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Engendering curriculum pedagogy for alternative pathways to secondary education in Jamaica

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This study reopens discussions on the approach to closing achievement gaps. It investigates three interventions at the secondary school level in Jamaica: two voluntary grade ten experimental programmes that gave students an additional year after completing Grade 9, and an empowerment programme that granted automatic placement based on The Grade Nine Achievement Test, allowing learners to repeat Grade 9. The self-studies and storied experiences of students and teachers revealed anomalies and practices that stultified empowerment and achievement. These disclosures have engendered the transformative pedagogy that is necessary for curriculum renewal that leads to alternative pathways to secondary education curriculum solutions, which are currently being explored in Jamaica.

Key words: curriculum pedagogy, underachievement, learner empowerment, self –study, narrative inquiry.

Introduction

Current debates regarding the raising of standards in students' academic achievement seem to be suggesting that achievement can be linked to teaching as a precise scientific undertaking, where teachers are the 'technicians' carrying out pre-selected instructional programmes and strategies. It should also be noted that curriculum and teaching have long been treated as opposites. Theorists have argued that the curriculum is not always what it appears to be as it can be sometimes hidden, exerting its impact on students insidiously (Ben-Peretz, 1990). They have argued that curriculum is not what is proposed, but what is actually taught; and the real curriculum is what is experienced in the classroom, not the published texts or the teachers' manual (Elbaz, 1983; Connelly & Clandinnin 1988; Fennimore, 2000).

Ben-Perez and Tamir (1981) challenge this perceived disconnect between curriculum and teaching and propose the concept of 'curriculum potential' which advances the view of curriculum and teaching as mutually supportive and reinforcing. In this context, the essential value of the curriculum, according to the writers, is how it permits teachers to adapt, invent and transform as they confront the realities of classroom life. The implication of this observation for this current research is that in viewing the potentiality of curriculum, teachers must be prepared

as acute critics, analysts and adaptors of curriculum. They must learn to understand curriculum as providing the raw materials from which they can craft and shape the instruction of their pupils. From this perspective, curriculum materials are often perceived as expressions of their developers' or writers' intentions. If we are to perceive this "disconnect between curriculum and teaching" and further perceive curriculum materials as expressions of the designers' intentions, how should we now perceive curriculum as it relates to the learners for whom it was created? What is the connection between curriculum and student underachievement?

The Problem

There are several types of secondary schools in Jamaica as indicated in Table 1. These school types emerged from the political mandates of government or educational reform processes. There are All Age schools; junior high schools; upgraded secondary schools, now reclassified as high schools; traditional high schools that emerged from the old grammar schools; and technical high schools.

Table 1. Secondary School Types and Grade Nine Achievement (GNAT) Placement

School Types	Grades	GNAT Placement
Junior High	1-9	
All Age	1-9	
Traditional High	7- 11 *(12-13)	✔
Upgraded High	7-11	✔
Technical High	**7- 11 *(12-13)**	✔

Note: Most traditional high and a few upgraded have a 6th form programme.

Evans' (2001) investigation into curriculum offerings, resources and teaching methods in Jamaican secondary schools revealed gaps in quality among school types. The quality of curriculum content, teaching and resources in All Age, reclassified Junior high schools and upgraded high schools were far below their counterparts in traditional high schools. One particular band of learners, the grade 9 graduates of All Age and Junior High schools who would have terminated schooling if they were not successful in the Grade Nine Achievement Test (GNAT), faces several challenges. Among these is the problem of securing a place in another school type to access grades 10 and 11, and to comfortably continue their education, operating at the same level as their counterparts in the other school types. The commissioned

Educational Task Force, Jamaica (2004) after a thorough investigation of student performance at the secondary level, revealed that there was gross underachievement. This they believed had become an institutionalized learner characteristic as schools were perpetuating a culture of underachievement by graduating students who after eleven years of schooling were not able to function as literate citizens equipped to join the labour force and empowered to contribute to national development.

