An Inquiry into Teachers’ Perception of at Risk Students in Jamaica: A Phenomenological Approach

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ABSTRACT: This was a qualitative study designed as a hermeneutical phenomenology to explore and understand the central essence underlying the meanings and anatomy of the lived experiences of teachers dealing successfully with at risk students. The purpose of this study was to discover how teachers perceive their purpose and how they view their readiness to teach at risk students in schools. It intended to explore the challenges faced by teachers and understand how these teachers view the current challenges they face, to identify and suggest programs, policies and strategies that should prove effective in diminishing the school-related factors putting students at risk that inhibit their achievement in Jamaica. The random purposive sample used consisted of three All Age School ASTEP teachers and one principal and all participated wholeheartedly in the one-on-one interview processes which lasted for one half hours each, which were used to collect data for this study. The strategies of coding and themes using an iterative and inductive cycle of analysis were used to analyze the data and adequate measures were taken to ensure validity and reliability of the study. The findings revealed that student’s readiness, academic identity, experience levels of numeracy and literacy achievement, a culturally responsiveness classroom, love and respect are foundational to the achievement of at risk students and are key pre-requisites to their learning experiences. It was also found that low expectations of boys, stereotyping, learning and behavioral challenges affect students learning experience and technical and vocational based programmes are needed to improve curriculum relevance to at risk students. Also, it was found that mentorship, school safety and creation of an environment conducive for all students learning is foundational in catering for at risk students; teachers of at risk students must be servant teachers who advocate for students, and Music, arts, differentiated approach to in-seat and on-task behavior in the classroom add value to teacher’s effectiveness. Data driven administrative decisions, effective instructional supervision, fiscal prudence is fundamental to school success. Access to pre-service teacher education of all teachers to ensure; (a) Access to continuing professional development activities that provide modern knowledge and skills needed to teach students with diverse educational needs, and (b) The strategy concerning continuing opportunities to use emerging new methods, forms of assessment are needed. Therefore, it was recommended that meaningful, useful job-related and job-embedded professional development activities are provided for teachers of at risk students. Building a data-driven to track best practices, student achievements and teacher effectiveness with an aim at establishing a relevant, education model, which is responsive to the educational needs of all students. It was also recommended that an aggressive program be embarked upon to develop stakeholder partnerships aimed at encouraging parents to participate more in their children’s education.

KEYWORDS: At risk students, Strategies to deal with at risk student, Jamaica

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Among the issues outlined in the report of the Task Force on Educational Reform (2004) and Jamaica Vision 2030 National Development Plan needing immediate attention is at-risk students and their non-detection in our school system. This is of grave concerns and has serious implications for students learning and workforce development. Thus, serves as an inhibitor to repositioning Jamaica to be competitive in the global environment. As a consequence, policy makers are forced to focus their efforts and resources on reducing dropout rates, as well as identifying and supporting students who are at risk of dropping out of school.
and the Ministry of Education’s adopted mantra that “every child can learn, every child must learn” (UNESCO, 2009). This is a new philosophy that will guide the teaching-learning process in schools.

Many schools are under resourced, and so no child left behind requires various aspects of students’ service. Student Services is primarily provided by the guidance counselors. As well, there is no Individual Educational Program to assist students who need such assistance. An Alternative Secondary Transitional Education programme (ASTEP), which is an initiative of the Ministry of Education, designed for students who have not certified literate at the grade four Level after failing the Grade Six Achievement Test several times is successfully being implemented in the school under study. This school under study, is reaping the benefits from the implementation of specific alternative instructional path in the ASTEP programme that seeks to provide an enhancing teaching learning atmosphere for students. These success stories need to be identified, documented and shared.

About half of mental disorders begin before the age of 14. Similar types of disorders are being reported across cultures. Neuropsychiatric disorders among the leading causes of worldwide disability in young people. Yet, regions of the worlds with the highest percentage of population under the age of 19 have the poorest level of mental health resources. Most low and middle income countries have only one child psychiatrist for every 1 to 4 million people. World Health Organization. (2018). These students were described as “not ready for primary school even at the grade one level”. The statistics from the Diagnostic Test shows that the population of ASTEP students entering the school under study in 2013 ranges from 12-13 years of age and “100% sat the grade four literacy exam 3-4 times, 80% are boys, 14% are at the primer reading level, 43% are at the grade one level, 79% are at the grade two level, 7% are at the grade three level and 13% non-readers”.

