Improving classroom teaching and learning: three key ideas

Vena Jules, Anthony Layne, Peter Kutnick and David Stephens

Background
This paper draws together three key ideas of education-based research with a view to enhancing social pedagogic and non-traditional classroom approaches for primary school teachers in rural Commonwealth countries.

The three key ideas are: firstly, the realisation that post-colonial classrooms in the South tend to be dominated by traditional pedagogical approaches and that these approaches are highly associated with school retention, drop-out and exclusion; secondly, that the development of improved social pedagogic practices within classrooms encourages social inclusion and communication among pupils (especially through effective group work practices) and raises levels of academic attainment, particularly among the lowest attaining pupils; and thirdly, that the introduction of sustainable classroom innovations must be supported by school leaders and practice-orientated educational researchers.

Drawing together these three key ideas allows us to bring South/South and North/South perspectives to problems of school-based underachievement, social exclusion and gender bias in educational institutions in the South. The development and adaptation of social pedagogic and non-traditional approaches also allow for classroom-based development and ownership of approaches that will provide for a sustainable increase in the range of teachers’ activities associated with effective learning, as recommended in various countries of the North and South. The development and ownership of these approaches by teachers should help to legitimise collective cultural practices that characterise many of the rural communities within the Commonwealth, as well as introduce a model of school improvement/leadership that is meaningful, relevant and sustainable to teachers in rural schools. These ideas are rooted within the Millennium Development Goals of poverty reduction, basic education, social inclusion and gender equality.

Previous research
Generally speaking, theoretical perspectives support a range of Millennium Development Goals, and, in particular, are based upon: a) human capital research that has shown a connection between an improvement in educational achievement and a rise in economic production, although the promotion of human capital through schooling is limited by traditionally constructed and taught classrooms; b) social pedagogic principles that account for the importance of planning for classroom-based social contexts of pedagogy – currently these pedagogies are as likely to inhibit as promote school-based learning; and c) leadership and support in schools that allow for educational innovation and sustainable development (Kutnick, P. et al, 1997, 2005; Stephens, D. 1997, 2003).

Within the context of human capital, the World Bank has noted that improving the level of educational achievement is associated with an improvement in ‘staying on’ in school in countries of the South – with dramatic economic and social benefits. This economic rationale for education has also been acknowledged in the ‘Education for All’ (EFA) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) 2000 related ‘Plan-of-Action’ to universalise primary and early secondary education. While this policy has been significant in the increased provision of schools in many countries of the South, the simple economic assertion of ‘more schools’ equated with increased economic activity (hence poverty reduction and increased basic education) has not guaranteed quality of provision or lower rates of failure/drop-out; it should be noted that equalising educational opportunity does not necessarily guarantee equality of outcome.

Countries in the Caribbean South, for example, are characterised by post-colonial school systems. These countries have either achieved, or are on the verge of achieving, universal primary and secondary education. In these schools, females currently have the same opportunity as males to access all levels of the educational system. However, females have out-performed males in the primary and secondary schools, and their enrolment at the University of the West Indies. Research here demonstrates that access may be increased but opportunity for all pupils to achieve is limited generally by traditional pedagogic and curricular approaches that are presented in everyday within-school and classroom processes.

Thus, traditional classroom practices have been associated with gender inequities in school achievement and a limitation of labour market opportunities.

As the World Bank has observed, current teaching practices and curricula tend to reflect outdated methods and attitudes, which preserve the rich cultural and social history of the past but do not meet the urgent requirements of the present and pressing needs of the future. Educational institutions do not seem to provide
pupils with the cognitive tools, socialisation and labour market skills to allow them to enter the productive sectors of either their own or other countries.

Traditional, didactic teaching practices are linked to immediate problems of school drop-out, underachievement and retention within school years. Underachieving children in these traditional classrooms tend to exclude themselves from many pedagogic interactions in the classroom and have poor social skills when interacting with their teachers or classroom peers. These relatively ‘unskilled’ underachievers are unlikely to improve in traditionally taught classrooms.

A further association between teachers’ traditional approaches and underachievement has been seen in primary and secondary schools. In studies in the United Kingdom, for example, we see a social pedagogy that is more likely to exclude large numbers of children in the classroom – their teachers, for a variety of reasons, maintaining a traditional approach and attitudes that do not allow for socially inclusive participation of all children in their classes (Blatchford, P et al (2003)). Generally, these ‘excluded’ children are not in a position to receive formative feedback about their learning, have low self-efficacy and achievement potential, and are not able to make use of classroom peers as a resource to facilitate their learning.

In order to overcome the current patterns of classroom action identified above, researchers and policy makers have sought to adapt and further develop a social pedagogic and non-traditional programme of activities to be used in the classroom by teachers and pupils in countries such as Ghana and South Africa. The basis of such a programme has also already been piloted in the South and in the North by British-based researchers. This programme works with teachers to develop children’s social inclusion abilities, and draws on a relational approach shown to improve children’s learning, motivation and attitudes. This has also been shown to work in large classes. The relational approach that serves as a social pedagogic basis for this project (itself) draws upon cognitive and social development theories and focuses on the development of supportive relationships. This approach is modelled on the development of close relationships within which trust and interpersonal security help to establish the bases for further communicative and joint problem-solving relationships. This approach is not a short-term innovation, but is co-developed over time between teachers, pupils and researchers.

