

Professional development and early childhood teachers' performance: A view through an undergraduate foundation course

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This qualitative case study investigated how one university foundation course “Caribbean Civilisation” impacted the professional development of in-service Early Childhood (EC) student teachers. It sought to extend our understanding of Professional Development issues which affect the learning of EC student teachers. Twelve Bachelor of Education Early Childhood Care and Education (BEEd ECCE) student teachers from Trinidad were studied at The University of the West Indies (The UWI) St. Augustine. A 2-phased data collection procedure was adopted in which at the end of the course, participants responded to a questionnaire giving their views about course expectations, challenges and benefits to their professional development. The grades of the participants were also compared with those of other students in their cohort to determine participants’ mean scores in relation to the rest of the class. In Phase-2 a focus group interview was conducted with a representative sample – 5 participants to determine the achievement of learning outcomes and issues which impacted their professional development. Constructivism and the Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1994) formed the theoretical framework for analysis. Following the procedures of Structural Coding (MacQueen, McLellan-Lemal, Bartholow, & Milstein, 2008) and thematic analysis (Smith & Osborne, 2008) data were analysed. Three themes emerged to represent issues related to the professional development experience. They were: Issues of Course Content and Pedagogy, Student Empowerment, and Enablers and Barriers to Learning. A positive influence on Early Childhood (EC) teachers’ professional development occurred in a context of teaching which supported student learning. This study though not generalizable adds to the thin research currently available in early childhood teacher professional development in the Caribbean.

Keywords: early childhood teacher professional development, transformative learning, foundation course, Caribbean Civilisation

Introduction

Four 1101 Caribbean Civilisation, the foundation course utilised in this study, is a compulsory course for the majority of first year students of The University of the West Indies (UWI). As a result students pursuing the Bachelor of Education (BEEd) Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme must undertake this

course, ideally in the first year of their tertiary education. The programme provides in-service professional development for an average of 50 student teachers each year. The teachers are funded by the Trinidad and Tobago government as part of the national education development agenda which is in keeping with commitments to regional and international agreements to achieve Education For All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (Ministry of Education, 2012). The government's aim was to have all teachers in the sector equipped with a BEd degree by 2015.

The "Plan of Action for EFA" in the Caribbean 2000-2015, puts "Early Childhood Care and Education" and "Enabling Teachers" as the first two items on the six point agenda for Caribbean countries (CARICOM Heads of Government, 1997). EFA is intended to meet the needs of citizens throughout their life and create within them the "Ideal Caribbean person" in the 21st Century. To achieve these goals one strategy involves enhancing early childhood education programmes by upgrading teacher professional development requirements and certifying Early Childhood (EC) teachers to meet established international standards.

Students enrolled in the Foundation Course Caribbean Civilisation at The UWI, are required to pursue a course of study that provides them with a grounding in Caribbean Civilisation and culture, while developing the critical thinking skills required of the Contemporary UWI student (The University of the West Indies, 2012). The course syllabus covers a time span from earliest times to present (circa 1500 BCE to 2016), and has a geographical span that encompasses the Caribbean and its Diaspora. Teaching strategies aim to motivate students to understand the need for their input in the developing region, even as they study their identity in a diverse Caribbean region. The course aims and teaching strategies therefore provide an appropriate context for analysing pedagogical issues that arise as student teachers study to achieve learning outcomes aligned to professional development goals. Since professional development has different meanings, establishing a definition of professional development is important.

Definition

The term Professional Development (PD) is used interchangeably with "teacher education" or "teacher training". PD in early childhood programmes includes "classroom" and "field" experiences that promote education, training, and development opportunities for pre-service or in-service early childhood practitioners working with children ages birth to 8 years and with their families. The term therefore involves a range of activities intended to increase the knowledge base, skill set and attitudinal perspectives of participants (Gusky, 2000). The ultimate goal of PD is to facilitate practitioners' acquisition of specific cognitive and social/emotional competencies necessary for teaching young children. It is also intended to assist in providing the skill set necessary for teachers to improve the ability of families to support children's learning and development. Zaslow and Martinez-Beck (2006) identified several forms of PD. They include formal education; credentialing; specialized, on-the-job in-service training; coaching and/

or consultative interactions; and communities of practice or collegial study groups. In this study, PD refers to formal education and credentialing for in-service EC teachers (pursued in the BEd ECCE degree programme).

Study Rationale

At the School of Education students pursuing the BEd ECCE degree and the BEd primary education degree complete professional courses, core courses and foundation courses. Students attend separate professional courses but meet to attend core courses, while their foundation courses are shared with students from faculties across the campus. One view expressed by some lecturers and tutors at the School of Education (SOE) is that in courses shared with primary school teachers, EC teachers do not contribute as much as primary school teachers to class discussions involving teaching pedagogy.