The Ministry of Education, in a bid to find short term solutions to the problem faced by students exiting grade 9 at the end of All Age schooling, encouraged the initiative of some principals to implement the Experimental Grade 10, which facilitated an additional year for these students who would have graduated from All Age and Junior High Schools. This was optional and no additional resources and subvention were provided by the Government. The Experimental Grade 10 initiative was short-lived. The Ministry later rationalized the Grade Nine Achievement Test to function as a placement test, which automatically awarded students exiting grade nine in All Age and Junior High schools a place to continue with three more years of schooling. Students were placed in a Grade 9 Empowerment Programme in a traditional, upgraded or technical high school. The Grade 9 Learner Empowerment Programme was implemented to allow greater access and parity for the continuation of schooling. This intervention was not guided by educational research to inform educators about the nature of curriculum content that would facilitate empowerment for learners.

Ellsworth (1998) in answering the question "Empowerment for what?" presents a vision of empowerment for human betterment, for expanding the range of possible identities that people may become and engaging one's self in transformative social actions. Giroux (1993) has argued for a transformative pedagogy that starts with engaging literacy not just as a skill or knowledge but an emerging act of consciousness and resistance (1993, p. 367). This engagement is rooted in indigenous critical praxis, which begins with *listening to the teacher within* (Feraria, 2008). This teacher intuition is not only achieved through teacher introspection but also lies within learners who engage in self-disclosures about the teaching–learning experience. These acts of teaching and learning are potentially emancipating as in the acts of going against the established they challenge what has become acceptable but not workable in our educational practices to engender alternative ways of doing and knowing. Within the context of this research these curriculum paths are constructivist as well as de-constructivist, as they are developed by progressive teachers attempting to illuminate inequalities, and inaccessibility to equitable curriculum offerings and resources. This orientation towards curriculum creates conditions for learner empowerment.

Anomalies in access and equity in curriculum opportunities and the attempts at amelioration are the background against which this research was conducted. The research sought to interrogate current pedagogical goals for grade 9 students on transitional pathways to grade 10, through the extended /experimental grade 10 and grade 9 empowerment programmes. The research was guided by the following questions:

1. How do classroom teachers' views of students affect students' response to learning in programmes designed for their empowerment?

2. How do students respond to the intervention programmes designed for their empowerment?

3. What are students' views about curriculum practices for closing achievement gaps?

Review of the Literature

Engendering curriculum is part of the thrust for a transformative pedagogy that transcends daily enactment of schooling to 'call into being' curriculum experiences aimed at engaging teachers in using and actualizing the discourse of critical pedagogy that empowers students both as individuals and as potential agents of social change (Mc Laren, 2003). It is with this understanding in mind that we can see the relevance of Paulo Freire's (1973) call for the illumination of reality in curriculum enactment as curricula by their very nature, obscure reality. This calls for a pedagogy that not only fuels academic achievement but also learner empowerment that is pedaled by learners' personal dreams, aspirations and self-actualizations. These are the hallmarks of what I choose to call emancipatory curriculum that is learner-initiated (Freire, 1990).

Curriculum as contextualized social processes

Technocratic approaches to curriculum, that advance pre-selected instructional programmes and strategies, de-contextualize curriculum. According to Cornbleth (1990), this approach separates the curriculum product itself from policymaking, design and practice. Cornbleth challenges this practice of de-contextualization and proposes the view of curriculum as 'contextualized social processes' that are created and experienced within multiple interacting contexts. The emphasis is on the continuing construction and re-construction of curriculum in classroom practice. Such practices reflect a critical rather than a technical, rational approach towards curriculum. The construction and re-construction of curriculum in situated practice necessitates an acknowledgement of the notion that curriculum exists in practice and not independent of it (Cornbleth, 1990).

A critical approach to curriculum illuminates some characteristics that are central to this research project: proactive teacher responses, user-instrumentation and user-utility. Szwed, (2001) in keeping with the principles of this approach, raises a question that challenges the reliance on teaching methods to address students' academic underachievement. He asks if it were possible that teachers are able to teach reading and writing as abstract skills but do not really know what reading and writing are in the lives and futures of the children they teach. He argues for a shift from the question of instruction back to the social meaning of literacy. In viewing curriculum as 'contextualized social practices' it is prudent to approach the

study of literacy in educational empowerment programmes as social practices and strive for methodologies that study literacy in everyday settings. Knobel (1999) notes that these social practices and meaning-making approaches to curriculum empower learners to access worthwhile employment opportunities and becoming effective citizens (p. 6).

