

The Role of Teacher Education in Supporting the Transformation of Early Childhood Education in Jamaica

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This article focuses on the role of teacher education programmes in transforming early childhood education in Jamaica. With less than 30% of Jamaica's early childhood teachers (for children birth to five years) trained, quality of practice is a major issue that has stifled the continued development of the sector. I argue that teacher education programmes must be aligned with broader sector goals and initiatives and that pre-service teachers must be immersed in realistic, rather than generic, learning experiences that will allow them to transfer theory to practice. Locally obtained and derived research should be at the helm of Jamaica's teacher training programmes. Cultural relevance is important if future teachers are to be successful in teaching in Jamaica's diverse early childhood classrooms. Additionally the current teacher education framework and its heavy leaning toward theory must be usurped by strengthened teacher education programmes that allow our pre-service teachers to be engaged in practice experiences that are rich, varied and relevant to the needs of the students.

Introduction

Within the past forty years, the early childhood sector (specifically for children from birth to five years) in Jamaica has undergone considerable change where the system has been challenged to improve on its successes and effectiveness in an era that has become increasingly diverse, demanding, technologically driven and financially constrained. However, in spite of the many challenges, significant strides have been made where, among other things; the Early Childhood Commission (ECC) was established, student enrolment has increased to over 90% for children ages three to five years, partnerships with noteworthy organisations have been built and maintained, curriculum reform has been achieved, and more importantly many of our more vulnerable children have been provided with opportunities to break out of the cycle of poverty, and at the very least be given the chance to experience success later on in life (Davies, 2013; Leo-Rhynie, 2013).

Despite the dearth of funds, in recent years, the support of early education in Jamaica has been tremendous from both the Government, and more so private organisations in order to ensure that further improvements in the early childhood system continue to be reaped (Leo-Rhynie, 2013). Through changes in policy, partnerships and support from many local and international bodies, schools have been built, public education programmes have been promoted, and hundreds of pre-trained teachers in the system have received vocational training in Early Childhood Care and Development in order to meet Jamaica's minimal requirement of working in early childhood institutions.

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The focus on the teachers as an integral aspect of the early childhood system has consistently been highlighted as a key factor in the way forward for Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Jamaica, particularly in light of the fact that the majority of the persons staffing early childhood institutions do not possess professional teacher training qualifications. Jamaica currently has over 8,000 trained and pre-trained teachers with varying levels of qualifications (ranging from vocational training to post graduate studies) who work in the over 2,600 ECE institutions across the island (Gleaner, 2012). Approximately 90% of the teachers meet the minimum qualification standards for teaching at the early childhood level. With numbers of about 4,000, these pre-trained teachers with minimal vocational training dominate the early childhood sector (JIS, 2010). Diploma-trained teachers are the second largest subset, representing 22% of the teachers in the system. Teachers trained to the Masters and Bachelor levels are about six hundred or roughly 9%.

While for many decades, the good intentioned pre-trained teachers have “held the fort” and manned the system, with some degree of success, it is not surprising to recognise the urgency of current leaders in the field who have highlighted the need to upgrade teacher qualifications as an issue of dire concern.

From a Jamaican standpoint, with 25% of the teachers in the system trained to the diploma and bachelor level, it is fair to say that there are far more professionally qualified teachers in the system now than ever before, especially when compared to a decade ago. Despite this, Professor Samms-Vaughan, former Chairman of the Early Childhood Commission, the organisation responsible for the oversight of early childhood institutions in Jamaica, has consistently maintained that there is no room for complacency. While this is indeed a move in the right direction, the majority of these trained teachers are employed in Government-owned infant schools/departments or privately-owned pre-schools and preparatory schools. Needless to say this practice perpetuates inequity and elitism in education whereby children of more affluent families are given opportunities to have a better head start in life over their less fortunate counterparts. The ripple effects of this dilemma are vicious especially in light of the fact that some of the more vulnerable children, particularly those in poorer communities, have a significantly reduced chance of being taught by a professionally trained and qualified teacher in the first five years of life, a fact which may have an impact on their future likelihood of success (Samms-Vaughan, 2008). It is the aspiration to stem this inequity and inequality in early education why emphasis is being placed on improving the sector.