Further, EC teachers are perceived by some lecturers of core courses and some primary school teachers with whom they share classes, to be intellectually less competent than primary school teachers. Lower grades are cited as one source of evidence of poorer performance in courses. EC teachers however are of the view that they are just as competent but their views are not respected. As a consequence they do not contribute as much as they could to classroom discussions. They also believe that no empirical evidence supports lower grades recorded for EC student teachers. Additionally they are of the opinion that if their grades are indeed lower, negative teacher and peer influences may be affecting their performance.

Interestingly, the problem EC students stated they were experiencing seemed in line with recommendations for further research needed to guide professional development practices in the field of early education (Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin & Knoche, 2009). Their concern was the processes underlying professional development efforts and how they impacted upon and produced meaningful change in the skills, behaviours, and dispositions of practitioners. From their enquiry, research gaps related to how professional development impacted early childhood educators' knowledge bases and skill sets were identified. They therefore recommended research to better understand the dynamic and transactional nature of the teaching and learning processes.

As a consequence this study was conceptualized to investigate issues within that "transactional space" which may influence the learning outcomes of EC student teachers, thereby impacting the outcome of their PD experience. The study sought to determine whether in one course students' grades were indeed lower than their peers and if there was evidence of discrimination and or support for learning from lecturers or classmates. The study also investigated whether EC student teachers were achieving course and PD learning goals. In the process the investigation hoped to verify or refute perceptions about EC student teachers' achievement of course and professional development objectives.

Further, it was convenient to study the selected course because the researchers were affiliated with the course, serving as programme coordinators

and a tutor. Caribbean Civilisation was therefore selected for this case study of EC student teachers in the Caribbean context. To situate the study within a body of work, a review of the literature addressing: Issues in EC teacher professional development; Beliefs about EC teachers' status and issues related to foundation courses follow.

Literature Review

Issues in EC teacher professional development

EC teachers are a critical part of any educational system. Martinez-Beck and Zaslow (2006) stated that the PD of EC teachers is fundamental for the quality of experiences children receive. Further, quality teaching in all sectors of the system is closely related to issues of training, education and PD. In establishing a position on high quality practice in EC teacher professional development, standards for EC teacher PD is an important reference point. NAEYC (2009) developed internationally accepted standards to support teacher professional preparation across diverse work settings. These standards state that well-designed professional preparation programmes assist in meaning making for early childhood teachers when they:

1. Develop professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions in a community of learners who make sense of their readings, observations, field experiences, and group projects through their interactions with others.
2. Help students to make connections between life experiences and new learning.
3. Apply foundational concepts from general education coursework to EC practice.
4. Help students learn to self-assess and to advocate for themselves as students and as professionals.
5. Strengthen students' skills in written and verbal communication.
6. Help students learn to identify and use professional resources, and make connections between these "college skills" and lifelong professional practice.

Further, instructors in these programmes should:

1. Create a caring community of learners,
2. Teach to enhance development and learning,
3. Plan curriculum aligned with important learning outcomes,
4. Assess student growth and development related to those outcomes, and
5. Build positive relationships with students and other stakeholders in the programme.

Their "take away" from the PD experience should be continuous, collaborative learning, demonstrating knowledgeable, reflective, and critical perspectives on their work. Ultimately they should be informed advocates for sound educational decisions of policy and practice (NAEYC, 2009).

In addition to the standards, studies highlighting teacher PD issues which seemed relevant to this investigation were reviewed.

First, in a study of the views of 90 in-service EC teachers about teacher training programmes in Cyprus, teachers were asked to identify challenges they faced during their years of teaching and to suggest ways for improving teacher training programmes. The major challenges they identified were related to issues of parent involvement, classroom management, multiculturalism, lesson planning and facilitation of children with special needs. To address these challenges they suggested a need for: more practicum experiences and greater emphasis on improving teacher attitudes and dispositions (Loizou, 2009). The idea that PD could be used to facilitate changes in teachers' attitudes and dispositions to address the classroom realities they face, could be extrapolated from this study.

Second, in a study conducted by Nitecki (2012) at a very successful early childhood teacher education programme at an urban 2-year college, researchers found that the key to the programme's success was a "culture of family" (p. 128). This culture was viewed as a strength-based approach, which appreciated and built upon the already established assets of the faculty and students. The culture assisted in facilitating, effective teaching/learning relationships as it focused on the whole student and encouraged a strong commitment to the programme. The study emphasized a student support culture which facilitated teaching and learning.

The final study under review was conducted by Han and Brown (2013). In this investigation a professional development intervention sought to enhance the critical thinking skills of the early childhood teachers. The concept, elements, standards and traits of critical thinking were integrated into the main course content and presented to the teachers for their assimilation. The findings indicated that early childhood teacher candidates' dispositions toward critical thinking significantly increased after the integration. Also their knowledge about critical thinking and ability to apply critical thinking in their own learning was also increased. This study highlighted positive developmental options for early childhood teacher preparation curricula and instructional practices based on enhanced learning content.