Curriculum as experience

Connelly's and Clandinin's (1988) view of curriculum as narratives of experience places teachers and learners at the center of knowledge construction. Looking only at what teachers and learners do in classrooms will not always lead us to an understanding of what they experience. According to Eisner (1991), this requires a willingness to listen deeply to what people have to say, and to see beyond what they do in order to grasp the meanings of what their doings have for them. An approach to curriculum as experience introduces teachers' and students' narratives as evidence and as data to be studied and interpreted. This view of curriculum is adopted as the organizing principle of the data collection and presentation procedures in this research.

Curriculum conversations

This current research also advances the notion of curriculum as conversation (Applebee, 1996), a view which stems from the premise that the conventions of discourse within the classroom are constrained by larger discourses of tradition and students learn to participate in these conversations. Treating curriculum as a domain for conversations leads to a new set of considerations in curriculum planning. Applebee (1996) notes that while educators are aware of these conversations, they fail to recognize their value as starting points for curriculum. This research is about activating these conversations that have been silenced by some educators. Activating conversations about learners' dreams, aspirations and ambitions transforms the school to a site for curriculum resistance and renewal.

In this light, deliberations about curriculum that seek to close the gaps in student achievement should initiate the interrogation of self that leads to self-transformation in order to achieve self-actualization. Rahman's (1993) investigation of the perspectives, principles and processes in participatory action research, a qualitative research approach that focuses on a solution to a specific local problem, Lichtman (2013), indicates that such self-initiated processes will only occur when people develop their own endogenous process of consciousness-raising and knowledge generation.

Method

This participatory action research was intended to achieve two broad objectives:

1. To engage teachers and students in the Grade 9 Empowerment Programme and the Experimental Grade 10 programmes in conversations about curriculum that would inform the development of a customized curriculum for learner empowerment; and

2. To arrive at an understanding of the design of curriculum in situated practices that foster learner empowerment and achievement

It was my intention that the results or findings would be seen as the contribution of the key stakeholders –teachers and learners who have engendered the kind of re-thinking and revisions to curriculum that would break the ongoing cycle of curriculum and teaching that are dislodged from learners' expectations.

The Participants

There were two cohorts of the experimental grade 10 drawn from two junior high schools. These two schools were selected because of the contrasting experiences in the schools' intervention into specialized curriculum for learner empowerment. The contrast in the execution of the schools' intervention led me to refer to one Grade 10 group as *Experimental* and the other as *Extended*. These two interventions were prior to the Ministry of Education's rationalization of the GNAT as a placement test. The Grade 9 Learner Empowerment cohort was selected from a traditional high school that placed the cohort of students allotted from the GNAT on a separate campus identified as the school's Empowerment Campus. The combined participants comprised sixty students. This was a purposive and convenient sample across three research sites.

Table 2. The programme types and research sites

Programme Type	Population Sample	Research Site
Experimental Grade10	Males: 20 Females: 0	Junior High School
Extended Grade 10	Males : 15 Females 5	Junior High School
Grade 9 Empowerment	Males : 15 Females 5	Empowerment Campus

Experimental Grade 10 was in a junior high school where the teacher trained in Literacy Studies created and implemented a literacy- as- social- practice based learner empowerment programme (my terminology, based on the philosophy and

principles reflected in the programme) with a group of 20 boys. Extended Grade 10 comprised 15 boys and 5 girls. The teacher, trained in primary education, used an approach to curriculum she described as "making it simple". The principal's cottages were used as classrooms for these groups. The Grade 9 Empowerment group was the grade 9 students for whom grade 10 was deferred. They were housed approximately five miles away from the traditional high school in which they were placed to repeat grade nine in a learner empowerment programme. Twenty students who attended school regularly were selected by the Campus Coordinator to participate in the research from a campus population of 92 students with an average daily attendance of 65 students. The physical facility housed three classrooms. There were no labs or working areas for practical subjects.

Access and Research Ethics

The principals of the Junior High schools in which the experimental and extended grade 10 were located and coordinator of the Empowerment campus were instrumental in getting assent letters through the Parent/Teachers Association. Once I entered the research sites I established a Rapping Protocol. The acronym RAPPING was used to set the guidelines for the rapping process and treatment of views and information: Respect (for the views of others and to speak respectfully about others; Anonymity (no names on rap sheets and the information that would be published); Put the truth on the paper (or say only things that were truthful); Prepare to explain how you feel and why you feel the way you feel) , Intrusiveness respect for privacy and confidentiality; and permission to withdraw at any time they felt they did not wish to rap. These guidelines were shared with all participants. The rapping sessions were conducted in a non-threating environment and a professional and business-like rapping space. The assent forms for teachers clearly outlined the purpose of the research, their roles in the research and my intention to share findings. They too were assured of confidentially and anonymity in the handling of all data.