As outlined by Samms-Vaughan’s longitudinal studies and as affirmed by extant arguments, significant and sustained benefits exist for children who have access to quality early childhood programmes. According to UNICEF-Jamaica, quality early childhood programmes, seek to improve both children’s readiness for primary education and learning outcomes in selected curricular areas in primary education, such as child rights and life skills-based education. Special attention will be paid to the development of gender-sensitive, interactive and child-centred teaching and learning methodologies (n.d.).

The benefits of programmes emphasising outcomes and embracing these philosophies cannot be over stated. Research has consistently maintained that children who have access to quality early childhood care and education are more ready and more likely to succeed in primary school and are more likely to finish secondary school. Additionally, they also display greater cognitive function, have higher IQ scores are less likely to be held back in school, less likely to require special education intervention, and are less likely to become truant or engage in criminal

activities (Anderson et al, 2003; Barnett, 1998; Heckman, 2006; Nores & Barnett, 2010; Reynolds et al., 2001).

It is for these reasons that improving the quality and quantity of Jamaica's early childhood teachers has been at the fore of the drive to improve the current state of the early childhood sector. As many stakeholders have recognised, a critical variable that must be considered in order to improve the system is to address the quality of the persons staffing the system. Admittedly while research has not been consistent in establishing or dismissing the correlation between teacher qualifications and programme quality, one fact that has been consistent is that there is a strong correlation between early childhood teachers' understanding of the importance of child development, child psychology and developmentally appropriate pedagogy and how these relate to academic achievement (Barnett, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Early et al., 2006).

In light of the following, this policy paper suggests that a major part of the transformation of the Jamaican early childhood sector rests with the development of teacher training initiatives and programmes that support the immediate needs of the sector. This article also argues that a holistic approach needs to be taken to address the unique cultural factors affecting early childhood education. Through this, teacher education programmes that emphasise child development and its importance and relevance to classroom instruction and practice are crucial. Additionally programmes must be reflective of, and aligned with the broader goals of early childhood transformation initiatives. This will further support the development of the sector and allow the said goals to be achieved.

Methodology

The data gathered for this paper are derived from a meta-synthesis of extant literature germane to teacher education and early childhood education from both a Jamaican and international perspective. Systematic reviews as defined by Carney and Geddes (2002) refer to the process of synthesising empirically validated research studies (usually peer reviewed) about a given topic which then allows for a wider interpretation and a deeper understanding of the findings. This process leads to generating new theories or concepts. For this article, while attempts were made to predominantly use peer-reviewed journal articles, because of the dearth of literature that speaks to early childhood education in Jamaica, a wider scan was conducted where information from newspaper articles, the Ministry of Education and the Government of Jamaica information news service (JIS) was also used.

The primary research question which guided the research articles selected for analysis was: how can teacher education aid in the transformation of early childhood education in developing countries? The steps for conducting systematic reviews, as suggested by Bettany-Saltikov, (2010) guided the search, selection and analysis process of the data used for this article. These steps are as follows:

1. Establish criteria for selection of articles and other sources prior to commencing data search.
2. Peruse newspaper article archives, read reference lists, and use key terms (and their synonyms) in scholarly search engines to ascertain the articles relevant to the primary question.
3. Assess the quality of the selected articles.
4. Extract the data in the selected articles germane to the primary research question.

- 5 Synthesise the data to provide a response to the question.

The Historical Context of Early Childhood Education in Jamaica

This article presents the history of the early childhood sector in Jamaica because the formative years of the system continues to directly impact and influence the current practices of the sector today.

The history of early childhood education in Jamaica, as with many other Caribbean islands, suggests that it had the humblest of beginnings. Admittedly, though many changes and improvements have taken place in the past few decades, it is still not uncommon to witness questionable early childhood practices across pockets of the island.

For many years, early childhood education was given scant attention by government leaders and officials. In fact, as with other West Indian islands, education in Jamaica, and its dependencies, was first embraced by the church as an area of importance (though often it was used as a means of indoctrination and gaining members). In the mid 1930's a parish rector, Henry Ward, established Jamaica's first public nursery for children whose parents had left them uncared for while they went to work in the banana fields. This, according to Ward, was needed as many of these children faced imminent danger in being left on their own for several hours each day (Morrison & Milner, 1995).