The literature presented, established that early childhood teacher professional development is a field of learning which has established high quality, professional standards. The studies further identified some areas of challenge and support for EC teacher professional development. The review will now investigate beliefs about EC teachers' status.

Beliefs about ECCE teachers' status

There is a perception that the level of students' attainment correspond to the cognitive capabilities of their teacher. Further, Lash and McMullen (2008) expressed the view that because early childhood education is so familiar to everyone, it is viewed as "glorified babysitting". As a result the expected outcomes from EC teachers and their pupils are low. Another perception is that the profession is not scientifically

based therefore those who work with young children do not have research based skills (Fukkink & Lont, 2007).

As a consequence a culture of low expectations has developed towards those in the profession. Further evidence of low perception can be derived from a two-part market research study conducted in New Zealand, which investigated public perception of the importance and impact of teacher status. Twelve focus group interviews were held with 95 participants ranging in ages and occupations. In all the focus groups, EC teaching was considered a low status occupation among a list of 36 occupations. Politicians, lawyers and professional sportspeople topped the list. It was found that decisions about status were based on power, money and fame. Overall the study found that teaching was not perceived as a very high status career. Also within teaching, secondary school teachers had the highest ranking and EC teachers had the lowest (Hall & Langton, 2006). These findings align with unofficial accounts of local perceptions of the cohort of EC teachers in this study.

Finally a study conducted by Henríquez-Linero, Sánchez-Castellón, and Mieres-Barrera (2012), investigated factors that characterize EC teachers at a personal and professional level. The study also explored the perceptions of other teachers, teaching directors and parents about EC educators. The main findings at the personal level was an identity denoted by a sense of belonging to the Caribbean culture, religiousness, a high regard for family unity, the capacity for self-critique and the presence of certain fears. At the professional level, characteristics of receptiveness to change, willingness to work as a team member, resourcefulness and lack of certification and refresher training were identified. Most participants found that public policy on education undervalued preschool education. They also believed that fundamental changes were needed in terms of the meaning and direction of EC education. This regional study identified among others a patriotic association with Caribbean culture and religious consciousness at the personal level, and receptiveness to change and team spirit as key understandings at the professional level. Further, the view that findings suggested a need for fundamental changes in meaning and direction for EC teacher education seems relevant to this investigation which could uncover specific areas requiring change.

Issues related to foundation courses

Since EC teacher PD was investigated in a foundation course the review will now examine research into issues which arise in foundation courses. There seems to be limited literature on student experiences in university foundation courses (Chipperfield, 2012). Chipperfield surmised that some problems in teaching and learning arose in foundation courses because they served a diverse population of students. She subsequently conducted a study of the influence of diversity on student learning experiences in a university foundation course for health professionals. By using a qualitative grounded theory approach to investigate the views of 13 participants developmental themes were obtained. The main themes which emerged were intra and inter cohort competition, self-preservation and

camaraderie. Recommendations based on these themes were made. They included facilitating early interactions among students to build camaraderie and positive group dynamics. These recommendations were also intended to reduce competition and fear of failure by the students.

Using a similar theme, Herrera, Brown and Portlock (2015), investigated students' personal development, in a foundation degree course as part of a wider qualitative grounded theory study of how diversity affected student learning. The non- traditional students entering higher education via university foundation courses experienced several personal risks which were magnified because they did not understand the academic demands of higher education. The issues of student risks equated to time management challenges, and changed student identity and relationships. Subsequent cases of failure were examined through individualization theory to determine their effect on the learning experience. The findings revealed the need for support with transitioning into the foundation courses to assist the students to successfully complete the degree. Recommendations to facilitate student interaction, to reduce their fear of failure and to increase their confidence were made.

This review served to identify several issues in EC teacher professional development. It included beliefs about EC teachers and considerations arising from foundation courses. The points thus highlighted, guided the research design. They will be used where relevant to assist in analyzing the findings of this study. The review also guided the development of the following two research questions:

Research Questions

1. How did one undergraduate foundation course contribute to the professional development of early childhood student teachers?
2. What new insights extend our understanding of teaching and learning issues which affected the professional development of early childhood student teachers in the Caribbean Civilisation course?

Theoretical Framework

Two related theoretical positions formed the framework for this study. They were used to link this study to broader areas of knowledge related to the research topic. The study used the constructivist model for adults, in which the educational design embraces the learner's past knowledge and future aspirations. Doolittle (1999) described adult constructive learning as having key factors which include: being relevant to the learner; considering the learner's existing knowledge structures; allowing for autonomy and involving learning facilitation instead of instruction. Piaget's contribution to constructivism- his developmental stage theory, was embraced. Laveault (1986) described this as learning progression first of a child along four stages, each building cognitive structures through changes in schemas until the final, formal operational stage which continues into adulthood. Laveault notes that adults do not build but rather adapt existing cognitive structures.