According to Ormrod, (2010), this matter is compounded by the fact that the problem of at-risk students has no socioeconomic boundary. These students can be found at every level of the socioeconomic strata. However, it is the children of families at the lower socio-economic strata who represent the highest percentage of children facing this dilemma perennially. These are usually pupils of deprived, single-parent households in rural areas and are in danger of leaving school prematurely, without fulfilling their potential (Ormrod, 2010). Furthermore, an examination of the statistics revealed that males are more likely to drop out of school than their female counterparts. Anderson (2011) believes that the Jamaican education system had failed in its efforts to truly educate all who could benefit from such education. In terms of academic/educational needs, Anderson found that the need for academic achievement was as compelling for at risk individuals as for the “non-disabled” in the twenty first century.

At risk students exhibit certain typical characteristics. These are: (a) A history of academic failure; (b) Higher chronological age in comparison with classmates; (c) Emotional and behavioral problems; (d) Frequent interaction with low-achieving peers; (e) Lack of psychological attachment to school, and (f) Increasing noninvolvement with school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1995; Garnier, Stein, & Jacobs, 1997). These are especially evident in those at risk students in danger of dropping out of school. These features are discussed in details as follows:

One recurring theme that permeates the literature is that teacher quality and effectiveness is the single most important factor that affect students’ success. Thus, it is important to ascertain the common experiences of teachers who are successfully dealing with at risk students in our schools. Exploring and understanding the lived experiences of these teachers, their meanings, structures and essence will afford us a platform on which to lay our educational transformation programme. The following question was formulated to guide the research process.

The population of this research comprised All Age School teachers and principals in Clarendon, Jamaica. Of the public schools in Jamaica, 107 are Primary and Junior High Schools, 10 of which are widely distributed mainly in the rural areas of the parish of Clarendon. By law, student attendance is compulsory daily, until age 16 except for parental request. Each school has a student population of approximately 423 and a staff of 32, including one guidance counselor, one principal and one Vice Principal. That is, to every teacher there should be 13 students. This low pupil-teacher ratio is due to the exodus of parents and their children from these areas in search of better opportunities, occasioned by the current economic downturn. Thus, some schools are deemed as over-staffed. However, this ratio is not evident in every school or every class, as some classes have a student population of 35 to one teacher. The major economic activity in the area of the school under study is subsistence farming and majority of students are from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Central research question: What are the common experiences of teachers successfully dealing with at risk students at a selected All Age school in Jamaica?

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Research Design

This was a qualitative study designed as a hermeneutical phenomenology to explore and understand the central essence underlying the meanings and anatomy of the lived experiences of teachers dealing successfully with at risk students. According to Creswell (2008), it should highlight the intentionalality of consciousness where experiences encompass both the outward appearance and inward reality based on the memory, image, and meaning” (p. 52). Thus: this study sought to describe and interpret the essence of the common lived experiences of teachers dealing successfully with at risk students. It also unpacked and describe how teachers perceive their purpose and view their readiness to teach at risk students in schools.

In utilizing elements of the qualitative approach, this phenomenological design begins with an assumption, a worldview, a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning teachers ascribe to their successful experience in dealing with at risk students (Creswell, 2007). That is, from the participants own view point with a focus on the teachers’ perceptions with the aim of understanding their experiences. It
maintained was delivered to the principal. This was followed by the school was coded. A letter, detailing how ethical standards were included will be solicited to conduct the research. For confidentiality, the telephone calls and emails (Appendix B) by which their participation was solicited will be used. This was then followed by additional site visits to allow researchers to meet, familiarize in the study, if observation will be used. This was then followed by additional site visits to remind the selected participants of the dates and to establish a rapport, in order to expedite the process and ensure that data collection runs smoothly.

**Internal Validity**

Qualitative researchers must provide conclusions that have internal validity which means they are “drawn from the data and the match of these conclusions with reality” (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002, p. 33). To create a richer understanding of phenomenon being studied and to assist in establishing trustworthiness (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), qualitative researchers are encouraged to utilize multiple sources of data. This was utilized in this study to triangulate data (Anfara et al., 2002) from the interview transcripts of each of the four subjects as well as from the initial literature review, subsequent literature reviewed, and information gleaned from personal communication with the school ASTEP teachers.

**Ethical Considerations**

In a qualitative study ethical considerations are vital to assure the trustworthiness of both the process and the subsequent content (Creswell, 2007). Although this proposal was not submitted to the Institutional Review Board, prior to data collection, care was taken to ensure that the proposal met the standards of Institutional Review Board of Northern Caribbean University. This process assured that the human subjects and organization within the study were protected.

All data during the process were kept confidential and the school was labeled A for anonymity. The school principal and ASTEP teachers were only provided with an electronic version of the final document. Pseudonyms were used for the names of the teachers and the principal. Care was taken to ensure that no other information was cited that would lead to disclosure of individuals or the study site used in the study (Sieber, 1992).

