
The Social Reconstructionist Approach to Teacher Education: a necessary component to achieving excellence and quality education for all

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ABSTRACT Improving all aspects of the quality of education is dependent on preparing teachers to become critical citizens. The social reconstructionist approach to teacher education is essential to transforming an education system defined by inequity, issues of quality, and issues of access. How do pre-service teachers perceive the mission of quality education for all in Jamaica? The findings reported in this article form part of a small scale qualitative exploratory study aimed at understanding what impacts quality education for all in Jamaica? The findings show pre-service teachers' viewed quality education for all as being impacted by a lack of quality teachers, a weak national economy, a lack of parental and community involvement in education, limited resources, and inadequate and poor physical infrastructure. On this basis, the article argues for a social reconstructionist approach to be incorporated into existing and future teacher training programmes as teachers and teacher educators are key components to improving quality education for all.

Introduction

Teacher education is a key component to achieving the objectives of Education for All (EFA) in Jamaica. Quality education for learners is influenced by the quality of their teachers. The two cannot be seen as separate. Teachers play an integral role in achieving the goals for student achievement and for accomplishing the goals set out in national policy guidelines. One such goal is Goal 6 of EFA which states:

Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills. (UNESCO, 2000, p. 17)

An objective of the Ministry of Education Jamaica is to ensure that there is quality education for all Jamaicans. In its vision statement it is noted:

Each learner will maximize his/her potential in an enriching learner centered education environment with maximum use of learning technologies supported by committed qualified competent effective and professional educators and staff. The education system will be equitable and accessible with full attendance to Grade 11. Accountability, transparency and performance are the hallmarks of A? system that is excellent, self-sustaining, resourced and welcomes full stakeholder participation. (Ministry of Education, 2013)

Framed on this vision, the Jamaica Teaching Council's mission for education 2030 is 'quality education for all'. It proposes that development and use of standards in teacher training is a key component to realising the vision. Professional standards will be used as a guide to judge teacher

competency with the hope of teachers attaining a license. The standards are a set of behaviours that characterise the teaching profession. The excellent teacher should be able to create, stimulate, and integrate to encourage the student achievement. It is felt that adopting a professionalisation route will assist in alleviating illiteracy at the primary school level (Jamaica Teaching Council, 2010).

The professionalisation of teacher standards rest on the teachers' abilities to demonstrate required competencies and to determine their teaching ability; strategies and processes of teaching are determined by the scientific study of the nature of teacher's work. Teacher education courses are designed around teacher competencies, thus quality teaching is judged on the effectiveness of the teacher and student outcomes (Zeichner, 2003).

I contend that the professionalisation of the teacher maintains that teachers are being prepared to operate on the notion of meritocracy. A philosophical standpoint that assumes every child begins learning at the same level, takes the same tests, has the same background, experiences, and culture, and ignores the issues of access, quality, and equity. These are major determinants impeding the goal of EFA in Jamaica. I posit that an inclusion of the Social Reconstructionist approach should be emphasised as it allows the teacher to understand the cultural, social, and political conditions embedded in the education system.

In this article I address how the mission of EFA is perceived by pre-service teachers who are the key determinants to the successful implementation of Goal 6. Their voices are illuminated through a focus group discussion, guided by reflecting on the key mission of EFA and by providing answers to the question: What are pre-service teachers' understandings of the mission of EFA in Jamaica?

Literature

Education in Jamaica

Within 20 years of the [Negro Education Grant], two types of schools emerged, the elite schools for the children of the gentry, and publicly financed schools for children of the working-class. The children who were expected to occupy professional careers were educated in the elite schools, while the artisans, semiskilled and the unskilled were prepared in public elementary schools. This dualised system became entrenched into the social fabric and for more than a century education functioned as the most powerful gatekeeper of the status quo. (Davis, 2004, p. 41)

This statement demonstrates an education system framed on inequity which is prevalent in primary and prep schools, where both sets of students vie in a highly competitive examination for limited places available in an elitist secondary system. Primary schools are government funded and usually poorly maintained with fewer resources, while prep schools serve the middle- to upper-class population. Inequity is also evident at the secondary high school level, where two types of secondary high schools resonate in Jamaica; the upgraded high school and the traditional high school which are both government funded. The upgraded high schools, however, do not carry the prestige of the traditional high schools which are highly regarded for their strong academic and liberal arts focus. Upgraded high schools were created out of a need to fulfil the demand in placement from students matriculating to the high school level. Originally these schools prepared students for a vocational type of education and served students who did not perform well academically in the competitive exam.