As with many schools, catering to young children at the time, this nursery was staffed by untrained women who were predominantly members of the church. This practice continued for several decades and ultimately evolved into many of these women branching out on their own. In this, they would take in children at their own homes by providing child care and later, by extension, schooling. It was, and currently still exists, where parents who worked outside the home, would depend on these private home caregivers to teach their children. Essentially, these "home schools" flourished and rapidly grew in numbers and came to be known as basic schools, because they provided the basic academic skills young children needed to learn (Commissong, 1999).

In the 1960's, the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, a philanthropic organisation in the Netherlands, earnestly seeking a project to sponsor, took on the charge of working with Jamaican officials in streamlining and strengthening the very ad hoc and disorganised state of the early childhood sector (Commissong, 1999). The project, under the guidance of D.R.B. Grant, labelled as the father of the early childhood movement in Jamaica, set about to improve the quality of the sector through emphasis on best practice, improved facilities and teacher training. As a teacher educator affiliated with the University of the West Indies, Grant, was keenly and specifically interested in improving the quality of teaching because he understood the impact and the difference quality teaching could have on the lives of poor children.

Massive professional development initiatives were undertaken with the aim of improving teaching practices to reflect best practice in the field. Years later, this initiative ultimately resulted in the development of the first early childhood teacher education programme in Jamaica. In the 40 years since, basic schools continue to flourish. As it stands there are over 2600 early childhood institutions across Jamaica, a number that increases on a daily basis. As previously mentioned, many of these basic schools are predominantly staffed by untrained and pre-trained teachers (known locally as practitioners) who often struggle with, and who essentially lack, the requisite competencies to meet the challenges of Jamaica's diverse early childhood classrooms (Davies, 2013; UWI, n.d.). As Grant suggested over 50 years ago, and as reiterated by current

leaders in the early childhood sector, teacher training is a significant aspect in the move toward Jamaica's development of an effective, well-functioning early childhood system.

Teacher education in Jamaica

Though several definitions have been suggested, for purposes of this paper teacher training is defined as a programme of study offered to in-service and pre-service teachers which exposes them to content, skills and dispositions needed to effectively meet the needs of students from the early childhood through tertiary years.

Though recent arguments in the past few years have sought to challenge the relevance of teacher education, very few, especially those in developing nations, can dispute the impact quality teacher training has on transforming schools, by extension the lives of our citizens, and essentially contributing to social and national development (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Rowe, 2003; Talbert-Johnson, 2006). For small, developing, low-resource countries, such as Jamaica, we recall all too well the low national literacy rate and inequity in education that existed for us to dismiss or make light of the necessity and importance of broad-based teacher training initiatives. Further to this, research findings have clearly stated that there is a strong correlation between quality teacher training and improved social markers such as entrepreneurship, literacy rates and social development; milestones of which many developing nations are still aiming to achieve (Igwe, 2011; Kankam, 2005; Wiseman Al, Sadaawi & Alromi, 2008).

From a local standpoint there may be some truth to the assertions of critics who are vicious in their attacks on the effectiveness, or lack thereof of teacher education programmes. Such critics have frequently labelled these programmes as out of touch, generic, expensive and ineffective, in adequately preparing teachers for the realities of the classroom (Gitomer, Latham, & Ziomek, 1999; Hess, 2002). Despite this, according to Darling-Hammond (2000), research over the past several decades, has consistently found that even with the many flaws and weaknesses, graduates of teacher education programmes are more successful in meeting the needs of their students than those without specialised training.