The researchers treated all participants and data with the utmost respect and confidentiality. In addition, as suggested by Yin (1989), the researchers created a process to check the validity of the research report by using a data filing system that allowed someone to follow the “chain of evidence from the initial documentation through to the final report” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Before the interviews, the research disclosed both his role at Church Teachers’ College and the R.A. Shirley Institute. The research also shared that it was his fascination with the school’s presentation at the Seminar and a course requirement that were the catalysts for being particularly interested in the teachers lived experiences.

**DATA ANALYSIS, PRESENTATION, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The assumptions underlining a hermeneutic phenomenological study are that the contextual essence of human lived cultural, socio-economical and physical experiences are important in the understanding of a phenomenon. To Creswell (2008), it should highlight the intentionality of consciousness where experiences encompass both the outward appearance and inward reality based on the memory, image, and meaning” (p. 52).
In utilizing elements of the qualitative approach, this hermeneutical phenomenological approach begins with the researchers’ assumptions about the lived experience, a priori themes that constitute the lived experience. The researchers write a description of the phenomenon and in doing so identified links between the teachers’ lived experiences and the phenomenon under study. Also, the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning participants paste on their successful experience, such as dealing with at risk students (Creswell, 2007). That is, from the participants own viewpoint with a focus on the participant’s perceptions with the aim of understanding their experiences.

Thus: this approach seeks to explore and understand the central essence underlying the meanings and anatomy of the lived experiences of teachers dealing successfully with at risk students. It will therefore involve the collection, analysis, and interpretation of comprehensive narrative, audio and visual data to gain insight into this phenomenon. It also seeks to describe and interpret the essence of the common lived experiences of teachers dealing successfully with at risk students. It will also unpack and describe how teachers perceive their purpose and view their readiness to teach at risk students in schools.

This approach is highly engaging and involves a process that demands richness in its reporting of rhetoric of participant’s lived experience. At the heart of phenomenology is the purporting the existence of culture, the significance of people constructed and contingent meanings of their environment.

Research Question 1: What is the perceive purpose of teachers dealing successfully with students at risk at a selected All Age school in Jamaica?

From the data collected in the teacher and principal interview, the overarching theme that emerged from the participants were: creating a climate that empower and develop the human capital pool is paramount to enhance the holistic transformation of each party in a school; teachers must be innovative in order to effectively teach at risk students; the competence of teachers is critical to develop and deliver relevant programmes to at risk students; teachers must be advocates for at risk students by developing welfare strategies and programmes to cater for their needs; the major purpose of teachers at risk students is to ensure that the central core of their learning experiences remains teaching and learning, bridging the gaps in Early Childhood education is critical to improve the institutional failure in the education system, and the role of teacher of at risk students is multifaceted and is more than just a facilitator.

The response from participant B was: “My purpose is to facilitate the teaching and learning experiences of our students”. To participant C, purposes include: “to educate, to go beyond the call of duty at all times to make sure that students needs are met, to lobby for student’s welfare by developing welfare strategies and programmes for students”.

According to participant H, his purpose is “to create the climate that foster the opportunity for teachers and other workers to give of their best and students to achieve their full potential as they develop holistically, to help shape students to be transformed into worthwhile citizens and to help them think outside the box to address students’ needs”. “To take a ministry initiative as ours and build on it so that we can deliver quality education to our students (poor people children as one of my past principals would say)”. “To tweak and tune school programmes to cater for our student’s needs, especially our boys, we try to discover how boys learn”.

Participant L indicated that his purpose is “to educate students in both the formal and informal setting. Also to assist with the overall maintenance and development of the school and the curriculum which is offered”.

Discussion

Augustine (2014) found that the lived experiences of effective teachers successfully teaching at risk students must involve developing and maintaining a positive relationship which are foundational in the teaching learning process. Findings also suggested that additional time must be afforded to provide nontraditional instruction which is challenging but essential. These findings bring to the fore the fact that teaching and at risk students cannot be divorced from mentoring which requires more than just the minimum contact periods, but demands a great deal of time.

In addition, teachers believe that mentoring is hard work and it challenges collegial relationships. However, teachers opined that the progress of at risk students provides motivation for the teacher (Augustine, 2014). In addition, teachers also find it personally rewarding and enlightening when at risk students make progress.