In D'Oyley and Murray (1979), Ruby King synthesised the historical origin of schooling in Jamaica:

Formative schooling in elementary and secondary education in Jamaica became a reality after emancipation. Secondary schools were developed because it was felt that the middle classes deserved an education superior to that being offered to the poorer classes in elementary schools. This was due to the decline in fortune of the White ruling class, as they could no longer afford to send their children to England to be educated. Elementary schools catered to the lower classes, and secondary education was designed for the middle classes. (p. 42)

These two systems are reflective of the main class lines of a society framed on colonialism. King further elaborated, "The most significant characteristic of schooling then as now in Jamaica is that it

is elitist. The phrase “free education for all” was essentially destroyed with the implementation of who passed Common Entrance Examinations’, now referred to today as the Grade Six Achievement Test (GSAT). These tests are taken by primary school children to gain access to secondary high school’. King states that because of this test, ‘there is a snob value attached to secondary schooling since at the inception only a small percentage of students benefited from it. This developed a perception in the society that class and caste are more important than performance’ (p. 43). This perception still resonates today, as students who fail the GSAT are seen as inferior and most times are placed in non-traditional high schools (upgraded high schools).

According to the Education Draft Sector Plan (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2010), student performance in Jamaica is at a low and below acceptable standards. Data from the Planning Institute of Jamaica (PIOJ) revealed that in 2006, 35% of primary school leavers were illiterate and only about 26% of secondary graduates met the requirement for employment and/or entry to post-secondary programmes. The education system has also been greatly criticised for the quality of its graduates from government funded institutions, examination success rate of students at all levels of the system, and the high rate of illiteracy among individuals.

As set out in the Education Draft Sector Plan (PIOJ, 2010), the issues and challenges to the education system are directly related to insufficient access to quality facilities at the pre-primary, primary and secondary levels, inadequate space, inadequate number of trained teachers for all levels, inadequate involvement of parents in educating their children, and increased violence in schools.

Education and the Economy

Approximately 80% of the annual budget allocated for education in Jamaica is spent on recurrent expenditures in contrast to learning resources. This is one of the major determinants to poor student performance.

International best practice indicates that policy, practice and adequate resources must be aligned to support not only academic learning for each child, but also the experiences that encourage development of a whole child – one who is knowledgeable, healthy, motivated and engaged. (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2010, p. 13)

Education Transformation

In October 2003, the resolution was passed to increase the budgetary allocation to the Ministry of Education (MOE) to 15% of the total within five years. This has not yet materialised and stood at 12.6% in the 2009-10 budget due to fiscal constraints. Recommendations were made to transform the education system. These included allocating approximately US\$630 million in capital and recurrent expenditure in the first two years. Thereafter, the annual recurrent budget of US\$491 million should be increased to US\$770 million and total capital expenditure from 2005 to 2014 should total US\$1.1billion (Cabinet Office, 2007).

Under the Education Transformation Programme areas of focus include:

- Expansion of school facilities and infrastructure
- School leadership and management
- Literacy and numeracy at the end of primary school
- Poor attendance
- Low levels of teaching resources and aids
- Violence and anti-social behaviour
- Low levels of teacher training at early childhood level.

Teacher Professionalisation

The professionalisation of teachers is the current wave of reform driven by the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF) reports of 1996 and 1997, the Holmes Group and Partnership, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), and the National Council for

Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). It is grounded in the philosophy of producing high quality education for all children. The goal is to raise the status of the teaching profession and generate higher quality teachers through standards. Research revealed, however, that standards do not adequately incorporate a culturally responsive curriculum (Zeichner, 2003).

