

Perceptions of the primary curriculum in Jamaica: One size fits all?

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The attainment of Education for All (EFA) goals is crucial to the productivity of any country. However, attaining these goals cannot be realised unless due consideration is given to the inputs and processes required to achieve such goals. As indicated by Marzano (2003), research has shown that the most influential factor in impacting students' achievement is a guaranteed and viable curriculum. In this article, the revised primary curriculum (RPC) used at Grades 1–3 in Jamaican primary schools is examined against the background of two EFA goals: (i) ensuring access to quality primary education; and (ii) improving the quality of education.

The study that guided this article sought to ascertain the views of Jamaican public school teachers of Grades 1–3 (the first three years of primary education) on the outcomes being achieved in relation to quality basic education. This qualitative study was conducted by collecting data from 11 in-service teachers who had experience delivering the RPC at Grades 1–3 for at least two years. Data was collected through one focus group interview and five individual interviews. The group and individual interviews were transcribed, sorted and coded, and the themes were identified. The main findings reveal that teachers felt the RPC for Grades 1–3 needed to be reviewed in light of its content and how teachers are prepared to implement the strategies of the curriculum.

Background

For the last 19 years successive governments in Jamaica have been reassessing and reforming curricula offerings in an effort to improve quality educational outcome for its people (Knight and Rapley, 2007). One such curricula reform effort was the Primary Education Improvement Project (PEIP), which started in 1993 and which led to the revision and implementation of curricula at the lower and upper levels of the primary education system in 1999. This project was aimed at establishing a system to monitor the performance of all pupils in key primary grades and equipping primary school teachers with the skills that will enable them to provide quality learning experiences to all pupils (MoE, 2001).

More specifically, the new curriculum, the RPC, was developed on the basis that students needed to understand the relevance of what they are learning and should be able to make connections between subject areas and society in order to achieve quality learning outcomes (Mitchell, 1999). This curriculum was thereby aligned with achieving aspects of two EFA goals: namely access to quality primary education' and improvement in quality education.

Despite the implementation of the RPC in 1999, several questions remained: are teachers at Grades 1–3 equipped with the skills to provide quality learning experiences for students? Are students able to make connections between subject areas, and are students achieving quality learning outcomes? According to Wahab (2010), although Jamaica has a strong record in basic education improvement programmes and high levels of enrolment at the primary level, it faces serious challenges in its efforts to provide quality learning opportunities and achieve high levels of literacy and numeracy. Consequently, at the major transition points of the education system, a substantial number of children are underprepared to access the next level of learning (PIOJ, 2012).

At the lower primary level (Grades 1–3), students exhibit low reading abilities that do not improve as they move up the primary grades (Carlson, 2002). The results of the Grade 4 Literacy Test (2011–12) support this point, as 28 per cent of the students who sat it did not achieve mastery (MoE, 2011–12). Furthermore, a recent report on the analysis of the global competitiveness of Jamaica indicates that the quality of primary education fell by 12 per cent between 2011 and 2012 (PIOJ, 2012).

A child-centred approach

The RPC at Grades 1–3 represents a fully integrated curriculum that is underpinned by theories of child-centredness. Child-centred education is entrenched in progressive educational theory, which prioritises learning by doing and attainment of each person's goals (Darling, 1994). In it, emphasis is placed on creativity, activities, 'naturalistic' learning, real world outcomes and experiences. Learning experiences should include co-operative behaviours (such as group work) and self-discipline, and the teacher should serve as a guide for students in their problem-solving and scientific projects. On this view, an integrated curriculum in the Jamaican context, and its delivery on the part of teachers, must be characterised by high regard for the interests, needs, feelings and opinions of pupils.

The problem, however, is that classrooms in Jamaican public schools are characterised by large class sizes and limited resources. More fundamentally, levels of resources vary across Jamaica's schools and yet, under the centralised education system, each school is given the same curriculum to deliver. At a time when some schools have high performance rates while others are struggling (Knight and Rapley, 2007), it might be advisable to tailor curriculum to context: perhaps in relation to facilities and space available, expertise of teachers and ability levels, and experiences of students.

Adapted from 'One size fits all: Perceptions of the revised primary curriculum at grades one to three in Jamaica', *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 9(1), 2014.

Teachers' views on curriculum and quality of instruction

The research questions guiding the focus group and individual interviews were as follows:

- What are teachers' perceptions of the RPC at Grades 1–3 in achieving quality primary education?
- To what extent is the RPC helping students to achieve quality learning outcomes?

From the data², five main themes emerged. These were:

1. Curriculum content and structure
2. Teacher preparation
3. Teacher professionalism
4. One-size-fits-all curriculum and context
5. Curriculum fitness for purpose

In summary, the participating teachers felt that:

- The content and structure of the curriculum needed revision as the content was too advanced for the age-group
- There was content overload and, as an integrated curriculum, students had difficulty making connections between the concepts and the different subject areas

Jamaica's existing primary curriculum

Primary education in Jamaica is offered in public primary, all-age, and primary and junior high schools, as well as in private (preparatory schools) schools in Grades 1–6.

Currently, the RPC at Grades 1–3 is fully integrated using the theme 'Me and My Environment'. There are two main components that form the basis of instruction: integrated studies and 'Windows'. Integrated studies lessons are planned using the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes drawn from all the subject areas, including the arts and information and communication technology (ICT). This approach to learning has been utilised to best help students achieve improvement in quality learning outcomes.