It was found within the literature that on both culturally responsive education and mentoring, the importance of relationships in the mentoring process, especially for at-risk students, is well documented (Brough, Bermann, & Holt, 2013; Edwards & Edick, 2012; Gay, 2010; Karcher & Nakula, 2010; Rhodes & DeBois, 2006). Bernstein-Yamashiro and Noam (2013) argue that personal teacher-student “relationships are pivotal in the learning equation; they represent a humanizing and necessary element of education—a creative and even courageous act amid a sea of negative relationships and school structures precluding and even denouncing such care” (p. 2). Teacher of at risk students must embrace their role to build relationships that are emotionally and academically supportive. A major limitation to this study was the small sample size. The pool of participants was restricted to only those who were invited and took part in the seminar series with whom a relationship was developed. Another limitation was the short amount of time I had to complete this study. In addition, a difficulty of this study was that the researchers had some connection, experience, or stake in the situation so bracketing (setting aside all prejudgments) was required with each study participant.

Research Question 2: What are the specific characteristics of the best practices/programmes utilized daily by teachers dealing successfully with at-risk students at a selected All Age School in Jamaica?

From the data collected in the teacher and principal interview, the overarching themes that emerged from the participant’s responses when asked of programmes utilized to assess and treat students learning experiences were:

1. Data driven administrative and effective instructional supervision are key to school success.
2. School safety is paramount in creating a conducive school environment.
3. Fiscal prudence is essential in school success.
4. Creating an environment conducive for all students learning is foundational.
5. Music and other extracurricular activities enhance at risk students learning as Learning readiness experiences are foundational.
6. Mentorship is foundational in students learning experience.
7. Teachers of at risk students must be servant teachers.
8. Teachers must be advocate for students.
9. Differentiated approach to in-seat and on-task behavior in the classroom add value to students learning experience.
10. Academic identity affects students learning experiences, students experience levels of numeracy and literacy achievement are key prerequisites to their learning experiences.

There was no response from participant B whilst the responses from participant C were: “The role of the ASTEP teacher is not just a teacher and a facilitator. This involves the role of a mother, friend, and mentor. The first thing I try to do is to build a relationship with the students by developing their student profile and use it to inform teaching. This is done through observation of students in their natural environment, individual tasks, gaming, and use of positive reinforcement, ascertain their zone of proximal development, allow students expression and get them to make short, medium to long term goals. I try to understand students by getting involved in their activities, create positive environment, give them special privileges, incentives, journaling and ensuring that students are comfortable by proving an environment conducive to learning so that students’ interest is raised to get them ready. These are critical to students learning”. “The actual teaching of curriculum objectives does not start until readiness activities are taken care of. These are critical to students learning”. “I must figure out how to move students from point A-B”.

The daily activities of participant H include: “administrative duties, instructional supervision, supervision of watchman, accounting and accountable officer”.

As an ASTEP teacher, the additional daily activities of participant L include coordinating a mentorship programme, conducting evening classes and operating an income generating programme.

Discussion

It is important to note that critical to all the themes identified from the participant’s response is a sense that relationships are foundational in the teaching learning and Mentoring Process. The literature shows the positive impact of building relationships with students as a foundation for classroom and school-based mentoring (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012; Karcher & Nakulla, 2010; Rhodes & DuBois, 2005). The teachers in this study demonstrated authentic enthusiasm around the relationships with their students. Teacher C shared, “I build relationship through students’ profile. It’s important to get to know the students I work with in order to help them succeed.” They seemed to accept this type of interaction with students as one of many responsibilities in the profession of education (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013).

The literature shows that when teachers teach a balanced curriculum, an integrated curriculum, differentiate instruction, content and assessment to meet individual student needs, and provide active learning opportunities for students to internalize learning, they are engaged in best practices. In this same breath, Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (2005) believe that best practice teaching should be: (i) student-centered; (ii) active; (iii) experiential; (iv) authentic; (v) democratic; (vi) collaborative; (vii) rigorous, and (viii) challenging.

It is easy to recognize classrooms that utilize best practices even at first glance. In a classroom permeated with best practices, Augustine (2014) suggest that the following should be present:

(a) Numerous project materials and books.
(b) Students are engaged and focused on their work.
(c) Teachers use collaborative and/or authentic tasks that place students at the center of the learning process often and continuously.
(d) Clustered, varied and functional seating arrangements with multi-instructional areas.
(e) Activity based, spacious classrooms, as opposed to classrooms settings suited for lectures.
(f) Teachers are actively engaged with different groups and students are anxious to enlist visitors in their various tasks or assignments.
(g) Joyful feeling of purposeful movement, industrious thinking and a vital and vibrant atmosphere and environment.

Augustine (2014) found that the lived experiences of effective teachers successfully teaching at risk students must involve developing and maintaining a positive relationship which are foundational in the teaching learning process. Findings also suggested that additional time must be afforded to provide nontraditional instruction which is challenging but essential. These findings bring to the fore the fact that teaching and at risk students cannot be divorced from mentoring which requires more than just the minimum contact periods, but demands a great deal of time.