Procedures

Narrative Inquiry

Using narrative inquiry and self-study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) as the chief procedures in this research allowed me to use informants' experiences, conversations, stories and reflections as avenues to authentic and genuine information that would be akin to engendering and calling into being ideas, beliefs and visions that would otherwise have been suppressed by instruments or methods that would remind students of being tested. I used the same methods to facilitate interrogation and investigation into teachers' classroom practice. Storied experiences facilitated a "knowingness" (Thomas, 1991) that was influential in changing self- understanding, developing critical reflective skills and facilitating the "sense of an expanded and deepened awareness of the roots of professional practice: beliefs, behaviors and values" (p.13) for the teachers in this research.

Elbaz (1983) supports the use of teachers' narratives as vehicles for bringing out aspects of their accumulated experiential knowledge. My informants self-disclosed, retraced and revised meanings as they related experiences about achieving curriculum goals, teaching styles , learning styles and the agendas of hidden curriculum. This resulted in re-constructive inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) that permitted the merging of data to create a composite of student and teacher experiences. This autobiographical transparency added to the validity of the research processes and findings (Feldman, 1989).

Instruments

The Students' Rap sheets

The instruments used in the collection of data from learners were engendered by the need not only to collect data in the natural setting as it relates to place but also in relation to the informants' comfort zone and psychological space. **My Rap Sheet: What I Am Good At; My Rap Sheet: What I am Not So Good At; My Rap Sheet: What I Must Do to Empower Me**; were no different from a researcher's field note pad. The instruments were powerful tools that gave the learners control over the research process.

These instruments were all designed in a similar way. They were blank sheets of paper except for the title of the focus of the rapping: (i) **What I am good at**; (ii) **What I am not so good at** and (iii) **What I must do to empower me**.

The discussion prompts on my Rap Sheet were geared towards getting students to talk about their talents, skills, short comings in their academic as well as life skills and their dreams and aspirations The prompts on my **What I must do to empower me** rap sheet directed the rapping towards two levels of "what I must do". One focused on accountability measures and the other on curriculum offerings. The first level was getting respondents to identify what they needed to do to be empowered and successful. The latter discussion prompt was intended to get students to talk about the nature of a programme / subject /skill that would empower them.

Table 3. Research questions and data collection instruments

Research Questions	Research Methods	Instruments
1. How do classroom teachers' views of students affect students' response to learning in programmes designed for their empowerment?	Narrative Inquiry: Storied experiences	Teachers' Rap Sheet
2. How do students respond to the intervention programmes designed for their empowerment?	Learner Self-studies	My Rap Sheet: What I am Good At and What I am Not so Good At
3. What are students' views about curriculum practices for closing achievement gaps?	Learner Self-studies	My Rap Sheet: What I Must Do to Empower Me

Teachers' Rap Sheets

The aim of **Teachers' Rap**, the informal talks with teachers at the end of a lesson or during their non-contact time, was to get their views about the students' strengths and weaknesses and how the empowerment programme was impacting the students. This provided avenues for data triangulation of learners' and teachers 'views. The discussion prompts were written on the teachers' rap sheets because I wanted them to see the different stances I wanted them to take: Reflection on teaching; reflection on programme; reflection for action.

The use of these instruments initiated self- study as an integral part of the research methodology as well as the research findings. I observed that the repeated rap sessions extended triangulation as the self- studies were multiple ways of presenting the learner self. This also achieved triangulation in researchers' perspectives as the approach created multiple researchers as teachers and learners became researchers of their own experiences. **Teachers' Stories (oral accounts and jottings of significant events)** provided the opportunities for the two teachers involved in the Experimental and Extended programmes to re-construct their teaching experiences with learners. These reflections came three months after the programmes were discontinued but were of great significance to this research which examined the current practice of teachers and learners, self- studies in the first six months of the empowerment programmes. This facilitated cross data analysis which strengthened the internal validity of the research process.