Globally the strengthened emphasis on teacher education has focused on improved training of teachers with the aim of meeting the needs of the system. The findings of Darling-Hammond (2000; 2006); Cochran-Smith (2005) and Rowe (2003) among others, have all highlighted the benefits of quality teacher education and its importance to social development. A significant aspect of the need for teacher education programmes rests in the arguable assumption that "teachers are made, not born" as opposed to "teachers are born, not made". This perspective advances that in order to be effective, quality teachers; aspirants must be given opportunities to take part in teacher education programmes that expose them to learning experiences, current research and pedagogical strategies that foster the development of quality teacher competencies and traits. Due to a lack of human and financial resources, for decades, Jamaica's education system was forced to assume the latter. Though many teachers' training institutions had been established, there really was a dearth in the number of teachers needed to staff the hundreds of early childhood, primary and secondary schools across the island. For several reasons, these programmes could not meet the demand of persons desiring to be admitted to college and this dilemma ultimately necessitated the need to use untrained persons to fill the several teacher vacancies in schools (Miller, 2001). With particular reference to the early childhood level, the system was and continues to be forced to employ persons without training with the hope that they would have the inborn, innate competencies to teach. This practice was, and continues to be, problematic.

As current leaders in the sector have highlighted, though this practice may have filled a need, this has not been as successful as they would have hoped. Essentially, the conclusion drawn is that there is a tremendous need for quality, professionally-trained teachers to support the goal of an efficiently organised system. This, according to Talbert-Johnson (2006) is at the core of quality training programmes. As she suggests; *“Teacher education programs are at a critical link for the preparation of teachers who possess an ethical stance regarding the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required to intervene effectively with all students. Therefore, teacher education is taking center stage in the discussion relevant to teacher quality and its effectiveness on the achievement of diverse students....”*

Within the past few decades, significant strides have been made in education and as such the use of untrained graduates (university graduates, without specialised teacher training) to teach has been significantly reduced (particularly at the primary and secondary levels). As the early childhood sector has not been so fortunate, many of our schools continue to be staffed by ill-prepared practitioners who do not have the skills needed to meet head on the demands of the classroom. This dissonance is what has essentially propelled leaders in the field to appeal for the implementation of higher practice standards and the improved training of teachers as a means of developing the sector.

The emphasis on teacher training is critical to the improved development of Jamaica’s early childhood sector because, as posited by Hagan et al (2003) graduates of quality teacher training programmes have an advantage over their pre-trained counterparts. The authors’ findings suggest that for those whose pre-service educational experiences are reflective of current research in education, they are far better prepared to meet the unique challenges they may encounter in the classroom. For instance, one such challenge as highlighted by Taylor (2010) and Talbert-Johnson (2006), relates to the need to understand and embrace cultural differences in the classroom. According to the authors, teacher training provides future teachers with the skills needed to use and build on learner diversities in the classroom.

The findings of Rowe (2003) also support this presumption. In Rowe’s research he explored the role of teachers in students’ academic and socio-emotional development. His findings suggest that “quality teachers” and by extension quality teacher training is important as these determining factors have a significant impact on students educational outcomes. Essentially, “quality teachers” and their teaching practices are shaped by their educational and professional development opportunities and these learnt competencies are then transferred to the classroom.

What does the ideal Early Childhood specialist look like?

According to Colker (2008), when focusing on the ideal characteristics of the early childhood expert, emphasis is often placed on the personal traits combined with quality specialised professional training which provides the practitioner with the requisite skills and competencies to understand and to deal with the unique behavioural, developmental and academic needs of young children. From a local perspective, it is felt that teachers with at least a teaching diploma or bachelor’s degree are capable and knowledgeable enough to be the lead teachers. Further to this, teachers must also be good observers, possess excellent organisational skills, be good communicators that allow them to reach both the children and the parents during instruction and consultations respectively (Colker, 2008; Kane, 2008; Simms, 2010).

Interestingly within the past two decades, a major shift in the qualities of the ideal early childhood specialist has occurred where technological proficiency has been included as a

necessary skill. Undoubtedly our changing society has warranted that teachers possess technological skills as essentially these will allow them to keep up with the changing modes of teaching, learning, communication and ultimately will allow them to remain relevant in a technologically-driven world.

In response to the unique needs and requirements of the profession, early childhood teacher training programmes, both locally and internationally, have consistently endeavoured to develop programmes that engender in graduates the qualities needed to be successful teachers and which are reflective of the ideal early childhood specialist.