Research Question 3: What are the challenges faced by teachers dealing successfully with at-risk students at a selected All Age school in Jamaica?

From the data collected in the teacher and principal interview, the major themes that emerged from the participants were:

1. Support is critical at all levels to close the achievement gap of at risk students.
2. Resources are needed to improve the areas of learning experience for at risk students.
3. Students’ readiness is foundational to their achievement.
4. Low expectations of boys and stereotyping affect their learning experience.
5. Learning and behavioral challenges affect students learning experience and Technical and vocational based programmes are needed to improve curriculum relevance.

When asked about the current challenges faced dealing with at risk students, the participants responses were: Participant B stated that “two areas that are really challenging are the lack of resources to enhance teaching and learning and cognitive and psychomotor development of the children. Students are extremely slow in grasping concepts presented to them. Their psychomotor skills are poorly developed.” Thus, participants found that there is a relationship between these physical movements (gross and fine motor skills) and cognitive functions in that due to the under development of these physical skills they are unable to follow instructions and carry out certain activities such as playing musical instruments and correctly demonstrate skills in certain sporting activities.

Participant C stated “lack of resources, lack of vocational/skill based programs”, lack of parental support, lack of resources, reluctance of students to learn, dealing with students with learning and behavioral challenges, diverse students, culture shock, how to achieve incremental changes, students are unable to read, numeracy and literacy skills are under developed” as current challenges face in dealing with at risk students.

Participant H gave “lack of parental support, lack of resources, reluctance of students to learn, dealing with students coming from different schools with learning challenges, developmental and behavioral challenges” as challenges that are faced at school.

Discussion

The finding correlates with the literature reviewed. The literature revealed that students at risk may have a history of poor academic achievement which can be traced back to as early as primary ages (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1995; Garnier, Stein, & Jacobs, 1997). Quite often, these at risk students have not developed reading and study skills, earn lower grades, obtain lower achievement test scores, and are at higher risk of being retained in a grade level lower than their classmates (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Jozeftowicz, Arbreton, Eccles, Barber, & Colarossi, 1994; Raber, 1990; Steinberg et al., 1984; Wilkinson & Frazer, 1990).

In crying out for help, at risk students may exhibit undesirable emotional and behavioral changes. In addition, they are said to be more prone to create disciplinary challenges in class, abuse drugs, and part-take in criminal activities (Finn, 1991; Garnier et al., 1997; Jozeftowicz et al., 1994; Rumberger, 1995; U.S. Dept. of Education, 1992). These students tend to have lower self-esteem, in most instances, than their age mates who are seen as more successful.

Students who drop out of school are often associated and interact with low-achieving students. As a consequence, antisocial behaviors are eminent as they socialize in these groups (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Hymel, Comfort, Schonert-Reichl, & McDougall, 1996). These students rationalize these behaviors by arguing that school is not necessary. Thus: they are more likely to distract the attention of teachers and other students from the teaching learning process, and derail students’ academic pursuits.

It is well documented that students at risk of academic failure usually show a lack of psychological attachment to school and school culture. As a result, they show less tendency to identify with their school. They also fail to perceive themselves as an integral part of the school community by engaging in little or no extracurricular activities and chose to show their dissatisfaction with school, generally by revolts (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Hymel et al., 1996; Rumberger, 1995).

Research Question 4: What was the initial impression of the challenges teachers dealing with at-risk students face at a selected All Age school in Jamaica?

From the data collected in the teacher and principal interview, the overarching themes that emerged from the participants were: Effective school programmes are necessary for school success, ASTEP was created to give teachers more work.

The responses given by Participant B Includes: “I think that we have a good school with relatively good programs to facilitate teaching and learning”. “Our greatest issue is lack of funds to drive these programs”.

Participant C indicated ‘the welcome at school was warm, I was well received by all” while the first impression of participant H “was that it was a good school” “Initially I thought the ASTEP was something the ministry devised to give teachers a lot of work”, “An atmosphere of healthy interpersonal relationship as I was well received by all”, “and a school with a rich history”. Participant L did not respond to this enquiry.

Discussion

Lavin and Madden (n.d) identified three “general principles of effective programmes for students at risk of school failure”. One of the most important principle suggested for an effective programme is that it must be comprehensive, systematic, complete alternative programmes to take the place of traditional methods. That is, they must be well planned with a comprehensive approach to instruction. This should include detailed teacher manuals with curriculum materials, lesson guides and other supportive materials (Lavin & Madden, n.d).

Secondly, they must be intensive. That is, it should include individual assistance from a professional or individually adapted computer-assisted instruction. This explains why participants said that their first impression of the ASTEP programme was that it involved more work.