Data Analysis

The methods used in this research are best described as quasi-conversational analysis and coding. Both afforded the opportunity to sort the data by searching for themes and to identify recurring themes and concepts across data sources. Coding was the process used and the codes which emerged were terms that I later used to present a composite conversation and an emerging profile of learners that was shaped by their lived experiences and self-studies.

Findings

Research Question: How do classroom teachers views of students affect students' response to learning in programmes designed for their empowerment?

Curriculum conversations:Teachers' self-fulfilling prophecies

The teachers' classroom practice and rapping were framed in larger discourses about how teachers construct pedagogical meanings to act and how these actions provided teachers with an on-going cultural conversation about students' lives and the world in which they live. Teachers' self-fulfilling prophecies about their students' attitudes and aptitudes emerged as a decisive factor in planning for teaching. The following is a composite of responses from teachers' talk carried out in their rap sessions:

> *"They can't read so the practical subjects are best for them"*
> *"We put them by themselves because they will only hold back the others"*
> *"I make everything simple for them. I can't do with them what I do with others"*
> *"They are not here to learn. They are disruptive. Their attention span is too short" They don't learn even with the best of teaching.*
> *"They are not interested in school. They are men and women. They are just passing through.*

There are certain misconceptions and dispositions which are raised in this composite teachers' conversations that guided content and pedagogy in curriculum decision-making. Some of the misconceptions are (i) one does not need literacy to pursue practical subjects; (ii) one's inability to read is liability for other learners' academic progress; and (iii) making everything simple will solve the needs of these learners. . These kinds of dispositions towards education for underachievers foster an approach to literacy as a discrete technical skill that is "added on" to give the basics (making it simple). These are not dispositions that support the view of literacy that is, reading, writing and enumerating, as cultural practices which are learnt in specific cultural contexts and which have real-life significance in that learners engage in authentic, meaningful learning ideally within vocational and community contexts.

Teachers' understandings of curriculum planning in empowerment programmes: Steppers, stoppers and campers

A critical approach to curriculum illuminated some teacher dispositions that were central to engendering curriculum. These dispositions towards curriculum and teaching revealed three profiles of learners in this research. The profiles of the learners were shaped by teacher's philosophy, pedagogy, the physical classroom

contexts, programme provisions or the lack thereof and their understanding of students' perceived dispositions towards school and learning. The following is a composite of comments from the teachers in each research setting. These later gave rise to three learner profiles, Steppers, Stoppers and Campers which emerged from the findings:

> *"I love them with all my heart and teach them from my heart …*
> *I know what they need and I go all out to provide the things they*
> *need*
>
> **(Teacher in the Experimental Grade10)**

> *"Nothing could budge them. I made my teaching so simple so they*
> *could understand...I brought my husband in for motivational talks*
> *with them but they were bent on being bad. My heart could not take*
> *it… I left"*
>
> **(Teacher in the Extended Grade10)**

> *The heart is willing but the flesh is weak- A real cliché but it's true,*
> *we have nothing to work with. So we are discouraged and I guess the*
> *children too*
>
> **(Coordinator of the Grade 9 Empowerment Campus)**

The comment from the teacher in the Experimental Grade 10 with regard to providing what her students needed was endorsed by a boy's comment *"Miss we step up in a life!"* This comment was the catalyst for coding the data to reveal the profile of The Steppers. The teacher of the Steppers spoke constantly about how much she loved her boys and how special they were to her. One of her comments summed it all up: *"I love them with all my heart and teach them from my heart …I know what they need and I go all out to provide the things they need"*. The needs of students were integral in the teacher's planning.

The teacher of the Extended Grade 10 was concerned about the art of teaching. The following comment summed up the philosophy underpinning her practice and her perceptions of the students' predisposition towards learning: *"Nothing could budge them. I made my teaching so simple so they could understand... I brought my husband in for motivational talks with them but they were bent on being bad. My heart could not take it…I left"*. The teacher left after one term with the students. These students emerged as The Stoppers. Students' responses to the school's effort to continue with making *it simple* after the teacher left further supported the profile of the Stoppers. Those who were engaged to work with students thereafter gave them seat work to keep them inside and out of trouble.

The Coordinator of the Grade 9 Empowerment Campus indicated that a willingness to work was constrained by the lack of resources with which to work. This leads to discouragement on teachers as well as students part. The general trend in the curriculum conversations that emerged in students' rapping revealed that

students were Campers as they were cut off from resources in the high school to which they were attached.