While not specifically used as a guide, it is fair to state that in the local context the desired traits for early childhood teachers are similar to those established by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), through their standards for teacher preparation programmes. The Association focuses on nine core values for professional preparation which implicitly specifies the core values for teachers in their practice (2009). According to the NAEYC (2010), early childhood specialists must:

1. Be knowledgeable in the use of developmentally appropriate practices in the classroom.
2. Be aware of the importance of the physical, social and emotional environment in promoting learning.
3. Develop strategies to facilitate students' acquisition of basic Mathematical concepts.
4. Utilise a cadre of strategies that support students' acquisition of literacy skills.
5. Develop a repertoire of skills to assess students.
6. Build a bank of strategies that can be used to support children with alternate learning styles.
7. Embrace cultural diversity in the classroom.
8. Understand trends and issues in the field.
9. Have comprehensive knowledge of the early childhood curriculum.

In the Jamaican context and similar to other countries, there are also legal and professional guidelines used to establish the desired characteristics of early childhood pre-trained teachers. Through the passage of the Early Childhood Act in 2003, the Government of Jamaica specified the legal requirements that all early childhood specialists must meet. Additionally, the ECC, through its stipulated Standards for Management of ECE institutions, has also implicitly highlighted the traits and characteristics of the ideal pre-trained teachers. According to the ECC, all pre-trained teachers must possess the dispositions that will allow children to succeed. They explain it is important that "The staff at early childhood institutions has the characteristics, training, knowledge, skills, and attitude, to help children achieve their full potential" which is acquired through studies, training and professional development (ECC, 2007, p 13).

The Framework of Early Childhood Teacher Education in Jamaica

Teacher training in Jamaica is done in a unique way. In this, eight individual teachers colleges across the island come together to form what is known as the Teachers Colleges of Jamaica (TCJ), a body sponsored by the Government of Jamaica and overseen by the Joint Board of Teacher Education (JBTE), the organisation responsible for certification of teachers and the development of teacher education. The rationale for this partnership is fairly simple in that it is believed that through collaborative engagement and effort, there is greater efficiency,

maintenance of higher accreditation standards, strengthened programme content and essentially improved “capacity and capability of colleges” (Teachers Colleges of Jamaica, 2012).

Of the eight members of the TCJ, currently six of them provide teacher training in early childhood education. Generally, all programme specialisations follow a similar framework. Previously, full-time programmes had duration of three years and would allow students to earn a teachers’ diploma. Within the past five years, with the current thrust by Jamaica’s Ministry of Education to ensure the improved quality of teachers, amendments were made to the Education Act which stipulate the bachelor’s degree as the minimum qualification for teachers. This requirement made it necessary for teacher education programmes to offer the four-year bachelor’s degree in the colleges.

The current teacher education framework as stipulated by the Joint Board of Teacher Education outlines four distinct areas for all teacher training programmes. In this, 20% of course content for a bachelor’s degree covers general education, 30% deals with professional studies, 45% is related to the specialisation courses and 5% is allocated to course electives (Teachers Colleges of Jamaica, 2012).

Aligning teacher education programmes to support the needs of Jamaica’s early childhood sector

Preparing teachers for the real world

A significant feature that strengthens or minimises the success of teacher education programmes is how well programmes are aligned to the realities of the real world (Lehesvuori, 2013; Public Agenda, 2000; Ramsey, 2000) and how easily students can transfer their knowledge gained to their teaching experiences. Interestingly this individualised approach can be both advantageous and disadvantageous. From a Jamaican standpoint and as noted in other countries, one might argue that current teacher-training initiatives are out of touch and not reflective of the majority of our schools. The heavy emphasis on theory needs to be usurped by strengthened competency based assessment models (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Oonk, 2009; Public Agenda, 2000). From a local standpoint, it has consistently been noted that a major weakness has been the lack of understanding of child development. Anecdotal evidence indicates that many pre-service and in-service teachers have minimal understanding of this extremely important aspect of their practice. A greater focus on child development, holistically, will undoubtedly have a positive impact on teachers’ practice. Having a more in-depth understanding of how children develop, grow and are shaped by the social, emotional and cultural landscape will essentially provide teacher education graduates with the requisite skills needed to be more successful in Jamaica’s classrooms.