Finally, Effective programmes frequently assess students’ progress and adapt instructions to individual needs by using results to modify groupings or instructional content (Lavin & Madden, n.d)

Research Question 5: How does the presence of the ASTEP students impact the overall operation of a selected All Age school in Jamaica?

From the data collected in the teacher and principal interview, the overarching theme that emerged from the participants were:

1. Successful and effective school programme requires intense effort from teachers
2. Hardworking and creative staff for school success
3. Staff internalizing change in the education system critical to student success, culturally responsiveness classroom is needed to reach at risk students

4. Positive beliefs about pedagogy and learning by teachers is needed

5. Love and respect for students is foundational

6. Resources are needed to improve the areas of learning experience of at risk students.

The responses given by participant B was: “Our greatest issue is lack of funds to drive these programmes”. Only participant B expressed this issue.

The response given by participant H was “it is one of the most successful school within its cluster, teachers are hardworking and creative”. On the other hand, participant L did not share a comment.

Discussion

The findings correlate with the review of literature. Augustine (2014) found that the lived experiences of effective teachers successfully teaching at risk students must involve developing and maintaining a positive relationship which are foundational in the teaching learning process. Findings also suggested that additional time must be afforded to provide nontraditional instruction which is challenging but essential. These findings bring to the fore the fact that teaching and at risk students cannot be divorced from mentoring which requires more than just the minimum contact periods, but demands a great deal of time.

In addition, with the knowledge of effective teacher and student relationships (Dubois & Karcher, 2014), this model of instruction can to be explored in greater depth to explore the impact on student achievement and engagement. From this study, the depth of understanding teachers lived experiences can inform us on how to cater for students who are struggling to carry over into a change in the teacher’s attitude and strategies for his or her classroom climate and instructional strategies for all of their students.

The literature also shows that the cultural background of these children must be considered in curriculum design and delivery. The constructivist view is a key concept in this respect as it respects student differences. Also, it allows students to use their own background knowledge and experiences to make connections and learn.

This will afford students the opportunity to become active learners. This can be done by involving students in questioning, hypothesizing and drawing conclusions based on their individual learning experiences. When students possess unlimited foundation to draw upon, teachers need to help students develop a knowledge base so they have a starting point.

Research Question 6: What are the factors motivating and/ or demotivating teachers to continue the programme implemented at a selected All Age School in Jamaica to deal successfully with at-risk students?

From the data collected in the teacher and principal interview, the central theme that emerged from the participants were:

1. At risk students appreciate on-going support and exposure.

2. Teachers learn about students through their gestures, slangs and attitudes.

3. Teachers find the success of students transitioning from the ASTEP classroom to high school personally rewarding and motivating.

4. Relationship building and students readiness are fundamental to the teaching learning process.

5. At risk students need advocates for their academic assistance, problem solving guidance and facilitation is paramount to student’s success.

6. Sustained relationship with parents require strategy and follow through but is highly rewarding when done right, the strategies teachers learn from teaching at risk students transfer into other classrooms.

7. Teachers can understand students by getting involved in their activities, teaching at risk students is hard work and dealing with students give teachers a culture shock as they engage in personal talks. In addition, use of home language is a critical instructional variable for teaching at risk students so that at risk students can respond and learn despite cognition, socio-emotional and behavioral challenges. Lastly students cultural and individual identity must be supported in their learning experiences with the aid of an inclusion environment is crucial for student’s success and creating a student profile is a framework for understanding where they are coming from and how to treat with them.

The responses are reported under the sub-headings are as follows:

(A) Factors Motivating Teachers to Continue the Programme Implemented to Deal Successfully with At-Risk Students.

(i) Unforgettable experiences

In response participant B proclaimed “our GSAT results are always impressive; we do well at sports, both internal and external; whenever a child enters the school not being able to read, they eventually begin to read over time, and we have exciting cultural activities throughout the school year”.

Jamaican lifestyles to which they were unfamiliar, and engagement in extra-curricular activities and having students reap successes in inter-school competitions”.

(ii) Motivating factors that encourage participants to stay in the ASTEP programme

Participant B believe that “it is worthwhile to see these students excel because they are usually the ones who struggle, labelled, and fall between the cracks”, and also specified that “I feel fortunate to be working with these students”.

Participant C asserted that “the ASTEP classroom is like watching your baby grows from creeping to walking and then that big smile. I myself was a late bloomer went to an all age school,
pushes myself to achieve. So I enjoy working with these students some are bloomers as me but needed a push, who is better to help them than someone with that firsthand knowledge, it reminds me of the movie “Coach Carter”.