Research Question: How do students respond to the intervention programmes designed for their empowerment?

Curriculum Conversations: Students Talk Back

Students' conversations about curriculum were also grounded in experience. The conversations they engaged were constrained by their personal dreams and expectations as well as their envisioning of what would be a good experience for them. The following is a composite from Students' Rap Sessions:

> *"They think is so big man read?'*

> *"What is IT (Instructional Technology) without computer?*
> *Is the computer I want to use!"*

> *"I want to do Spanish but we don't 'get that. I want to work in the hotel and I need to know Spanish"*

> *"Is idiot thing dis! Man a waste time! I could be hustling with my uncle and earning some good money.*

Some teachers had remarked that the students were "men and women" and had insinuated that as a result, they were not interested in being learners and being in school. However, while the question *They think is so big man read?* in students' talking back" appears somewhat as a trajectory to this observation, its rhetorical nature invites a reflection on the 'making it simple' method used by the teacher. The question ignited the awareness that the teaching approaches for developing reading skills were not age appropriate based on the student's assessment.   In addition to this disconnect with students' needs, the sentiment 'is idiot thing this" was dismissive. This was a commentary on the programme itself. While some students lamented on another level of disconnect, in this instance being cut off from the high school they, unlike their teachers, envisioned how they could harness untapped resources on the school site:

> *"Come here miss* (a male student holds my hand and leads me outside. The group of students following behind) *Look out there!* (pointing) *All a dat is school lan' but wi here forming fool when we could be farming di land. The girls dem could cook di food.* (the voice of another male student) *Di boy dem too* (chorus of girl's voices) *Yeah dat too! An wi all learn to do something. We could sell di cabbage dat we plant too!* (another male student's voice)

"They always want to go outside" was the lament of the teacher in the Extended Grade 10. This craving for 'outside' from the teacher's standpoint implied a lack of interest in learning. However, based on the envisioning of the students in the Grade 9 Empowerment programme (The Campers) above, this craving for "outside" seems to be charting a new course or curriculum path students would like to take. The curriculum envisioning underpinning students' conversations was inspired by entrepreneurial enterprising. This opened up a discussion on tapping into existing resources that offer authentic learning experiences and social and economic investments for learners.

Research Question: What are students' views about curriculum practices for closing achievement gaps?

Wasting Time as Campers: Disconnect and Disillusionment

"Man a waste time" was a general response to the Grade 9 Empowerment programme. The notion of time wasting was also expressed in a classroom observation session in the Extended grade 10 where a student in an attempt at overcoming a writer's block during a writing task solicited the teacher's help to spell the word "wife" and dismissed her help when the teacher attempted to engage him in applying phonetic skills to 'sound' the word.

Student: (approaches teacher's desk) Miss spell wife
Teacher: Say woo....iie...fh (teacher encourages student to apply phonemic strategy)
Student: Miss you a waste mi time. Mi want to go back to write

Students' disenchantment with how Information Technology was administered was expressed in one student's pointed question *"What is IT without computers?"* There was also an expressed need for career- oriented subjects. Wasting time was an underlying undercurrent among students' in the Grade 9 Empowerment programme.

The students in the Grade 9 Empowerment and the Extended Grade 10 were engaged in a technical approach to reading and literacy development .There was emphasis on spelling and word recognition. The teachers' stories resonated with strategies that would "make it simple" for the learners. These strategies were not always well received by students who responded in various ways. In this scenario the learner rejected the strategy of "sounding the word" or phonemic awareness that this teacher felt, in her reflection on the lesson would have led to learner empowerment in overcoming a writing block. However, the student felt he was wasting time waiting on the teacher for the correct spelling or had wasted his time asking the teacher for help. In one rap session with students on the Grade 9 Empowerment campus a male student who shared similar disenchantment with his teachers' approach to developing his literacy skills asked this question: *"Dem think is so big man read?"*

Stoppers: Grade 10 Deferred

The Extended Grade 10 group in this research experienced various types of disruptions throughout the academic year. These disruptions ranged from the teacher's resignation to their daily behaviour which disrupted the school community. They lamented about the names they were called by administrators: extortionists, bad eggs; warm benchers and no good. The teacher's view of them is summed up in this statement:

> "*They can't read. They can't spell. They can't write. They can't do anything so I try to make it simple for them.*"

The Stoppers questioned the quality of the programme by highlighting ineffective teaching strategies dislodged from their own realities and what it takes to empower them to achieve. Some of the gaps they identified in their empowerment programme were the catalysts for transformation and empowerment among the Steppers. It was evident that there were conflicting views about how reading skills are developed and how literacy should be taught to empower learners. Based on her reflections on previous lessons   (which she admitted did not go well) the teacher supported students' view that they needed more to do. The curriculum practice was largely grammar-based. The teacher's classes were built around vocabulary work and sentence completion. It was evident that in addition to this approach to teaching which she described as 'making it simple", the teacher was passionate about 'bringing out the best" in the students:

> "*I try to expose them to the right values. I get different speakers to come in and share with them. But they are only interested in giving trouble.*"

But students in the Extended Grade 10 believed that it took more than making instruction simple to bring out the best in them. All teachers viewed practical subjects as alternative to regular schooling for learners. But the Campers' self-studies as gleaned from their Rapping' sessions on **What I must do to Empower Me**, indicated resentment for these subjects as they felt they were not career-oriented. They were too theory-based as there were no provisions for practical work in Information Technology, Home and Family and other practical subjects. The students viewed the available school land as a resource that could be utilized for farming, which would later lead to food preparation and a small business for the school. It is interesting to note that while their teachers felt they had nothing to work with the students were collectively endorsing the possibilities for Agriculture, Home Economics and Entrepreneurship. The Stoppers lamented not having practical subjects to do like their peers in the real Grade 10 at a neighbouring technical high school.

Stepping Up in Life: Expanding Curriculum Experiences

"Miss we step up in life", a popular Jamaican saying, was one boy's response to my comment on the new uniform that the Experimental Grade 10 wore. The boys were dressed in lily white shirts and green ties made from the tunic of the girls' uniform. This was a change from the full suite of brown khaki, the typical school boy's uniform. Broad smiles radiated from nineteen other male faces. They were back in their old school but this time with a high level of expectation from a brand new teacher in a brand new classroom located in the principal's cottage. Their self-studies revealed qualities that were perceived by the teacher in her study of learners' profiles: They loved attention and were always in search of recognition. They needed to know that they were special. These affirmations brought out the best in them. They received these affirmations through the expanded learning opportunities.

These learners' curriculum experiences were expanded to include Work experience in a hotel. At the end of the programme they expanded their profiles to include qualities observed by others such as teacher's observation of their *"good work ethics, excellent work attitudes while on hotel-based experience and good behavior and work output when they worked in groups."* These self-appraisals and teacher observations were echoed by the supervisor in the hotel setting who was asked to comment on the quality of the boy's performance in the House keeping department. She commented on the fact that, *"these boys are ready for the world of work. They have better work ethics than some adult workers. They only thing preventing them from employment is their age. They have to be at least eighteen."* The Steppers lauded the hotel-based based work experience they had and the usefulness of the letters of application and resumes they wrote before placement. They said that they felt good about themselves as this was application for a real job in a real hotel:

> *"Miss, we feel so good and important that we wish it was a job we*
> *could keep*
> *Me a go back Miss! Me sure about that. Fi real!"*

There were other responses from this group which echoed similar sentiments of aspirations, fulfillment and self-affirmation and actualization. Work experience was valued highly by the Steppers. This valuing was also transferred to their job-related preparation of letters of request, job application and resumes:

> *"Miss I never know I could do it but when teacher say we have to*
> *write the letter if we want to go.*
> *I really want to so it push me to write Miss"*

Literacy development was deemed important by students and the teacher. The approach to literacy rather than students' abilities and interests was the catalyst for

sustainability. The Steppers were engaged in learning and experiencing literacy as social practice. Instructions were contextualized, collaborative, less individualized and active. As one student expressed: *"Something I can do and use when me to get a work when I leave school"*. This was demonstrated in the writing classes such as the one that the Steppers described that focused on letters of application to the hotel seeking permission to do six weeks of in-service training; the writing of the resume and the writing of a report on the experience.