A major challenge that consistently reveals itself in the Teaching Practicum component of programmes, is that many pre-service teachers are able to cite, quite eloquently, philosophical and psychological theories but struggle to transfer the said theoretical concepts to teaching and learning experiences. A considerable part of this has been with how teacher education programmes are structured. As it stands, many of the courses are heavily theory based, with one or two micro-teaching experiences interspersed throughout with an intense practice experience in the final semester of the fourth year. In this, students are placed in a school for 3 months. The current model of teacher training needs to be transformed to reflect a more balanced approach that also focuses on practical experiences.

Locally, the current teacher education programme framework has been in existence for decades and even though our schools have changed, children have evolved and experiences are different, our teacher training programmes have virtually remained the same. With the exception

of upgrading teacher qualification from a three-year diploma to a four-year bachelor's degree, there still remains the heavy leaning on content and theory, with a twelve-week practicum experience in the final year of the programme. This dissonance between teacher education programmes and reality needs to be addressed if the trajectory of early childhood education is to be changed.

Situating teacher education in the Jamaican context

Another aspect that needs to be addressed is the unique challenges faced by Jamaican teachers in Jamaican classrooms. Current understandings of culture have revealed that cultural variances have a significant impact on student learning (Gay, 2002). With the increased output of locally-produced educational and child development research, teacher education programmes are essentially obligated to use these findings to strengthen and undergird our teacher training initiatives.

For example, poverty, malnutrition and crime, which sadly have marred the Jamaican landscape for many years, impact the lives of our children in numerous ways. It is not uncommon to hear pre-service teachers complain about the difficulties they have in meeting the needs of children from such circumstances, as they feel unable to relate to them, are challenged in understanding the homes, families and communities they come from and struggle with tailoring instruction for meeting those who have alternate learning styles.

Interestingly, Samms-Vaughn's Profile Project (2008), a longitudinal study following the lives of several hundred Jamaican children for approximately ten years has provided very detailed insight into several ways poverty, maternal traits and social conditions affect young children. The findings have revealed that Jamaica's reality is that many of our children come from extremely deprived circumstances and that the impact this has on children is significant. The unique social challenges and cultural differences should be viewed as critical in the development of programme structures and content in teacher education programmes. Courses such as, child development or even strategies related to content delivery should be undergirded by the realities of the Jamaican situation and pre-service teachers should be provided with strategies to deal with these in the classroom.

Jamaica's teacher education programmes have a responsibility to ensure that pre-service teachers are provided with opportunities to engage in experiences that are applicable and relevant to the contexts for which they are being trained. Teacher education programmes have a responsibility to ensure that locally-obtained research findings, such as that of the Profiles Project, are disseminated and that the data shape how and what is taught in these programmes.

In addition to the previous issues, our teachers are not prepared to deal with the socio-emotional issues that children come to school with. Research speaks quite clearly about the impact of socio-emotional challenges on children's academic performance (Elias & Harold, 2006; Flook, Repetti & Ullman, 2005; Zins et al, 2007). From a local standpoint there is much to be concerned about. According to the SOS Children's Village, approximately 75,000 of Jamaica's children are orphans, thousands have witnessed or been victims of violence and thousands are engaged in child labour as they help to support their families financially (n.d). Courses specifically related to socio-emotional development and mental health of young children should be critical elements of our teacher programmes. Pre-service teachers need to be exposed to a repertoire of strategies and content that they can realistically use to help such students in their practice.

Finally, the cognitive abilities and academic needs of the children also need to be considered. Having an understanding of the areas of deficiencies will allow teacher education programmes to develop courses that can readily address this. For instance, a major issue in the Jamaican early childhood sector relates to the competencies students have as they transition from the pre-primary to primary years. The evidence suggests over 70% of the children at the pre-primary level do not have the literacy nor numeracy skills to successfully meet the academic demands of primary school (MOE, Education Statistics, 2008/9).