Participant H indicated “the support of teachers, focus on developing early numeracy and literacy skills”, successfully transition of students into the high school system as motivating factors that encourage him to stay in the ASTEP programme”. He said “I can only describe this experience as magic happening between grade 7 and grade 9”.

Participant L stated the fact that “the students we put in the ASTEP programme are not incapable of learning” as a motivating factor that encourage him to stay in the ASTEP programme. He also specified that “many are simply slow learners and some have developmental issues of one kind or another, they require patience and persons to genuinely care for their welfare to help them maximize their potential”.

(iii) Changes Teachers Experienced about themselves in the ASTEP Programme

Participant B stated “at first I did not believe the ministry of education mantra that ‘every child can learn, every child must learn’ but after meeting these students and started teaching them using music, I realized that they can learn. However, we cannot approach the teaching of these students in the traditional way. You must tweak what you learn in training to reach these students and think outside the box. As a result, I improvise by finding different ways to help students learn. You must have a plan as we cannot approach these students as we approach the other students and we must include music in our plans so that it can be fruitful”.

Participant C shared that “the experience that I have in the ASTEP classroom helps to build me as the teacher, it is like a learning process for me daily. I have learnt to understand teens, slangs, gestures on a wider basis. Though their reading level are below average I learnt a lot from them. It helps me to keep in close link with what goes on in the education system, help me to be more rounded by attending at least all workshops as possible to seek adequate information, aid so that I can be fully equipped to deliver to the students so that they can acquire knowledge. It helps me to be able to deal with students who have impaired intellectual ability/ learning disability”.

Participant H stated that “become confident in self, better reader, realize that the ASTEP students are just as smart as the other students, realize that they have other talents, and learn not to compare students with others”. “A paradigm shift occasioned by the realization that beyond the gender issue, boys are different from girls biologically. Boys are born with a biological disadvantage but they have the capacity to learn, the cards are stacked against boys from birth”. The responses given by participant L were: “I have developed a level of patience that I never thought I possessed. I have also become more innovative as a teacher in my effort to get students to learn at whatever cost. I have also developed competency in employing differentiated instructional techniques”.

(B) Current Challenges that Serve as Demotivating factors that Encourage Participants to stay in the ASTEP Programme

When asked about the current challenges faced dealing with at risk students, the participants responses were: Participant B stated that “two areas that are really challenging are the lack of resources to enhance teaching and learning and cognitive and psychomotor development of the children. Students are extremely slow in grasping concepts presented to them. Their psychomotor skills are poorly developed.” Thus, participants found that there is a relationship between these physical movements (gross and fine motor skills) and cognitive functions in that due to the under development of these physical skills they are unable to follow instructions and carry out certain activities such as playing musical instruments and correctly demonstrate skills in certain sporting activities.

Participant C stated “lack of resources, lack of vocational/ skill based programs”, lack of parental support, lack of resources, reluctance of students to learn, dealing with students with learning and behavioral challenges, diverse students, culture shack, how to achieve incremental changes, students are unable to read, numeracy and literacy skills are under developed” as current challenges face in dealing with at risk students.

It is important to note that participant H reported that majority of “those who have not mastered or near mastery of the grade four (4) literacy and numeracy are boys”, “those who have not received their 1st (first) choice in GSAT are boys, and who continuously fail the standardized tests are boys. Hence, ASTEP consists primarily of boys”.

Other issues reported by Participant H based on teacher’s observations were that ASTEP students were “late bloomers” who appear to have “emotional disorders, learning disorders” and “tends to see and attend school as escape, and so, want to attend school at all cost”.

Discussion

Interpreting these factors as a whole is challenging. Studies show that for many teachers, the experiences garnered from teaching at risk students transfer to other aspects of their lives and regular classroom settings (Marlowe & Page, 1999). This reflected the fact that experiences gained in teaching at risk students can increase teacher’s realization of the needs that all students may have that are often unknown to teachers. However, this requires on-going relationship with parents that requires strategy, follow through and monitoring of students’ data which is a framework that must be established. Thus, teachers dealing with at risk students require on-going professional development which teachers usually appreciate (Marlowe & Page, 1999).

This will afford students the opportunity to become active learners. This can be done by involving students in questioning, hypothesizing and drawing conclusions based on their individual learning experiences. When students possess unlimited foundation to draw upon, teachers need to help students develop a knowledge base so they have a starting point.

Teachers should provide students with emotional support and modeling behaviors, skills and attitudes. Through these, and other forms of scaffolding, teachers can help students take advantage of their strengths, skills, and knowledge to develop and learn (Marlowe & Page, 1999). Learning and problem solving opportunities based
on real-life situations can be provided to help students deal with real life challenges.

