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THAT FINAL ONE THIRD:

TOWARDS ATTAINING ONE HUNDRED PERCENT MASTERY ON THE GRADE FOUR LITERACY TEST

EDUEXCHANGE E-DISCUSSION SUMMARY

Date of Discussion: February 1-3, 2011

Mrs. Jennifer Silvera, Dr. Maureen Byfield and Mrs. Novelette McLean Francis, Literacy Advisors to the USAID/Jamaica Basic Education Project, were the moderators for the first Jamaica Partners for Educational Progress E-Discussion, EduExchange, in 2011. The E-discussion was held between February 1 and 3 and the discussants were called upon to identify factors that impact students' performance on the Grade Four Literacy Test (GFLT) and useful strategies that could be used to improve the performance of the one third of students who are currently failing the examination. The full discussion is available on the [Jamaica Partners for Educational Progress website](#).

February 17, 2011

This publication was produced for review by the U.S. Agency for International Development. It was prepared by Carol Watson-Williams and Alesia Riddell of the QED Group, LLC; and Katherine Curtis of IRG.

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PARTICIPANTS

We received thirty-nine comments for the discussion on factors and strategies related to improving the performance of students who are failing the GFLT. Our contributors were:

- Pauline Bain
- Winnie Berry
- Janet Brown
- Rose Davies
- Elaine Foster Allen
- Kristin Fox
- Cynthia Grenyion
- Yvonne Iles
- Steven Kerr
- Yewande Lewis
- Grace McLean
- Evelyn Miller Bryan
- Bernetta Porter
- Ushana Jackson
- Josset Smikle
- Claire Spence
- Susan Walden
- Jacqueline Williams
- Gertrude McKenzie

Contributors belonged to the following organisations:

- National Education Inspectorate (NEI)
- Family Life Ministries
- Institute of Education, University of the West Indies
- Kingston Restoration Company
- Ministry of Education
- Parenting Partners Caribbean
- Planning Institute of Jamaica
- Reading Association of Jamaica
- Shortwood Teachers' College
- Sir Arthur Lewis Institute for Social and Economic Research (SALISES), University of the West Indies
- St. Richards Primary School
- The Mico University College
- USAID/Basic Education Project
- USAID/ Jamaica Mission

Authors' Acknowledgments...

Thank you to our moderators who made the EduExchange a success: Mrs. Jennifer Silvera, Dr. Maureen Byfield and Mrs. Novelette McLean Francis. Thank you also to everyone who contributed to the richness of the discussion by posting comments and sharing experiences, and resources.

Background

Literacy is a critical factor to the academic success of students and has been identified as the pillar upon which much of Jamaica's education transformation activity rests. In 2004, the country set reaching the achievement of 85 per cent literacy at Grade Four by 2010 as one of its primary education goals. That target remains unmet. The data indicate that only about two-thirds of children mastered the Test in 2010. Formerly a classroom based assessment, the Grade Four Literacy Test became a nationally administered examination in 2009. One of the consequences of this is that student performance on this examination is now used to determine their eligibility to sit the Grade Six Achievement Test at the end of their primary schooling. In light of the increasing importance attached to this examination, members of Jamaica Partners for Educational Progress Community of Practice came together to discuss the factors, strategies and policy recommendations that are relevant to improving student performance on the Grade Four Literacy Test.

For the next three days we will be trying to understand the reasons for this level of performance; discussing what educators and other stakeholders can do to help students achieve higher levels of mastery; and what options should be provided for students who, despite interventions fail to achieve mastery.

(Welcome)

FACTORS AFFECTING PERFORMANCE

Members of the education community identified several factors that influence the performance of primary students on the Grade Four Literacy Test in Jamaica. The factors highlighted by the discussion can be classified as in-school/classroom factors, e.g. teacher preparation of students for the exam, and external factors, such as parental involvement, that impact student outcome on the test.

IN SCHOOL/CLASSROOM FACTORS

I have learnt from my experiences as a teacher that our children will improve in their reading performances if address some of their most basic needs/rights. The challenges of irregular attendance, malnutrition, lack of love and support from parents and family members and physical, mental and verbal abuse are only a few of the daily struggles faced by many of our students. We cannot afford to have students attending school for less than a quarter of the specified time and the reality is that this happens too often especially in our poorest, rural communities. If we truly want success, we must address these problems while we enforce the many strategies that been discussed today.