Traditional classroom pedagogy, often associated with a didactic teaching style, neither allows effective relational or group work to be undertaken in classrooms nor legitimises the potential development of socially inclusive understanding among pupils or teachers. Neither does traditional practice encourage teachers to explore alternative pedagogic teaching styles. In traditional classrooms, the relationship between the social context and learning potential within those classrooms may be seen as inhibiting rather than promoting learning among children. On the other hand, if an alternative social pedagogy that is inclusive – such as relational group learning – can be initiated in classrooms (with the support of teachers), then the potential for all pupils to attain at high levels is likely to be enhanced, as will pro-school attitudes and motivation.

Three key ideas in authentic settings

There has been a tendency in educational and educational policy research to consider the effects of teaching, teacher-pupil interactions and policy innovation independently of the environment in which these innovations occur. This paper argues for classroom processes and adaptation of innovations in terms of contextual dimensions affecting classroom activity. Thus, new social pedagogic and non-traditional approaches should necessarily take account of the natural classroom setting/environment in the following manner:

a. Recognition be made of the cultural environment/community that surrounds schools in rural areas; this account will consider the role of community educational practices, gender traditions, and expectations and perceptions of the role of the school.

b. Recognition be made of current school and classroom practices, especially of the structure of daily routine and curricular expectations. Innovatory practices that support social pedagogic and non-traditional approaches need to be used to complement many existing practices rather than challenging them.

c. Recognition be taken of traditional practices that often exclude or differentiate pupils, especially with regard to gender and ethnicity; for example, specific traditions/practices that separate pupils rather than bring them together (such as provision of learning tasks that do not consider the social/grouping context within which the tasks occur).

Current international research demonstrates that successful programmes based on social pedagogic and non-traditional approaches (leading to increased attainment and more pro-social and pro-school behaviour and attitudes) must be developed and adapted within real/authentic classrooms (rather than at policy or theoretical levels).

Three key ideas: meeting teacher and pupil concerns

Practical as well as research-based evidence suggests that teachers and pupils may have doubts about, and difficulties implementing, new social pedagogic and non-traditional approaches to work in classrooms, especially with regard to forms of group work such as co-operative learning. Teachers’ concerns about these innovative
approaches include the loss of control, increased disruption and off task behaviour; beliefs that children are unable to learn from one another; that these approaches are time consuming and do not involve all pupils; that teachers and pupils may become drawn away from their curriculum; and that pupils, themselves, may not trust one another.

These concerns may reflect the failure to construct meaningful settings in which these alternative approaches can take place; for example, one British study (Blatchford, P. op. cit.) found many teachers had ‘instructed’ their pupils to work in groups but, when asked, none had provided training for their pupils in group working skills. Under these circumstances, considerable ambiguity of purpose is likely to result in insecurity among teachers and pupils and consequent effects on outcomes. On the other hand, when teachers and their pupils are involved in the adaptation and development of social pedagogic approaches, for example, taking ownership and responsibility, many of the doubts and concerns cited above become the focus for discussion and innovation in the classroom.

Further problems reported by teachers while attempting to implement social pedagogic approaches concerned the selection and design of effective tasks and task structures that legitimise less formal interactions in the classroom and that lead to possible increased levels of conflict when pupils engage in discussions. These further problems suggest a need for training in group and interactive skills under normal classroom conditions, with teachers’ involvement and adaptation of teaching styles and attitudes. There is clearly a role here for Teachers Colleges working with pre-school trainees and in-service units supporting serving teachers.

Conclusions

In the broad attempt to meet a number of Millennium Development Goals, this paper focusses in particular on the adaptation, development and use of social pedagogic and non-traditional (teaching and learning) approaches by teachers and researchers for use in primary school classrooms of rural areas of the Commonwealth. The adaptation, development and use of these approaches should challenge traditional, post-colonial classroom structure, which has been associated with discriminatory levels of participation and achievement in schools.

The paper challenges teachers and pupils to develop teaching and learning activities in their classrooms, based on socially inclusive and interactive principles – and expects to find corresponding improvement in attainment, less discriminatory outcomes, and changes in attitude to schools and schooling by pupils and teachers. If these approaches are successful in classrooms, we are more optimistic of the role education can play in poverty reduction, the improvement in basic education and less gender differentiation. Further, as social pedagogic/non-traditional approaches are developed, a number of ‘expert’ teachers capable of sustaining their improved teaching will become an educational asset for other teachers, schools, education ministries and departments of teacher education.

References


Biographical notes

Dr Vena Jules is senior lecturer in education at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus, and Trinidad and Tobago.

Dr Anthony Layne is senior lecturer in education and acting head of department at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill campus, Barbados.

Professor Peter Kutnick is professor of psychology and education at King’s College, University of London.

Professor David Stephens is professor of education at the University of Brighton, United Kingdom.