The Jamaica Teaching Council Standards Draft Document (2011) states 'every child has a right to be taught by qualified and competent teachers' (p. 3). As such the teaching profession has been rationalised to holding teachers accountable through professional standards. Issues of client service and accountability are now being given the utmost priority.

In the Jamaica Teaching Council's mission (2010), 'teachers are the core of education social change and development'. Professionalising the teaching profession through setting standards will achieve desirable results in student outcome. Standards set out by the Council are intended to focus on the quality of education.

Teacher Education and Social Reconstruction

Quality education as defined by the Jamaica Teaching Council is framed on professional standards to improve teacher quality and student outcomes. I argue though that teacher training institutions in Jamaica must look at what constitutes excellence for all. Education in Jamaica is framed on inequity and oppression; hence teacher educators must investigate teaching and learning holistically. Reconstructing teacher education better serves the interest of all groups of students. Martin (1994) states 'social reconstructionist principles must be infused throughout the entire teacher education curriculum. Students must be taught to analyze schooling in ways that call into question the nature of what and how we teach' (p. 80).

Social reconstruction defines the school and teacher as an integral part in the move towards social justice. The major emphasis is on social justice issues, which emerged at the time of economic depression and widespread social unrest in the United States of America. Citizens wanted an equitable distribution of wealth and 'common good' over the individual gain, which was capitalistic. Hence, the society looked towards the schools for change, and radical progressivists challenged teachers to lead the nation towards socialism. The central question was what is the aim of teacher education? Kilpatrick (1933) argued that education should prepare individuals to take part intelligently in the management of the conditions in which they live; thus, they should be provided with the tools that will lead them in this direction. Teachers should foster cooperation, not competition, by developing critical thinking and becoming transformative intellectuals in an effort to advocate for counter hegemonic teaching and a democratic ideal in the teaching and learning environment. Social reconstruction emphasises the broad purposes of education, viewing the role of teachers as cultivating leaders for societal reconstruction. The approach emphasises an awakening of social consciousness among teachers and educators.

Methodology

The study is a small-scale exploratory research designed to uncover pre-service teachers understanding of EFA. A purposive sample of 24 pre-service teachers participated in a 60 minute focus group discussion. Students were selected on the basis of them being enrolled in a second year Instructional Methods module completed in Semester One. Instructional Methods is the module which prepares pre-service teachers to teach. Pre-service teachers share educational experiences of being educated in Jamaica from the basic school level to tertiary level, hence they share similar experiences. Data were analysed using the cross case thematic analysis, as answers to focus group discussion were compared across groups. Being the instructor of the class and educated in Jamaica, I am aware of my own biases and preconceptions that may influence what I am trying to understand.

Findings

The main research question was: What are pre-service teachers' understandings of the mission of EFA in Jamaica? Reflecting on the statement, 'Every child can learn, every child must learn'. Pre-

service teachers were placed in groups of three and asked to critically reflect on what this statement means. This is discussed below under the themes: pedagogy, teacher quality, economy, infrastructure, and critical role of parents and teachers.

Pedagogy, Economy, and Poor Infrastructure

Every child must learn we do agree with this statement, but on the flip side we don't believe that every child must learn. We find that there are many factors that contribute to the fact that every child must learn. We know that Jamaica is a third world country and so we find it difficult to say that every child must learn. Due to the problems we face such as pedagogy, physical infrastructure, and economic instability. These cause children not to be able to grasp and function efficiently as other children in the other regions.

Pedagogy is the art of teaching. Over the years pedagogy has been a problem for some time, as there are not enough resources within these institutions to support the delivery of the learning process. Therefore some students will be left behind and not be able to function as they should. Another attribute to this phenomena is financial problems which a lot of students face within the schools and homes having not being able to provide children with the required food for one's body to develop. Students will not be able to learn and function as they should due to lack of nutritional need that is required for learning. Another major issue is physical infrastructure of the school where the learning environment in which students are able to learn are diminishing, as a result students are not comfortable in the learning process.