Disequilibrium resulting in more sophisticated thinking occurs when adults have opportunities to reason out multiple solutions to problems. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural view of learning in which learning is influenced by other persons in social situations also applied well to the constructivist model for adults.

The second component of the theoretical framework was Mezirow's (1994) Transformative Learning Theory. This constructivist view of learning posits that learning is based on the social process of constructing and adopting a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experiences as a guide to subsequent action. Mezirow's position is that learners experience personal and intellectual growth as learning. The learning process is influenced when learners struggle with dilemmas, examine assumptions, acquire new knowledge and seek further perspectives. Through this process learners change their frames of reference by engaging in the rational process of critically reflecting on their assumptions and beliefs and consciously making plans for implementation. This brings about new ways of defining their worlds. This process is basically rational and analytical. Imel's (1994) view that although transformative learning may not always be a goal of education, its importance should not be overlooked strengthened the inclusion of this theoretical position.

Methodology

As a lecturer on the BEd ECCE programme for seven years, the principal investigator was ill at ease with the negative perceptions of EC student teachers. I was therefore interested in articulating for their recognition through research. A qualitative case study design was conceptualized to investigate how one university foundation course "Caribbean Civilisation" contributed to the professional development of 12 students pursuing an undergraduate degree in ECCE. The case study design was chosen for its appropriateness for this in-depth, small scale inquiry of the real life context of the participants (Creswell 2007, Yin 2009). The research questions focused the study on: identifying how the foundation course contributed to the professional development (PD) of student teachers and also understanding issues related to teaching and learning which positively or negatively affected the achievement of PD goals.

Participant demographics

Participants were all mature female students who ranged in ages from 21-40 years. Eighty percent were employed in ECCE centres while 20% had other clerical jobs. One student was unemployed. 50% were single or in a relationship and 50% were married. Most members of the class were year 1 students however, 3 were year three students.

Data collection procedure

Data were collected from three sources - an open ended questionnaire, analysis of the final marks of participants in relation to the rest of the cohort pursuing the

foundation course, and a focus group interview with five participants after students received their final grades. Twelve students agreed to complete the open ended questionnaire after their final face-to-face class and before their final exam. The questionnaire allowed participants to give their views about the extent to which the course met their expectations in terms of the delivery and content. Questions also sought student views of the challenges and supports to learning experienced during the course and the perceived benefits to their professional development. Demographic data were also captured for possible significance to achieving course learning outcomes. No link was found.

After sitting their final exam, students' marks obtained from four assessments were tabulated using Excel Spreadsheet. Those assessments were: One Think Piece - a one paragraph opinion piece providing critical commentary on a topic of Caribbean interest, worth 10% of the marks; a graded Book Report summarizing and analyzing a selected Caribbean text in relation to Caribbean issues, worth 25% of the marks, a graded quiz on all content covered worth 5% and the final exam- two essays worth 60% of the marks. The grades of the participants were compared with those of other students in their cohort to determine if participants' mean scores showed significance in relation to mean for the rest of the class.

When students returned from their two-month summer vacation, a 90 minute focus group interview was conducted with five of the twelve study participants. Maximum Variation Sampling was used to select participants for the focus group interview (Creswell, 2014 & Patton, 2015). This technique allowed the researchers to choose students from the small sample pool who were very different from each other based on demographics including ethnic diversity and their final grade on the course. Interview responses from the sub-sample provided further data which yielded "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) and allowed for data triangulation and further analysis with the questionnaire data.

In this way the researchers were better able to look for the common patterns that emerged from the variation and to identify themes. The interview which was conducted in the Students' Lounge, was audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Three of the open ended questions asked were: What did you learn from the course Caribbean Civilisation? What if any were the challenges you faced while doing the course? Did you feel intimidated by students from other faculties in your class?

Limitations

The study cannot be generalized since it is limited to one sub-group in a foundation course at a university in Trinidad. Also it is quite possible that findings from the statistical analysis of student marks would have been different if the entire cohort of EC teachers were sampled. Nevertheless where similar circumstances occur, insights from this study could provide a guide for understanding issues affecting teaching and learning in professional development programmes. The analysis of data follows.

Data Analysis and Findings

Data from three sources were analyzed to determine the findings of this study in relation to the two research questions about issues which affected the professional development of EC teachers in a foundation course. First participant marks were compared to the entire cohort in the foundation course to determine how they performed in relation to the rest of the class. Second a qualitative analysis of 12 responses to an open ended questionnaire and five responses to a focus group interview conducted with participants: Sarah, Indra, Patrina, Ava and Sally (all pseudonyms).