In light of the deficiencies in student competencies, teacher education programmes are essentially obligated to ensure that pre-service teachers are provided with the skills and strategies to deal with the issues at hand. The Ministry of Education and other stakeholders have been very vocal in the need to improve the competencies of students in the key areas of numeracy and literacy. Whether through additional or strengthened content knowledge and the need to focus on methodological issues, having an understanding of the weaknesses in the skills students take from their pre-primary education, is critical if student improvements are to be made.

Opening doors for the other 75%

A critical aspect in changing the trajectory of the early childhood sector in Jamaica is undoubtedly the need to have fully trained teachers in all early childhood institutions. As previously mentioned, current statistics reveal that fewer than 30% of the teachers in these schools have a teaching diploma or more advanced qualifications (Davies, 2013).

Through aligning teacher education programmes to the Jamaican context, several variables would have to be taken into account. For instance having an understanding of the profile of current early childhood teachers would make the task easier. The data suggests that the typical early childhood practitioner is a female and approximately 45 years of age. The question is how do we provide opportunities for her to access programmes of study while taking into account the unique challenges she might be experiencing in her daily life.

Though changing, Jamaica's teacher training institutions are predominantly located in largely populated towns. Especially for those in rural communities, there is great difficulty in finding a programme that will allow them to meet their family responsibilities while at the same time advance their academic qualifications. The feminised demographics of early childhood educators, in addition to cultural norms, which view women as the main care givers in homes, have prevented many of them from relocating to areas where they can access a programme.

Within the past five years, there have been more tertiary institutions offering programmes of studies in Early Childhood education in many rural parts of the island. While this increase has certainly provided greater opportunities for those desirous of pursuing further studies there still remains a gap for many who have time and financial constraints.

Teacher education programmes must provide greater opportunities for many of our pre-service and untrained in-service teachers to be able to improve their qualifications while meeting their personal demands. Whether through distance learning, online learning or high intensity summer programmes, in order to realistically provide greater opportunities for the untrained teachers to be trained, teacher education programmes would need to be specifically designed to fit in the lives of the over 75% of untrained teachers in the system.

Teacher quality is important and teacher training makes a difference (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Rowe, 2003; Samms-Vaughn, 2008). If Jamaica's early childhood sector continues to be dominated by untrained professionals then many of our early childhood institutions will continue to be marred by a lack of quality, which inevitably would be detrimental to children. Teacher

education programmes, through the provision of flexible programme offerings and schedules are important if this issue is to be overcome.

Conclusion

Given the need to improve Jamaica's early childhood sector, the focus must be on the quality of the teachers staffing the sector and by extension, how teacher education programmes can support this initiative. Through continued review, reform and upgrading, teacher education programmes can be tailored and aligned to meet the unique developmental and academic needs of children and address the immediate needs of the sector and this will undoubtedly support the venture of an early childhood system reflective of best practice.

Very few can deny the diversities and the realities of Jamaica's early childhood system. In light of this, what is needed are programmes that adequately prepare teachers for meeting these diversities and realities. Teacher education programmes that are developed for pre-service teachers and by extension, in-service teachers, cannot and should not be generic. What is needed are programmes that are reflective of the unique cultural differences, social practices and socio-economic challenges. Understanding the issues at hand and finding ways of preparing teachers to deal with these is extremely important.

Truthfully, the past 20 years have proven we have been somewhat successful in this venture and other countries have too recognised this. Our teachers are well prepared and trained to teach. The massive teacher recruitment of thousands of Jamaica's teachers to the UK, the United States, the wider Caribbean and other countries around the world is proof that our system does result in the development of highly sought after and qualified teachers, the issue however is how well do we prepare our teachers to deal with the realities of the Jamaican context.

I argue that a review of the framework of teacher education must be done, specifically as it relates to the weighted allotment for specialised courses, content courses and professional courses. I also argue that more time needs to be given to specialised courses and that these should specifically emphasise issues in child development and be based on the needs of our children, teachers and communities. It will certainly not be an easy move. The many challenges faced at the early childhood level will not be solved overnight. I do maintain however that teacher education programmes should be at the nucleus of the transformation as we provide the resources needed to have a well functioning early childhood sector. As research has clearly stated, quality teachers make a difference and by extension quality teacher training is crucial (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Rowe, 2003; Talbert-Johnson, 2006).

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