The findings raised issues with teacher training and readiness to teach at risk students. Deployment of teachers by administrators is deficiency in the school system that affects best practice. In many instances, qualifications of the teachers do not match their assigned area of teaching. An example is, many teachers improve their qualifications in social studies or guidance and counseling, in Jamaica, but are assigned to teach Mathematics, English or Science.

Globalization combined with political needs, has made the Jamaican education system a high-stakes world of standardized testing, scores, and school improvement tied to funding contracts and nationalized benchmarks. Therefore, when teachers are asking to use the differentiated approach in their classroom they are concerned that they are asked to differentiate instruction, content and environment but the tests are not differentiated to accommodate student’s needs.

The scarcity of male role models, lack of parental involvement, teacher expectations, streaming and socio-economic status have been suggested as critical factors inhibiting boys’ achievement (Reid, 2013). Reid also believes that lack of male role models is obvious as shown in the high propensity of incidence of female-headed households and their dominance of the teaching profession. Miller (1986) described this situation as feminization of the teaching profession. Miller suggested that this is the legacy of our colonial rulers in their deliberate attempt to curtail the power and influence of black males to safeguard white rule supremacy.

Research Question 7: What is your perception of the ministry’s capacity to evaluate the ASTEP programme at your school in order to make informed decisions?

A Consideration of the Study in Relation to the Researchers’ Personal Experience

The Interview Process

The process of interviewing was enlightening. The opportunity to talk to the teachers doing this work provided an insight into not only the relationships they generate with ASTEP Students they teach but also their lives as well. It was a real privilege to meet such hardworking, dedicated and compassionate educators. They demonstrated a deep sense of commitment to being more than a teacher for these students, and yet they all exhibited an authentic humility regarding their work with the students and their families.

Finding time to conduct the interviews with these busy educators was a real challenge. The initial intent was to conduct a series of four interviews with each participant based on the model outlined by Seidman (2006).

The reality of their work demands and ministry duties disturbed the sequence of the planned interviews. However, it was important to adhere to the agreements made with the study participants to keep their commitment to only a few days. Due to the fact that we had communicated often through email, there was a comfortable sense of connection with the participants. In the interview process, the teachers were warm and welcoming and quickly opened up about their experience.

Each interview took place in a site determined by the study participant. I enjoyed being able to interview educators currently working at risk students. It allowed me, in most instances, to observe an interaction with colleagues. There seemed to be a sense of pride from the teachers that they were participating in an interview about their experiences. Stepping into their school environment also provided a context for their reflection and provided a glimpse of their classroom and extra-curricular personality.

After each interview, field notes (Bogdan & Biklin, 2007) were written regarding not only the context and content of the interview but also reflections on the emotions expressed within the interview that would not be readily apparent in the transcript. Special notes were made on my own reactions in reviewing the range and depth of emotions shared by the participants as they discussed their perceived successes and challenges in their classrooms.

Their stories resonated with me especially because of my own desire to help at risk students navigate their journey through the school years. Since all the participants were working as an ASTEP teacher, there was little overview needed about the program.

All respondents were exceptionally welcoming and enthusiastically shared their stories with me. They all displayed a genuine interest in sharing both their stories as well as advice for the improvement of the ASTEP programme.

It was a challenge for me to adhere to the amount of time we had agreed for the interviews. Their experiences and stories were compelling and created additional questions and avenues to explore. In every instance, the time flew by; and in some cases, I felt rushed to finish in order to respect the personal time they had given to participate.

The Experience of Being an ASTEP Teacher

The interviews with the teachers were invigorating and also a humbling experience for me. On my way home after each interview, there was ample time to reflect on the content of the interview and to consider it in context with the other interviews. Each time the depth of dedication these teachers had to their students was complemented by their authentic humility about the lengths they are going to help these students. The intensity of emotions that accompanied their shared experiences included joy, frustration, happiness, sadness, pride, futility, yet an acceptance of the realities both in the process of teaching these students and in the results they are reaping.

In writing about the experiences of the ASTEP teachers, I struggled to describe the depth of the experiences shared by these teachers. Reviews of the transcripts and field notes unveiled a challenge to find a description in the literature that would explain what drives these four exceptional people to:

1. Open their hearts and lives to these at-risk students.
2. To give of their precious time in seeking avenues to afford students experiences in the midst of a full teaching schedule.
3. To not judge the student or their family.
4. To not only see, but expound on the strengths of these students.
5. To persevere through often seemingly unsuccessful attempts to help the student succeed.

6. To risk professional relationships in an environment where sometimes even their own colleagues are not supportive of their efforts.

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