Using descriptive statistics the grades of the 12 EC teacher participants were compared to the other 108 students in their cohort, to determine participants' mean scores in relation to the rest of the class. The Microsoft Excel programme was used to generate a scatter diagram which allowed for a visual inspection of trends. A line of best-fit representing the average mark for the distribution was added. The scatter diagram (figure 1), shows mark percentages on the Y-axis. It also shows that all scores including those of EC student teachers, generally fell within the representative band of scores for the range of students. There were no significantly outstanding marks as the majority of marks seemed to be in a tight cluster. In fact more than 60% of EC student teachers' marks were above the class average. Students therefore did not perform below the class average as was anticipated based on the views of some lecturers in other courses and some BEd Primary students.

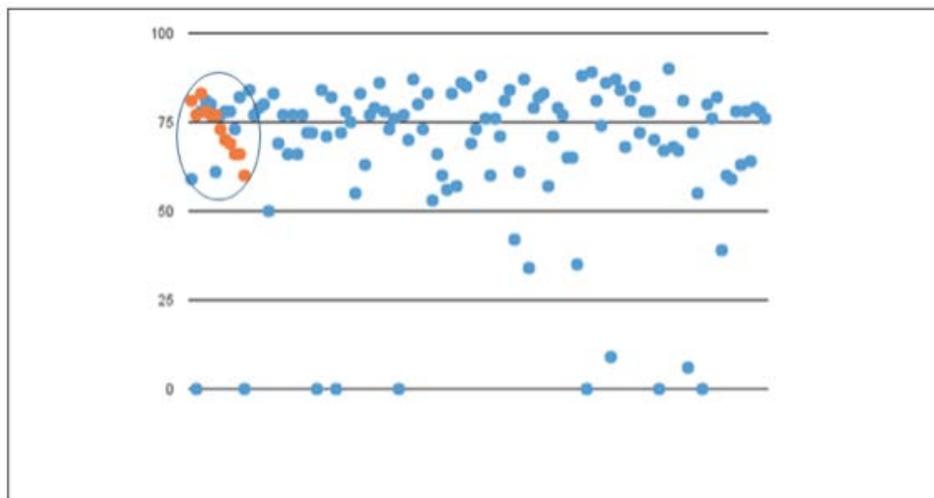


Figure 1. A Scatter diagram comparing participants' marks which are circled with marks for the rest of the class

Two researchers collaborated to apply Structural Coding techniques (MacQueen et al, 2008) as a first cycle method to code segments of the questionnaire and interview responses. Data were read and re-read by the researchers who deliberated

to agree on codes. The structurally coded data were later collated into categories and subjected to thematic analysis (Smith & Osborne, 2008). Three themes emerged from the data:

1. Presenting Meaningful New Course Content using effective pedagogy
2. Facilitating Levels of Student Empowerment
3. Identifying Barriers and Enablers to student learning

In response to the first research question: 1. How did one undergraduate foundation course contribute to the professional development of early childhood student teachers? The first two themes: 1) Presenting Meaningful New Course Content using Effective pedagogy and 2) Facilitating Levels of Student Empowerment, seemed to best represent student responses.

Presenting meaningful new course content using effective pedagogy

Students recounted that new learning from the course enhanced their knowledge of the Caribbean region in which they lived. Even though initially Sarah and two peers felt that they did not remember much course content, during the interview they expressed amazement at how much they recalled. Indra stated that she would never forget the “big words” she learnt from her lecturer, namely eurocentrism, mercantilism, commercial capitalism and revisionism. She particularly internalized the concept of mercantilism. Indra equated her understanding of mercantilism to the export of raw materials from sugarcane production in Trinidad, which was refined into a “variety of products” abroad and then resold to us for “triple the amount of money”. She believed that the Europeans who governed the region during the period of enslavement and indentureship “fooled” us and “took us for granted” as they enriched themselves at our expense.

Indra’s thinking could be interpreted as an example of a student connecting new knowledge about mercantilism from content presented in the Caribbean Civilisation course to lived realities. The “big words” she said she’d never forget were most probably remembered because teaching was meaningful and effective. It seems that the course assisted with the type of meaning making expected of well-designed teacher professional preparation standards outlined by NAEYC (2009). Indra further added that her newfound understanding of historical Revisionism provided different perspectives on life and deep insights into diversity. She described her learning and thinking as, “a shift in the paradigm”. She further opined that the revisionist content taught in Caribbean Civilisation was important for “building her self-esteem” and helping her to not to be ashamed of her culture.

