive status. Consequently, the deeper systems of power held by the elites and the exclusion of rural regions connect with Benet's polarity pair of diversity and equality.

Similarly, the fundamental divide between the elites and the rest of the population, especially in rural regions, seems to indicate the negative aspect of poorly managing the diversity and equality pair. As argued by Benet, the positive aspects of equality may include the abolition of traditional hierarchical power relations, as well as the dominance and oppression that arise. The possibility for poverty reduction and the development of effective public secondary education for people in society are also among the potential positive aspects of equality. The potential downsides of equality can include a lack of protection and/or respect for individual rights and distinctions. As with diversity, equality may bring upsides and downsides for individuals and society (Benet, 2006). According to Benet (2006), some downsides or negative aspects of equality come about with the "stifling of motivation, creativity, hard work, diligence, and commitment to excellence" (p.181). The downsides of diversity can result in the concentration of power, oppression, and erosion of individual rights. In these cases, access to effective public secondary schools may be stifled.

Additionally, the participation of Haitian educators and other educators in Haiti's educational system is regarded as a human rights concern in terms of strategy, education, and literacy progress. The lack of effective public secondary education and widespread illiteracy, especially in rural regions, and the process that the inhabitants believe is controlled by the elites have been exacerbated by the failure to effectively manage participation and representation, as they are both important in any educational system of a democratic society. For example, while the significance of classroom instruction in the development of a student's sense of responsibility as a member of society is widely acknowledged, in democratic societies, a prescribed curriculum is typically implemented to guide teachers in their instructional practices. Thus, the aforementioned procedure will optimize the graduation rate, enrollment rate, and literacy rate of all students. Effectively managing participation and representation will also guarantee that all schools have the resources to promote learning, such as teacher quality that meets the standard requirements. As a result, according to Freire (2005), a teacher is no longer just one who teaches; but one who is himself taught in discussion with the pupils, who in turn teach while being taught. Thus, it might have been wise for Haitian policymakers to examine the relationship between elites and the rest of the population, which could have led to more effective management of the participation and representation polarity pair (see Calixte-Hallworth, 2023).

Connecting Study Results to the Theoretical Framework

To frame the study, the polarities of the democracy model Benet developed as a theoretical framework was applied to analyze the experiences of the educators that yielded the emergence of specific meanings and interpretations by the participants. Benet argued that to overcome oppression, it is crucial to strategically utilize the interplay between five pairs, with the aim to maximize the positive aspects of each pole while minimizing the negative aspects. Upon analyzing the experiences and perceptions of educators, the results indicate that there is a lack of effective utilization in at least three pairs: diversity and equality, human rights and communal obligations,

and participation and representation. Moreover, given the interconnected nature of each polarity within the framework of democracy, it can be inferred that the negative aspects extend to the freedom and authority as well as the justice and due process pair.

Participants offered the following supporting language:

- “Quality education is not a priority for the Haitian government.”
- “Politics play a significant role in rural areas’ lack of secondary education.”
- “Division in the educational system.”
- “The “Haitian government is weak.”
- “Nepotism and corruption.”

From the data collected, it appeared that the lack of public schools is because of a lack of policy that envisions treating all students equally or providing equal access to public secondary education. Second, the elites in the private sector must be more aware of their position as major players in partnering with the state to improve the development of less fortunate children. So, when placed all together, it is a political system split into a small elitist group instead of allowing everyone to have the same education, which is the foundation to assist people in achieving what they need in society. The lack of public secondary education in Haiti’s rural areas contributes to citizens’ lack of democratic involvement and inclusion, as described in the literature review (see Calixte-Hallworth, 2023). This linkage also suggests that the government’s lack of rural secondary education efforts might have failed because the polarities of diversity and equality; and participation and representation were not adequately managed (Benet, 2006, 2012, 2013). Several other secondary themes also followed, which allowed for the enlightenment of the different perceptions of the participants on why there is a lack of effective secondary education in rural areas like Pointe L’Abacou, Haiti. In this study, the participants confirmed their perceptions of rural communities’ marginalization and exclusion from participation and representation. The polarity pair of human rights and communal obligations address the human rights of marginalized communities hindered from participating in a democratic system, thereby exemplifying the absence of representative bureaucracy (Benet, 2006, 2012, 2013). The government must avoid violating human rights. Communities have obligations to protect their members’ human rights. When ignored, this can be detrimental to a community. Therefore, excluding the rural areas in a democratic system to earn an education would be considered an assault on their educational rights, representing an assault on human rights. Likewise, participation as a polarity of democracy fits into the participants’ narratives. Participation in the rural areas in Haiti’s educational system is regarded as a human rights concern regarding strategy, education, and literacy progress. The lack of effective public secondary education has been exacerbated by the failure to effectively manage participation and representation, as they are both critical in any educational system of a democratic society.

The study’s results identified significant frustration against the Haitian government for ineffectively managing the diversity and equality pair. The perceptions of the participants also suggested that the human rights and communal obligations pair is not being managed. The

government engages in the inhumane treatment of the citizens while the government cannot provide public goods such as schools, good roads, and learning materials for rural students. The participants attested to high unemployment, poverty, lack of infrastructure, electricity, and insufficient clean drinking water. Thus, the government is failing to protect the human rights of the people in rural areas while also failing to meet the communal obligations of society (Benet, 2006, 2012, 2013). Participants also revealed that the government does not support participation in the democratic process. The participants allege that some citizens need to be represented by government leaders effectively. In addition, the findings suggest that the positive aspects of representation are not being achieved because of corruption among governmental officials. This also discouraged citizens from participating. Hence, the results of the study suggest that because of the failure on the part of the government to manage the polarities of democracy effectively, the lack of secondary education in the rural areas engulfed the urban areas. It brought insecurity that even the urban children couldn't continue with school. Participants in the study felt that students in rural areas are unfairly treated by walking for more than 2 hours to attend a secondary school, which indicates the failure to achieve justice. This can be achieved only if the Haitian government can maximize the positive aspects while minimizing the negative aspects of the polarities of democracy (Benet, 2006, 2012, 2013). Therefore, the findings suggest that the polarities of democracy may be helpful in planning, implementing, and evaluating the policy recommendations that are made to achieve positive social change in the Implications section below.

Conclusion:

The research study allowed 20 participants from two different nations to provide their insights on the lack of public secondary education in rural areas in Haiti. Through the literature review, Haiti has historically been characterized by disarray, challenges, and widespread corruption. Haiti has encountered unparalleled intervention from the global community, characterized by unfulfilled commitments, erroneous strategies, and a longstanding tendency to marginalize, notably by the United States, France, and Canada. The literature review has provided additional evidence to support the notion that Dominance and Abuse of Power by the Elites and other oppressive factors have a profound and enduring impact on Haiti's society. The contemporary discourse surrounding Haiti is largely framed within this historical context, and the ongoing repercussions of oppression continue to shape current events in the country (see Calixte-Hallworth, 2023). One could argue that the perpetuation of the narrative labeling Haiti as the "poorest country in the Western Hemisphere" serves the colonial perspective and the international community's interests in portraying the country in the most negative light possible to downplay Haiti's significant accomplishments. The context was thoroughly presented in the analyzed books and news articles, as well as through the perspectives of Haitian educators and other educators knowledgeable about Haiti's educational system. Using Benet's polarities of democracy theoretical framework and Johnson's polarity management conceptual framework, the research provided visibility to understanding the historical divide and inequities within the nation are deeply entrenched by the failure to effectively manage

the polarities by the government of Haiti. There is a pressing need for public policy reforms that can effectively address the current educational situation.

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