(Susan Walden, Ministry of Education)

- Classroom focused teaching which does not provide enough opportunities for students to learn through direct experience.
- Teaching all students as though they are at the same level
- Insufficient use of assessment data to guide lesson planning and interventions
- Inadequate time allotted to teaching reading and writing
- Insufficient emphasis on phonics and inability of some teachers to teach the sounds of the letters of the alphabet correctly
- Bad teaching practices which are perpetuated by lack of a system-wide way of supporting new teachers as they develop their expertise
- Insufficient use of books
- Inadequate experience and facilities to cater to children with special needs
- Students being unaware of what is required of them and how to do it

The **loss of valuable instructional time** is also a major factor that impedes the process of teaching and learning. One discussant observed that this loss results from teachers dealing with “disciplinary issues, lack of student preparation for classes and the general disorganization in the daily routines” (Yewande Lewis, 2011).

Furthermore, some community members considered whether the integrated approach created a situation of **“information overload”**, which lessened the contact time devoted to literacy. The inadequate time focused on literacy is underscored by the point that “too few classrooms are text rich environments where reading is encouraged as a fun activity” (Elaine Foster Allen, 2011). Moreover, it is noted that there is a tendency to emphasize “the whole word approach to the teaching of reading to the exclusion of the phonics approach”, despite research evidence that supports using a combination of both (Elaine Foster Allen, 2011). However, another discussant cautioned others about the “temptation” to emphasize phonics for students who fall into the non-mastery category as it results in lack of opportunity for them “to transfer/ apply phonics skills into actual reading of texts” (Yewande Lewis, 2011).

EXTERNAL FACTORS

- Poor parenting practices
- Poor school attendance, especially in rural areas
- Malnutrition
- Mental Health issues
- Physical and mental abuse
- The influence of two coexisting languages; Jamaican Creole and Jamaican Standard English

Discussants considered **parenting practices** to be a significant factor in determining students’ mastery of literacy. One contributor noted that “poor parental practices also confuse our children since values taught at school are not necessarily the values taught at home”. She observed that “the number of parents who do not read at home has grown significantly as there is no time for less instant gratifying activities so children are not stimulated” (Jacqueline Williams, 2011). This supports the general concern that parents needed to be more involved in their children’s education. However, the experience of two teachers working in the inner city who have succeeded in this area, highlighted that school personnel can influence the building of beneficial home -school relationships despite socio-economic challenges (Rose Davies, 2011). Specifically, these **teachers’ effort to encourage parental involvement** resulted in some parents helping to make teaching aids, paying for school materials such as video player, and expressing interest in attending their child’s class so that they can better assist them.

Another issue highlighted in this discussion is that **students’ mental health** should be considered when examining academic underachievement. It is noted that “the emotional stress, which is a spinoff of abuse, including neglect, and constant exposure to violence” should be explored (Jennifer Silvera, 2011). This is supported by another member’s assertion that many students who are referred to “counseling because of academic underachievement have mental illnesses related to unresolved grief and poor bonding and attachment to primary caregivers” (Pauline Bain, 2011).

However, despite these important factors, which contribute to the perpetuation of the one third of students who are failing the GFLT, the discussants agree that without using the data from assessment, the education sector cannot ascertain whether the plethora of interventions which have been tried are in fact working.

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

Participants agree that having competent, caring teachers made the difference in enhancing the success chances of students, especially those who are in jeopardy of being left behind. The three day discussion highlighted several strategies that would enhance students’ performance on the Grade Four Literacy Test.