Sarah’s view added strength to the interpretation that the course was meaningful to students. She stated that the course gave her, “a different perspective on everything- on life on the whole”. Sarah added that she gained new knowledge which gave her a stronger insight into understanding why the different ethnic groups- the East Indians, the Africans, the Europeans, “are perceived the way they are”. For her it was most important that Revisionist methodology developed her

“critical thinking skills and her own independent thought”. This helped her to “not be ashamed of her own culture and heritage”. The development of students’ critical thinking skills seems similar to the outcome of the professional development intervention by Han and Brown (2013) which increased EC teachers’ critical thinking skills significantly when the elements of critical thinking were integrated into the main course content.

The participants also spoke about the context in which the course content was delivered. They unanimously agreed that they felt “100% satisfaction” with the course delivery. One aspect was that the teaching style Sarah recounted, facilitated interactive learning and “invoked a passion in her for studying Caribbean Civilisation”. Patrina similarly added that the course was well delivered using an interactive teaching style which was in sync with her learning style. Indra further stated that the lecturer’s ability to motivate the class contributed to their success. She believed that the lecturer “actually went all out”. “He was encouraging, not boring,” and often told students, “You all are going to pass!”

Students also benefited from the “family like” support which was provided in and outside of class time when the lecturer willingly answering student questions both via face-to-face and through emails or entertained visits without appointments. Ann said that the lecturer was “captivating” and “he really did different from other persons, other courses, as this person actually went all out”. The tutorials also complemented the class presentations. Students were able to “see what it was all about, how things were happening.” Her words seemed to imply that the teacher was knowledgeable about the course content and taught with conviction which maintained student interest. These findings seem similar to Nitecki’s (2012) study which found that the key to the successful teacher education programme studied was on teaching the whole student. In the process a “culture of family” which facilitated effective relationships and commitment to the programme occurred.

Additionally, three respondents stated that the lecturer also clarified historical theories and fostered critical thinking. While the assignment was challenging for one student, another student welcomed being challenged to think and develop her own critical thinking skills. Indra spoke about her discomfort with the “Think Piece” assignment which required students to justify their critical response to a calypso (local song). She explained, “The Think Piece was a little difficult because we had to go within the lines of the calypso... it was like something totally different from what everybody perception of it was”. Sarah however liked the idea that the assignment allowed for differences of opinions. She stated that, “You would have been able to collect your marks ... but you had to back up (reference) what you’re saying”. Encouraging critical thinking was a positive feature of the course. NAEYC’s (2009) position statement on EC teacher professional development expects teachers to develop knowledgeable, reflective, and critical perspectives on their work since their job requires using knowledge from a variety of sources to make informed decisions.

Facilitating levels of student empowerment

Another finding was that students were empowered in different ways and at various levels. First the lecturer was able to present new course content using effective pedagogy thereby empowering students as they gained new knowledge. Further, empowerment came from Revisionist studies which taught students new perspectives on Caribbean Civilisation. This built their self-esteem and was inspiring (rather than degrading) as they learnt about society and their own identity. This self-empowerment seemed helpful for acquiring some of the core standards identified for the EC profession (NAEYC, 2009). Empowerment facilitated fostering the ethical guidelines needed to accommodate diversity and to develop respectful relationships for supporting and empowering families. This skill is useful in EC workplaces when teachers have to interact with diverse parents and families of preschoolers.

Indra's empowerment helped her to better appreciate herself, her community and to remove biases she may have had about persons of different ethnic origins. Similarly Ava explained, "It influenced my sense of identity in terms of my religion." The category of religious empowerment as a form of self-identity, or self-emancipation, was very strong. Ava likened her religious empowerment to "racial emancipation". She stated that after learning about the history of her Spiritual Baptist faith, she became "more open" about her religion. She continued:

People have some kinda thoughts against the Spiritual Baptist and those kinda stuff, and any time that I would put on my spiritual garments and if I have to go out, some people would like watch me like, you know, they didn't want to like sit next to me, those kinda stuff. It was probably worse than racism. And now that sir taught about it, is like, "Hey! I don't care what anybody else say!" So I just go with the flow now.

While Ava received religious empowerment as she felt freer to practice her faith, other forms of empowerment resulted from new knowledge and perspectives gained. These enhanced students' self-identity and positioned them to interact as professionals in diverse EC settings. Indra's view about self-empowerment that contributed to her professionalism seems powerful. She added that the course was like, "A living part of our body. It's like an enzyme in our body. It helps us to carry on in our professional life". Another participant added that she was empowered to provide informed, unbiased, knowledge to children, colleagues and members of the community.

Figure 2 attempts to capture relationships between the levels of student empowerment which the students said they experienced. First they learned new knowledge and perspectives. As their critical thinking skills were enhanced students' became more self-empowered and their professional knowledge increased. Three areas of self-empowerment and professional empowerment which resulted are included.