So we are strongly saying that every child can learn and every child must learn but there are certain challenges, which are flowing throughout the education system which make achieving this vision harder. Teacher quality should be improved and special emphasis should be placed in this area. In addition the physical infrastructure of these schools needs to be improving so that the students can be more comfortable so that learning can be better for them. (Group 1)

Quality Teachers, Poor Infrastructure, Poverty and Parents

To us personally as student teachers this is a broad statement that extends to each and every Jamaican child. However given the Jamaican context of schooling in Jamaica where education is post-colonial, framed on the British system and the country ranked as a third world. The statement is in some aspects valid and invalid in others. Given the numerous challenges the Jamaican school system faces, students can learn if there is proper infrastructure, and well trained educated teachers.

On the other hand being that the Jamaican school system is framed on colonialism the curriculum in most schools are still reflective of the British more than Jamaican and Caribbean orientated; this causes some students to struggle to learn because they are not socialized to speak and write proper and fluent English (we believe this is one reason for the low literacy rate and low English A Caribbean Secondary Examination Council [CSEC] passes).

Also because Jamaica is ranked as a third world/developing country we do not possess all the necessary resources to facilitate the special learning needs and different learning styles of all students. This leads to some students falling behind and not learning to their full capabilities. Poverty is also a factor because there are some families that are on the Program of Advancement Through Health and Education (PATH) and still cannot afford to send their children to school more than three days of the week and sometimes these children have to work to earn a living for their family, such as selling on the streets or helping their parents to work.

Every child can learn, every child must learn but the question that comes to mind is, learn what? What a child learns is based on how children were socialized. For example, in the garrison communities, the children there are smart – but 'street smart'. These children tend to be interested in other things than education.

None the less, we cannot make these negative factors deter us; all stakeholders of education including parents need to play their part to motivate their children to learn substantial things to

their full or maximum potential. For this mission statement to be fulfilled it does not only depend on the Ministry of Education but on everyone. Every child can learn, every child must learn – Every parent can help, every parent must help. (Group 2)

Parents, Poor Infrastructure, Quality Teachers

The statement ‘Every child can learn, every child must learn’ has been heavily debated whether this statement is valid in the Jamaican context. We strongly believe that every child can learn despite cultural diverse backgrounds, learning disabilities, emotional or behavioral problems, or the economic situation of the family.

In order to facilitate learning however parents and teachers must play a role in this. Parental cooperation is vital; parents should monitor and assist with homework and projects, since the home isn’t typically the atmosphere conducive to learning. Also communicating with teachers for feedback on the child’s progress, these factors are very important in stimulating the child’s desire to learn. Each individual develops at their own pace, to facilitate learning the same programs and instructional strategies cannot be used for every student so therefore teachers should analyze this and deal with it on an individual basis. This intervention will help to stimulate the child’s awareness and their strengths, focusing on the strengths will help to overcome their weakness.

Due to the economic downturn however the country is currently facing, children are unable to attend classes frequently, and may not have all the required material for school. Also if a child lives in an unstable environment, where the child is constantly being mental or physical abused, frequently moving from home and little or lack of overall care and interest in a child’s educational growth, this can damper a child’s desire to learn. In the case of physical infrastructure, some may have challenges of inadequate tutoring, if a child is homeless, hungry and have to be working for their survival while still attending school, how can they be expected to learn and to excel in school? These factors are known to produce huge hurdles in a child’s development and make it much more problematic for a child to even feel that education is something to be valued. Failing schools and teachers play a role in the decline in learning. Based on national and international assessment of developing countries, Jamaica has been experiencing decline in learning especially in mathematics, and science based subject areas. This is hindering progression and is being corrected with operational [Professional] standards that are suitable to facilitate learning, such as replacing incapable teachers and by raising the school standards. However a child can learn if he/she is placed in an environment conducive to learning. Some children learn more than others but every child can learn. (Group 3)

Discussion

The Ministry of Education and the Jamaica Teaching Council’s goal is to improve education for all by improving the quality of its teachers, resulting in a literate and numerate Jamaica. Goal 6 of EFA states ‘Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills’ (UNESCO, 2000, p. 17).