These include:

- Emphasizing the teaching of phonics e.g. adaptation of the approach used in the ABEKA system
- Immersing students in a range of language experiences
- Data driven instruction
- Encouraging Parental Involvement

- Educators visiting the homes of underperforming students
- Employing differentiated instruction
- Ensuring classrooms are text rich
- Creating situations where students' self esteem and self efficacy are high
- Working towards targets set by both teacher and student

While CoP members agree that there is no singular strategy that will suit every situation, it is noted that “students must be explicitly taken through the process of, for example, analysing the question, with the teacher/ parent/ facilitator asking the relevant questions and providing the appropriate cues to help learners understand what is required of them”(Maureen Byfield, 2011). This approach is noteworthy in light of one members’ observation that “too many teachers are not allowing students to learn; they tell everything, read everything” (Everlyn Miller – Bryan, 2011). On the contrary, it is advised that teachers help “learners to read instructions, underline pertinent words and explain what they are required to do”, teach them to review their work and engage in self question (Maureen Byfield, 2011). This is especially important because “even where good teaching and learning strategies exist, students may still underperform if they are not adequately prepared to meet the specific demands of an instrument” (Novelette McLean Francis, 2011). However, the effectiveness of these actions would be maximized through data driven instruction, which is said to be the key to good lesson planning.

Instructional strategies would also be supported by making classrooms “text-rich” by acquiring fiction books. Elaine Foster Allen suggested that private sector partners could financially support the provision of boxes of fiction books to various schools, an

intervention, which was previously funded by UK Department for International Development (DFID).

The role of caregivers and the home environment featured prominently in the discussion concerning the factors and potential strategies to promote mastery on the GFLT. Cynthia Grenyion told members of the community-based programme she developed to empower parents to contribute to the education

We often hear teachers and their teaching being blamed for poor student outcomes but if truth be told we have no systematic - system wide way of supporting new teachers and developing them from novice to expert teachers. It is therefore possible that the same 'mistakes' made during T(eaching) P(ractice) are or were never addressed over time - for many teachers. Could it be that this situation has now become systemic and chronic?

(Elaine Foster Allen, Shortwood Teachers' College)

process beyond fundraising and receiving reports. Specifically, parental involvement is facilitated by teaching parents basic literacy skills and ways to teach their own child, and a parent support group that encourages discussion of challenges. Additionally, Janet Brown noted that there are examples of principals who insist that their staff should visit the homes of “children

in their care in order to understand their situation as well as be more available for questions and support”.

The discussion highlighted that improving the performance of the one third of Jamaican students who have not mastered the GFLT requires multi-sectoral effort that must work together to ensure that the right interventions and specialists are in place. As such the use of data plays a vital role in ensuring that by 2015, 100% mastery is achieved.

1. Determine the results you expect from your class. (think of the end - that is your dream or goal)
2. Allow the class to articulate their goals for the learning experiences.
3. Find a way to assess the students. (baseline/pre-test etc.)
4. Use the pre-test results to assist you in determining the interventions.
5. Group students.
6. Make learning fun.
7. Ask for help. Lots of teachers know how to teach and get good to excellent results.
8. Test again. Compare the results. Share with students and parents.
9. Get the parents' commitment to help you to help the students to move to Level 2.
10. Keep testing at intervals. Make learning experiences fun. Celebrate successes.

(Claire Spence, USAID/Jamaica)

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Developing targeted programmes of human resource development to ensure that our teachers have the skills, aptitude and experience needed
- Establishing and sustaining access points and resource centres to cater to the needs of these students and their practitioners
- Compulsory school attendance for all students
- A course on “Working with Parents” should be offered at every level of the teacher education programmes.
- Conduct research to quantify how much of the school day is spent on teaching.
- Examine the characteristics of the one third of students who fail GFLT
- Increase the number of fiction books in classrooms, possible with the help of through private sector funding

RELATED RESOURCES

Jamaica Partners for Educational Progress. (2011). *Grade Four Literacy Test: 2007-2010*. Jamaica Partners for Educational Progress: Kingston, Jamaica

This document includes a list of tables that represent statistical data of the Grade Four Literacy Test that were published by the Ministry of Education’s Student Assessment Unit between 2007 and 2010. The percentages of students who mastered, almost mastered and have not mastered have been organized to show the national and regional statistics as well as gender and school type between 2007 and 2010.