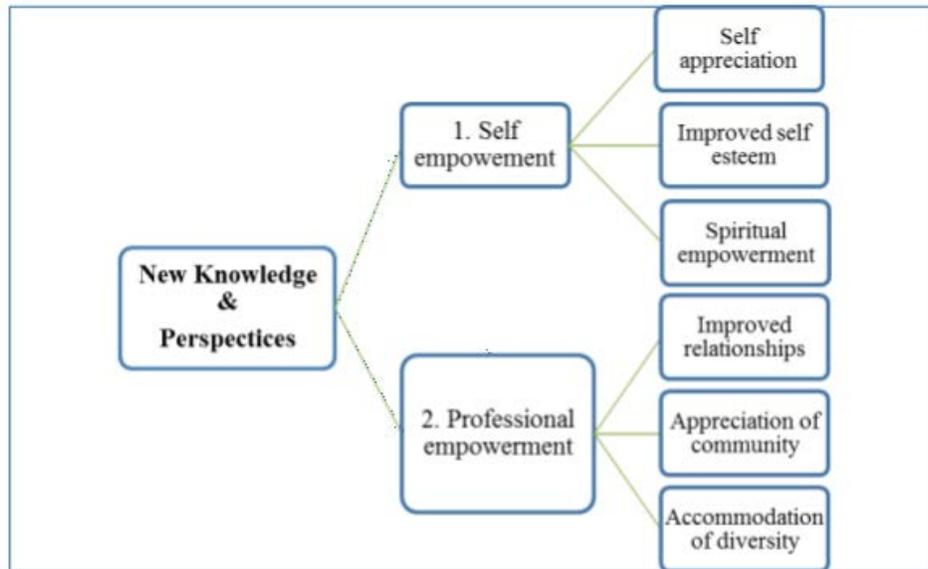


Figure 2: Levels of student empowerment

Two findings from research conducted in Columbia, which explored factors used by teachers, teaching directors and parents to characterize EC teachers were similar to the findings of this study. At the personal level, identity linked to the Caribbean culture and religiousness was significant (Henríquez-Linero, Sánchez-Castellón, and Mielles-Barrera, (2012). In the present study new perspectives on Caribbean Civilisation heightened students' self-identity. Also they identified "religious empowerment" as an important form of self-identity. At the professional level two findings, among others, from the Columbian study were: EC teachers' were viewed as having characteristics of receptiveness to change and willingness to work as a team member. These differed from the current study findings where teachers said they were better positioned to develop improved relationships, accommodate diversity and appreciate their communities as a result of their professional development experience.

The course therefore made a positive contribution to students' professional development. Students were empowered to succeed as they not only received passing grades but showed evidence of internalizing meaningful new knowledge. This was mainly because the lecturers were accommodative of students' learning. Their new learning appeared to be transformative in the way that Imel (1994) explained that transformative learning may occur even though it may not always be a goal of education.

In response to the second research question- What new insights extend our understanding of teaching and learning issues which affected the professional development of EC student teachers in the Caribbean Civilisation Course? - The

theme which emerged to represent this was: Identifying Enablers and Barriers to student learning.

Identifying Barriers and Enablers to student learning

Barriers to learning surfaced when students reflected on their experiences in courses other than the foundation course studied. Barriers for the EC cohort mainly stemmed from negative relationships and feelings which developed between lecturers and EC student teachers. Also barriers existed between BEd primary school teachers and EC student teachers. Students felt marginalized by statements which “put down” EC teachers. That problem did not exist within the group itself, nor was there a problem in the Caribbean Civilisation class as students in the class were unaware of the different faculties their classmates represented. Even though there were BEd primary students in the class, no issue arose. Sally opined that one reason may have been because no student introductions were asked for on the first day of class. Students did not know which faculties were represented in the class. Apart from that classes were so interesting that they concentrated on learning and working within their group of friends.

In their core education classes the perception that EC teachers were “glorified baby sitters” surfaced when peers made comments such as, “EC teachers don’t teach”. Ava felt comments like those were degrading. Indra supported the point when she stated, we are not acknowledged as teachers by some lecturers and by the BEd primary general student- teachers.” Ava added, “So it kind of turn you off from those classes. It was kind of hard to be friendly with (those) people. You want to keep your distance”. Patrina added that negative comments made it “hard to focus on the course itself.” Degrading comments therefore was a barrier to learning as they: demotivated EC students, negatively affected peer relationships and made student learning in those courses difficult.

Marginalisation also occurred when EC teachers felt they had to do assignments designed for primary school teachers. Since they did not know how to plan for primary school students it was more challenging for them. Indra further spoke of marginalisation which stemmed from disrespect for their ability. She stated that EC teachers are perceived as though “we don’t know what we’re doing”. As a consequence their opinions were treated as unimportant and invalid in class. They had to go through the added process of justifying their responses by “quoting theory” if they wanted some lecturers and BEd Primary general students to consider the points they raised in class discussions.