Special time slots referred to as 'Windows' have been designated for the development of numeracy and literacy skills, as these are key indicators of improved quality education. According to the Grades 1–3 Curriculum Guide (1999), 'this approach is considered necessary, as pupils' performance in both language arts and mathematics has remained consistently low over the years' (p. xi). The Windows sessions are used for:

- Introducing skills necessary for learning in particular areas of the integrated content
- Reinforcing skills introduced in integration
- Teaching areas not included in the integrated content
- Providing opportunities for daily reading and writing
- Assessing pupils' performances in language arts and mathematics

- They were not consulted in the development of this curriculum and that is why these issues³ exist
- School principals did not have the skills to lead the process of training or to provide the support needed

Further to these points, it became evident that some teachers were not adequately trained to utilise the integrated curriculum, which led to teacher frustration, evident in the teachers' inability to write appropriate lesson plans and facilitate lessons in an integrative manner. Some teachers also did not display professionalism in how they prepared for the teaching of their students. This was evident in their lack of participation in writing lesson plans and, where they had written plans, their inability to deliver them creatively.

The issues relating to curriculum content and structure raised by the teachers then give rise to the following questions: is the RPC truly an integrated curriculum? How was the content of the RPC determined, and who were the stakeholders involved in determining the content and structure of the curriculum that was designed to achieve quality basic education?

It is evident from the data that urgent training in the area of integration needs to be undertaken if this curriculum is to be used to assist in achieving the EFA goals relating to quality. Leadership at the school level should aid in this process. Fullan and Pomfret (1977) noted that a key ingredient in successful implementation is leadership at the local and national level. Participants seem to support this view, as they indicated that some principals try to offer support but simply don't have the skills. To aid the process, the Ministry of Education could provide sample lesson plans that teachers could utilise.

In expressing their views on whether the RPC was achieving quality outcomes, participants indicated that the RPC at Grades 1–3 was not achieving its intended outcomes of assisting students to be literate and numerate. Participants felt that the developers of the RPC had good intentions but that these intentions need to be revisited as they relate to the alignment between what is included in the curriculum, how the intentions are communicated and the strategies implemented to ensure that quality outcomes are achieved.

Participants also noted that it is the slow students who are most affected by the misalignment between the different areas of the curriculum enacted to achieve quality outcomes. They highlighted that the way the outcomes of the RPC are assessed disadvantage one group over another. According to the participants, although an integrated curriculum allows students to be more verbally expressive, the examinations are not so structured and therefore students with low reading levels are always at a disadvantage. The results of examination at this level indicate that Jamaica continues to experience low levels of literacy and numeracy (PIOJ, 2012). This suggests that there is a misfit between the curriculum and the purposes as well as the assessment practices utilised to judge outcomes.

In the words of two participants, the curriculum structure and its delivery by some teachers utilises a one-size-fits-all approach. Participants indicated that some teachers use the same lesson plan year after year without any 'real planning' or allowance for creativity and integration, and some of the topics suggested by the curriculum did not cater to the lived experience of rural students versus urban students.

Conclusion and recommendations

The data presented in this article suggests that at the lower primary level the current curriculum is not leading to quality educational experiences for all, and therefore needs to be reviewed in terms of its content and training for implementation. There needs to be better alignment between the goals of the curriculum and the strategies enacted to achieve them.

First, any new curricula introduced in the education system must possess a rigorous implementation plan for the training of all who will use the curriculum. Monitoring and evaluation systems must also be put in place to hold individuals who have been trained accountable.

Second is the need for the use of technology in aiding effective curriculum implementation. Knowledge regarding training should not only reside at the central administrative office but, for effectiveness as well as cost-effectiveness, should be easily accessible at the local level as well. The need currently exists for training materials to be available that provide sample lesson plans, methods and examples of how users could adapt the curriculum to suit their school and its pupils.

If urgent steps such as these are not taken to address the issues teachers are facing with the RPC, we will continue to see its unintended use – as was the case with preceding Foundations of Self Reliance and Self Development curricula (Bailey et al., 1998). The unintended use of a curriculum developed to improve literacy and numeracy will likely result in Jamaica not achieving the EFA goals by 2015.

Endnotes

- 1 Prior to the implementation of the RPC at Grades 1–3, an evaluation of the curricula in use was carried out by Bailey, Brown and Lofgren (1998) in 50 schools across the island. Results from the evaluation study indicated that the overall performance of students was low: approximately 50 per cent of the students were reading far below grade level; the teacher played the dominant role in the classroom; strategies did not cater to different cognitive levels; there was inappropriate use of instructional materials; and there was little effort to integrate content across subject areas. Further results from the study indicated that the curriculum was viewed as suitable and relevant. The RPC was therefore developed to address the identified weaknesses so that outcomes for EFA in relation to improved literacy can be achieved.
- 2 The full data, presented in descriptive narrative using pseudonyms for participants, is presented in *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 9(1), 2014.
- 3 During the development of the RPC, Bailey and Brown (1997) reported that there was a 'noticeable' absence of teachers from the curriculum review team. As Jamaica moves forward to achieve EFA goals of access to quality primary education and improvement in quality education, a functional partnership among all stakeholders must be established. This means that teachers must be involved in the curriculum development process.

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