Johnson R. S. & Watson, J.E. (2005). *A seven year study of the effects of synthetic phonics teaching on reading and spelling attainment*. Retrieved January 20, 2011, from <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/>

The progress of Scottish primary school students in word reading, spelling and reading comprehension over a 6 year period are examined. The study describes 2 major approaches to teaching phonics: Synthetic and analytic phonics, which are employed in the first year students. Over a 16 week period, 300 students were taught either 1) synthetic phonics programme 2) analytic phonics programme or 3) analytic phonics and phonological awareness training programme. The findings were that students who were taught the synthetic phonics programme were ahead of others exposed to the other programmes and in their age group in all areas examined. After this initial programme, students who were taught the analytic phonics programme were taught the synthetic phonics programme and their progress in word reading, spelling and reading comprehension were examined until the 7th year. The results showed that disadvantaged students read and spelt better with the synthetic phonics programme and that boys performed significantly better than girls in all areas except reading comprehension. By “the end of primary 7, word reading was 3 years and 6 months ahead of chronological age, spelling was 1 year and 9 months ahead and reading comprehension was 3.5 months ahead” (Johnston and Watson, 2010, p. 2).

Lewis, Y. E. (2010). *Literacy in elementary school in Jamaica: the case of the grade four literacy test*. (Doctorial dissertation). University of Iowa, Iowa. Retrieved from, <http://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/698>.

Lewis examined the discourse related to the change in the Grade Four Literacy Test (GFLT) from being a “classroom-based assessment to national high-stakes examination” and documented the response of two schools to the change. The study sought to answer three main questions:

- How did the Discourse about the GFLT change between 1999 and 2009 in specific government documents and in the print media?
- What did schools do to prepare the students who failed the revised GFLT in June 2009 and had to retake the test in December 2009?
- What were the perspectives of participants with regard to the change in the GFLT?

Using qualitative methods including critical discourse analysis, classroom observation and interviews, this study notes that accountability grew stronger while classroom based assessments and bilingual education became less prominent features of the discourse between 1999 and 2009. Based on her observations at two inner city primary schools, she pointed out that in order to foster improvement in literacy, loss of instructional time needed to be rectified by more efficient use of the time table. Ineffective teaching of literacy was also a problem. Additionally, she maintained that though practicing for tests can improve GFLT test scores, the question remained “what percentage of those passes are due to improvement in learning” (Lewis, 2010, p. 210). Being bilingual was perceived as an asset. Participants believed that GFLT raised awareness of the importance of literacy and the change to “a national high stakes examination” encouraged teachers to make teaching reading and writing a priority. The following recommendations were made: earlier intervention, reducing poverty, supporting family literacy, providing better literacy resources, reducing class size, improving teacher training, focusing on bilingual education, providing literacy specialist in all schools/ clusters of schools, early identification of students with special needs and further research that documents effective teaching practices.

Ministry of Education. (n.d.). *Can technology improve literacy?* Retrieved January 22, 2011, from www.moec.gov.jm/projects/pep/pep_it.../Port%20Henderson.doc

Under the Primary Education Support Project, Port Henderson Primary was chosen to participate in an action research, which would examine the role of technology in improving literacy. This article explored the challenges that Port Henderson Primary noted as barriers to improving literacy and detailed their approach to: 1) Move students to at least one grade level by the following school year, 2) Expose students to computers in order to facilitate reading and 3) Use computer as a teaching/ learning tool to improve reading in grades 4 – 6. Strategies for teachers and students are highlighted.

Mitchel, S.A. (2007). Acquiring basic reading skills: An exploration of Phonetic awareness in Jamaican primary schools. *Caribbean Journal of Education*, 29 (2)

This study explored the influence that interventions, which targeted phonetic skills, had on primary school students’ ability to acquire basic reading skills. The author agreed with Bogle (1997), cited in Mitchell (2007) which posited that it is “important to make literacy connections by language, by eye but also by language by ear”. Mitchel (2007) noted that overcrowded classrooms and noisy classrooms are not conducive to teaching phonics.