Marginalisation was therefore a barrier to learning. Students felt that they were discriminated against or disrespected because their specialization was ECCE. They had to endure degrading comments about their ability; complete assignments planned for Primary general students and justify their class responses with literature. These experiences affected their learning and jeopardized their achievement of professional development outcomes. Barriers to learning were

an issue which affected EC students' learning in some core courses but not the foundation course Caribbean Civilisation.

Enablers to student learning in the foundation course extended beyond the course delivery method and lecturer/tutor support previously mentioned. In fact enablers to learning were a constant which facilitated learning in all courses. These enablers included friendship networks where students undertaking the same programme supported each other. "Everybody helped each other in some way" Indra reflected. Sarah gave the example that, "If you're having a bit of confusion because you don't know what this (something) is saying, all you have to do is sit and ask somebody- What do you understand by this? And they would lend a hand". Ava reflected that students had both friend and family support. Other participants unanimously agreed. She spoke of both family and "your group of friends" urging students on. When for example, "you don't feel like doing an assignment or (you're) procrastinating," she said family members knew the assignments students had to do, so they motivated them to get it done on time. They'd support by saying, "Go and do your work".

The barriers students itemized were identified through reflection on their experiences in other courses. No barriers to learning were reported for the course studied. It seems accurate to conclude that the enablers which supported learning in the course Caribbean Civilisation were specifically the lecturer's teaching style and supports provided during course delivery. Learning was also enabled generally by students' friendship networks and family motivation. General enablers were constant for all courses.

Barriers to learning brought about by marginalisation, and the supports students identified were somewhat different to the issues outlined by Chipperfield (2012). In Chipperfield's study of a foundation course she discovered numerous instances of intra and inter cohort competition as well as self-preservation tactics by students. However in the foundation course studied no instances of competition or self-preservation tactics were reported. Participants hinted at that type of behaviour occurring in classes where the EC student teachers received degrading comments, felt demotivated and as a consequence peer-relationships and student learning, leading to professional development were affected. As one student stated, degrading comments made it "hard to focus on the course itself." This implied that in the absence of degrading comments, as was the case in the foundation course, students were able to focus on the course.

Conclusion

This study investigated how one foundation course which accommodated students from across faculties, contributed to the professional development of EC student teachers. It also sought to uncover new insights to extend understandings about teaching and learning issues which affect the PD of EC student teachers. The findings were that all EC teacher participants passed the course with marks that were within the range of marks for the class. This was contrary to the popular perception that

they were performing at the bottom of all courses. Beyond marks student success was also measured by the knowledge, skills and dispositions they demonstrated in the focus group interview. Improved self-identity and Caribbean identity and understandings for accommodating diversity were some of the new knowledge which they expressed gaining from the course. Their responses provided a positive evaluation of their achievement of course aims which included- learning about historical methodology such as Revisionist understandings and understanding Caribbean identity in a region of diversity.

Coded focus group data suggested that aspects of standards for supporting EC teacher professional preparation were also met. Achieving NAEYC (2009) standards, such as developing professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions after studying in a well-designed professional preparation programme was another benchmark for measuring success. Additionally, students made connections between life experiences and new learning when they discussed understanding existing race relations or feeling empowered to provide unbiased, knowledge to children, colleagues and community members. Providing evidence which suggested meeting these standards showed that the course contributed to the PD of EC student teachers.

This study was important for addressing the gap in understanding process issues underlying professional development in EC education. Using a constructivist perspective findings suggest that the foundation course provided insights into the professional development of EC teachers. Pedagogically, the study also suggested that efforts should be made to minimize, negative perceptions by lecturers and students which can undermine professional development of EC teachers in some courses. Piaget's theoretical position that learners make meaning and develop cognitively through interactions, experiences and ideas was evident.

The adult constructivist learning environment (Doolittle, 1999) seemed to have empowered student learning through student-centered pedagogy and supports which facilitated the transfer of lasting new knowledge, skills and dispositions. Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1994) appears to have also occurred as students gained new knowledge and revised their understandings of identity and also racial, political and diversity issues. That learning process involved critical and reflective thinking about assumptions and beliefs which caused learners to change their "reference frames" and redefine their thinking. Ultimately the course seemed to have contributed to developing the 'Foundation' for the 'ideal Caribbean EC teacher- one whose PD equipped her to effectively teach diverse children and to interact with their families.

Further research is recommended to investigate issues affecting the PD of EC teachers. A mixed method design could be used to investigate and compare issues arising in several courses instead of one course. Also the experiences of EC student teachers in courses other than foundation courses could be investigated from the perspectives of lecturers and other students as well as EC student teachers.

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