Purpose of the Study
This research examines the perceptions of teachers and students on the secondary reforms in China. Topics studied include curriculum planning, teaching strategies, assessment and evaluation strategies, and high-stakes examination.

The Issue
Large-scale education reforms emerged around the world in the 1990s. In Jamaica, the most significant development which took place was the Reform of Secondary Education (ROSE) which was implemented in the 1990s. This year marks the 40th anniversary of Jamaica’s establishment of diplomatic relations with China. In recent years, Jamaica has been a beneficiary of China’s economic strength. The Gleaner’s editorial “Forty years of Sino-Jamaican relations” on November 20, 2012, calls for Jamaica to “develop a deeper and broader understanding of China—of its economy, its politics, its political personalities and its social dynamics” and for UWI “to establish a China-centred South East Asia research institute.” This research paper will help us to develop a greater understanding of the educational system in China. In 1999, the Chinese Department of Education introduced its ‘quality education’ reform (2001). It attempts to introduce the transformation from “transmission-centered” to “inquiry-centered” in teaching paradigm. The reform goals are “students should be urged to take an active part in learning activities” and “they should also develop their abilities to collect and process information, acquire knowledge, analyse and handle problems, communicate and cooperate with others” (MOE, 2010, p. 3). In curriculum content, student understanding and application of concepts were emphasized. In classrooms, special attention was aimed at each Chinese teacher’s use of varied teaching and learning methods and to a variety of assessment modes (Liu and Qi, 2005). It is interesting that Jamaica’s ROSE initiative, the National Curriculum Policy, and The Mathematics and Numeracy Policy (2003) have similar goals as the Quality Education Reform in China. Results and recommendations from this study will no doubt have implications for Jamaica.

Methodology
Two research methods were used: administration of questionnaire surveys and classroom observations. Major sources of data for this study were surveys for teachers and students. Survey data measuring instructional effectiveness was used given that reforms are designed to change how and what teachers are teaching in the classroom. They are also commonly used to measure implementation of large-scale reforms and how often certain strategies are used (Desimone, Smith, and Frisvold, 2010). Classroom observations were carried out at two sample schools.

The population included 24 sample schools that were selected representing large and small cities, ethnicities and SES in four provinces. Sample schools included twenty academic schools and four vocational/technical schools. At each sample school, 25 randomly selected sample teachers and two representative classes were asked to complete questionnaires in April 2010. The return rates were 82.4% (students) and 69.7% (teachers).

Main Findings

TEACHER VOICES

Sixty-nine percent of the 294 teacher respondents were female. Mean teaching experience was fifteen years. Ninety-two percent were trained teachers with university degrees. Mean class size was 51 but they preferred 29. Student SES included low (37%), middle (53%) and high (10%). On average, respondent teachers spent fifteen hours each week preparing classes. Most teachers claimed that they received sufficient resources (67%) and professional development (63%). Teachers depend heavily on textbooks (Ma et al., 2006). The classroom observation data revealed that teachers tended to follow the content sequence of the textbooks. In some classes, teachers use teacher resource books and PowerPoint that accompany the textbooks. Teachers’ self-reporting of teaching (Table 1) indicate that they are using varieties of teaching strategies including teacher-directed methods (teacher talk, questioning, and discussions), student-centred activities (activities and group work) and use of technology. Predominant student evaluation methods include tests, class work, homework, and exams which are also used to determine the final mark.

Ten percent of the sample teachers claimed that they were spending a lot of time on classroom management whereas half (49%) said little amount of time. Students’ on task time and work completion rates were between average and good.
Main Findings Cont’d.

Sample teachers were satisfied with their courses (77%) and student achievements (72%). When asked for their opinions on the examination system, results were similar to those of the sample students, 37% said the current system is unsatisfactory (n=273), 20% satisfactory and 43% in-between. Most of the findings were similar to previous studies in China (Joong, 2009) and Jamaica (Joong, 2011, 2012).

STUDENT VOICES

Of the 1903 student respondents, most were from urban communities. Students’ and teachers’ perceptions of how frequent specific teaching methods were always/often employed in Mathematics and English are listed in Table 1. Original paper contains more courses. The percentages of teachers’ responses are in brackets. It appears that sample teachers used predominately teacher-directed methods. With a few exceptions, there is agreement (within 10%) between the teachers’ and students’ perceptions on how often these strategies were used. The use of computer technology (mainly for teacher presentations) is on the increase when compared with results in previous studies (Joong et al., 2009). As for student-centred lessons, sample students claimed that about one-quarter of their teachers always/often used these strategies whereas about half of the sample teachers claimed that they do. Similar discrepancies occurred with the use of computer technology. This is the main reason for the inclusion of student voices in reform studies surveys. There is not much discrepancy on evaluation methods.

One significant result in this study is that students are claiming that discipline is becoming a problem. About one-third of the students claimed that the behaviours of other students are making it difficult for them to learn. Results from the previous study (Joong et al., 2009) did not indicate discipline as a major concern.

The mean numbers of hours spent on homework and studying were 2.8 hours per day. Tao (2003) had similar findings. In an open-ended question on gender issue, seventy percent (n = 797) of the respondents claimed that there is no relationship between gender and ability and achievement. Most claimed that male students tend to do better in science-related courses whereas girls are better in arts-related courses. As for educational aspirations, 85% would like to attend university and 4.6% would go to work.

Conclusion

Results of this study indicate that teachers in China have dedicated themselves to the education of students and have made the necessary changes to adopt most of the reforms. Some teachers are still struggling with transitioning. Teachers indicated that there was adequate support in terms of resources and training. Resources in rural schools are scare and teachers have to go to cities for training. Within teaching practices, most teachers and students claimed that they were using a variety of teaching methods, although teacher-directed strategies still dominated. There were conflicting perceptions of how often student-centred activities were used. As for student evaluations, both sample teachers and students claimed that traditional tests, class work, homework, and exams were used most often. The teachers had difficulty changing current teaching praxes. Teachers also pointed to the negative effects resulting from reforms or societal changes such as unemployment and one-child policy. These effects included low student motivation and management issues. Classroom management needs increased as new modes of teaching and transitioning created new situations for students to deviate from expected behaviours.

On the issue of the examination system, in general, about one-third of all respondents claimed that it’s unsatisfactory. The persisting problem with the current reform lies on the examination system. Teacher respondents claimed that there was little room for introducing activity-based learning while preparing students for examinations.

Implications for Policy and Practice

- Adopt a good balance of teaching strategies rather than regurgitation of facts, strategies include whole group interactive teaching, use of manipulatives, cooperative learning, and integration of technology.
- Employ other assessment strategies, both formal and informal, that include performance assessment, portfolios and journals/communication.
- Classroom management is becoming an issue for students and teachers. Teachers should get students more involved in the lessons and reinforce rules. Proactively, more group work and activity-based lessons may help, especially for the younger grades.
- Reduce class sizes and increase support from administrators;
- Use diagnostic measures to determine the special needs of learners (LD, Gifted, etc.) and plan strategies to cater for such needs.
- The examination system needs to be reformed to improve the quality of education. Parents and other citizens need to place less emphasis on examination results.