Pre-service teachers in the study have expressed their perceptions of EFA in Jamaica. Across the three groups of participants they believe ‘every child can learn’, but factors such as the economy, teacher quality, poor infrastructure, lack of parental involvement, limited resources, and poverty impacts this process.

I contend the quality teacher is also a teacher who is conscious. ‘Teachers must be taught to analyze schooling in ways that call into question the nature of how and what requires change in how we view the teaching and learning process’ (Martin, 1994, p. 80). Essentially I argue for emphasis to be placed on cultural, social, and political discourse embedded in social reconstruction to be included in teacher education programmes. If Jamaica is to create quality education for all, these issues must be embedded in the curriculum through social reconstruction. Hence teacher quality should be defined in terms which speak to a broader purpose. ‘Preparing future citizens to

reconstruct society so that it better serves the interest of all groups of people' (Sleeter & Grant, 1988, p. 176).

Embedded in the pre-service teachers dialogue is also the issue of community and parental involvement. This suggests achieving EFA should not rest solely with the teacher. In the professional standards set out by the Jamaica Teaching Council (2010) teachers are expected to interact with parents and the community. It states that 'The school as a community of learning involves parents, and community members as active participants. Everyone collaborates to help the school achieve its continuous improvement targets and short-and long-range goals' (p. 12).

The Challenge of Equity, Quality and Access

'Jamaica's challenge is equity, the provision of quality education for all children. The society has been burdened with the vestiges of an inequitable two tier education system. As a result the quality of education at different schools has varied widely' (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2009, p. 14). How then can teachers provide the quality education for all, as set out by professional standards? It is vital that pre-service teachers become cognisant of the role they should play which is not only in the classroom, but in societal transformation.

Giroux (1988) believes that we should view teachers as transformative intellectuals; he defines the teachers' work as intellectual labour. He argues that 'all human activity requires thinking' (p. 125) and, in a transformative curriculum, teaching is not seen as 'teacher proof'; that is defining the role of the teacher against a set of guidelines. The goal of the social reconstructionist is to prepare teachers to take part intelligently in the management of the conditions in which they live, foster cooperation not competition, develop critical thinking, and become transformative intellectuals, in an effort to advocate for counter hegemonic teaching and a democratic ideal in the teaching and learning environment (Kilpatrick, 1933).

The *National Report of Jamaica on Millennium Development Goals* (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2009) outlines access to education in three areas: primary education, secondary education and tertiary level. 'Access to primary education has been improved to almost 100% and 90% at early childhood level. The secondary level enrolment is 86% in the first three grades (7-9) but only 63% in grades 10 and 11. Enrolment at tertiary level is 31%' (p. 13).

Tuition is free at primary, but not at early childhood level. The government instituted free tuition at secondary level in 2007 and targets 2016 as the date for universal enrolment at this level (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2009). Though there have been improvements in access to education as set out by the Education Sector Plan (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2010), some key issues still impact early childhood education:

- Disparity between the qualities of teachers in community basic schools versus the public infant schools/ departments and the better supported preparatory schools.
- Lack of the required physical infrastructure, equipment and support materials in some of these institutions, hampering the delivery of an acceptable standard of education to support the intellectual development of the child.
- Poor nutritional support which impairs intellectual and physical development. Research indicates that children under-perform academically when they lack the necessary nutritional support.
- Absence of adequate parenting support for the children and the schools.

Conclusion

Based on the vision for education for all, teacher quality is measured on the performance and accountability of teachers. I argue, however, that a major component to measuring teacher quality is to understand the contextual factors which can impact their performance. This will allow them to become critical teachers, thus contributing to the transformation of the teaching and learning environment. Education for all rests solely on societal transformation.

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