Discussion: Emerging Insights for Curriculum Renewal for Student Underachievement

Steppers, Stoppers and Campers were names given to the groups based on the profiles that emerged from Learner's Self Study and Teachers' storied accounts. It was found that these learners' varying curriculum experiences were influenced by three key factors. These were (1) the quality of programme offering, (2) teacher quality and, (3) the relationship of programme to the school/community. These three factors contributed to the profile of three learner dispositions (Steppers, Stoppers and Campers) in curriculum responses to learner empowerment in sites of practice to address student underachievement. I will now present the curriculum philosophy emerging from school-based responses to learner underachievement and present the findings in programme offerings, teacher quality and school-community relations which framed them.

Quality of Programme Offerings for Learner Empowerment

One factor which pervaded the Campers lament in their self-studies was not being given the opportunity to make choices or have a say in the curriculum content. Such expectations are not unusual as they are in tandem with social constructivist classrooms where learners have the opportunity to select topics and make choices. This research has shown that the teacher and learner dispositions that emerged from Steppers are signaling the path that these empowerment programmes should take. Thus rather than viewing the experimental approach as an alternative to the empowerment thrust, the move should now be towards infusing Steppers philosophy, spirit and praxis in empowering students for self-actualization as the catalyst for learner empowerment. Two transformative pedagogies have emerged from Steppers' philosophy and praxis. These are contextualized literacy instruction in which literacy events are activities rooted in social practice which engage students in manipulating discourses in speaking , reading and writing for and in real life contexts. Coupled with this is occupational literacy or literacy for work which is acquired through community-based instruction that immerses learners in applying literacy and literacy related competencies in workplace settings.

Teacher Quality and Pedagogy for Learner Empowerment

The profile of the kind of teacher that emerged from teachers' self-studies and storied experiences, that can initiate learner empowerment through transformative pedagogy in an empowerment programme boasted teachers with the following attributes:

(i) well-rounded in subject areas to facilitate learning across the curriculum;

(ii) sensitivity and awareness of the students' needs, abilities and interests and to address them accordingly;

(iii) willingness to go beyond the call of duty to access and provide curriculum experiences that support personal growth and development, real-life and life- long learning ;

(iv) motivated and student-friendly so that the students will be eager and comfortable to learn; and

(v) professional and proactive

Relationship of Empowerment programme to school- community

The extended and experimental Grade 10 classes had contrasting relationships with the rest of the school community. In both cases the principals' cottages (located on the school compound) were utilized as classrooms. Steppers had access to school facilities and where these were lacking, the teacher found a way to overcome the setbacks to allow students to actualize their goals. The other members of staff felt that the boys were good role models for their peers and supported the teacher's effort to make them sit the Grade 9 Achievement Test to gain a place in high school. The Steppers, on the other hand, were viewed as "a problem for the school" in their school and with a "light and simple curriculum" students had opportunities to idle; spent most of their time outside and were a disruptive element in the school. Some stopped attending or were irregular in attendance. The Campers were isolated from the high school and were not treated as if they were in a high school. The Steppers were clearly nurtured by their school community and the wider community in their work experience programme.

Conclusion

This is timely research for Jamaica. It comes at a time when the Ministry of Education in Jamaica is preparing The Alternative Pathways to Secondary Education Curricula for underachieving learners in the lower secondary school (grades 7-9) The findings in this research are indicating that relevant and sustainable policy-making as it relates to addressing learners' empowerment and self-development require a consultative approach that provides the platform that gives learners the opportunity to envision the path that will lead to self-authentication and actualization. This transformation path is not a short–cut to empowerment. The Steppers have indicated that it is achieved through the nurturing of learner dispositions by a transformative pedagogy. The learner self- studies have shown

that the Steppers traveled along this path, the Steppers became aware that the current path on which they were traveling would not take them to that place of betterment and the Campers lamented that they had been taken for a ride to a place where they are expected to be empowered but do not have the tools with which to work. These learners have re-opened conversations about curriculum that were submerged and clearly not taken into account in planning for their empowerment in existing curricula contexts.

These conversations have opened the channel for conversations across the nation and the Caribbean about the closing of achievement gaps and the opening of curriculum pathways to new thresholds into learner empowerment through curriculum reform. This calls for the engendering of a cooperative agenda at the classroom, school and national levels for a new vision of what is the ideal basic education for students whose academic achievement lag behind. It is a vision less fettered by inherited models and more in tune with contemporary socio-cultural, spiritual, economic and environmental needs of our learners who all desire to step up in life.

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