The study’s recommendations included:

- Agree on the sounds of the standard Jamaican alphabet

- Sound song for kindergarten and grade 1 in addition with other teaching tools
- In the first week of Grade 1, focus on phonics “to align the children” and then throughout the year, a half hour should be dedicated to phonics at the beginning and end of each day (p. 354)
- Make class aware of when there is a switch between Jamaica Creole and Standard Jamaican English
- Teach “simple, phonetically correct words first, vowel by vowel, and then challenge the exceptions”

OFSTED. (2011). *Removing barriers to literacy*. Retrieved January 20, 2011, from <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofstedhome/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Documents/bytype/Thematic-reports/Removing-barriers-to-literacy>

This report identified good practice supporting learners of a wide age range in different types of institutions. The sample included early childhood, primary and secondary level institutions, colleges, independent training providers, local authority providers of adult and community learning, prison and young offender institutions. Providers maintained that a “eureka” moment in terms of specific or distinctive practices did not occur, but “made what one school described as ‘painstaking adjustments’ to what they did when their monitoring provided evidence of weaknesses and ‘stuck with what worked’” (OFSTED, 2011, p. 5). OFSTED noted that factors that facilitated literacy attainment in at risk students included the following:

- “Teachers with high expectations for pupils’ achievements in literacy
- An emphasis on speaking and listening skills from an early age
- A rigorous, sequential approach to developing speaking and listening and teaching reading, writing and spelling through systematic phonics
- A sharp assessment of progress in order to determine the most appropriate programme or support
- Carefully planned provision to meet individual needs
- Rigorous monitoring of the impact of provision
- High-quality pastoral care to support learning in literacy
- Highly effective use of time, staff and resources” (p.5)

Noteworthy practices of successful institutions included:

- Making outstanding use of national test and assessment data to raise the expectations of staff and to set sufficiently challenging targets.
- Having at least one senior member of staff with an excellent knowledge of literacy and its pedagogy.
- Having a rigorous, systematic approach to teaching phonics and recognizing the importance of regular practice in reading
- Reflecting on and adapting the curriculum, including any intervention programmes, to meet changing needs.
- Nominating learning mentors or staff to support ‘looked after’ children and other pupils who were potentially at risk of underachieving.

Webster, P.S. (2007). No, teacher, it nuh begin with “Once upon a time”: Strategies for facilitating engagements with informational texts. In C. Gentles and N. Scott, *Voices from the Field*. Institute of Education: Kingston, Jamaica.

The author explored the positive benefits of using information texts to promote literacy as she described the instructional strategies and activities used during a five day period in one of Clarendon’s primary schools in 2007. She noted that “we should begin to expose students to information texts early on and not wait until they reach later elementary, middle and high school when reading is the cornerstone of the curriculum” (Webster, 2007, p.84). The author observed:

- 1) First graders using the known to connect to the unknown. The author noted “the textual strategy, making connections, made it possible for students to use their personal and collective experiences to enhance understanding of the book” (p. 76).
- 2) “Teacher read – alouds to increase content knowledge and expand vocabulary”, which was followed by students engaging in echo reading, the teacher also paused to point out words, and asked and answered questions.
- 3) The use of ‘look backs’ to extract important facts about the book’s subject matter

The instructional strategies included:

Table 1: Strategies and Activities:

Text Strategy	Activities
Making Connections	Prereading
Prediction	Picture
Questioning	Picture Walk and Read aloud
Word study/ vocabulary	Prereading/ read aloud
Echo – Reading	Reading written texts on the blackboard
Choral Reading	Reading written texts on the blackboard
Data Gathering	Drawing/ Writing important facts about bananas*
Description	Read aloud
Comparison	Banana Sucker and mature banana plant
Observation	Picture walk/ handling banana sucker and a hand of green bananas/ words in bold print/ glossary/ index/
Look – backs	Postreading to check listening comprehension/ Gathering important facts about bananas

*Banana was the subject of the book

Janet Brown provided two documents:

Ball, J. (2010). Promoting gender equity through mother-tongue based bi/multilingual education. *East Asia and Pacific United Nations Girl's Education Initiative*, 7, p. 1- 7. Retrieved from http://www.ungei.org/infobycountry/files/newsletter_2010.12_FINAL.pdf

Sheldon Shaeffer chaired a plenary panel on ECD and Language including panelists Jessica Ball, Emily Vargas-Baron and others (these are CG members) - for more information and presentations etc., see <http://www.seameo.org/LanguageMDGConference2010/programme2.html>

DISCLAMIER

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