

Scholarly Research in Education in the Caribbean: Retrospect and Prospect

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Introduction

Jennings (2012) evaluates two innovations introduced into the education systems of Belize and Jamaica against factors shown in research to be associated with the successful implementation of innovations. The fact that one innovation was a success and the other deemed a failure suggests that Jennings (2012) wants educational practitioners to avoid the pitfalls of the latter and learn from the former. Offering practical advice to the target audience about how to bring about change was clearly a goal of this paper. But effecting change is not so straightforward. "Change is a journey" says Fullan (1994, p. 21), implying that it is something we can prepare for. COVID-19 proved different. It took us by surprise. Murillo (2021) likens the events of the pandemic with those described by Camus (1948) in *The Plague*. There have been many plagues in history, Camus notes, yet each one "takes people equally by surprise" (Camus, 1948, p. 34). The same can be said of introducing change into our education systems. Each time this is done, it takes us by surprise. We repeat the same mistakes as though learning from the past escapes us.

For scholars engaged in research, what they have learnt from past research in their field of

investigation is a necessary starting point. In the same vein, thoughts about the future of research in the Caribbean need to be informed by our knowledge of the research done by Caribbean scholars in the past.

According to Gilbert (2001, p. xv), "Research only becomes effective when it is written down and published for researchers, policymakers and others to use and to criticize". One of my enduring memories in my first year of teaching (1976) at The University of the West Indies (UWI) is of my class of postgraduate diploma in education (Dip. Ed.) students who were critical of the fact that the readings I recommended came out of North America and Europe. It appeared to them that Caribbean scholars were leaving research on the Caribbean to the Europeans and North Americans and were not generating new knowledge that reflected the realities of education in the Region. In fact, as a student in the United Kingdom in the early 1970s I had that impression myself. Even while studying for a Master's degree, I was never given a reading list which included a publication by a Caribbean scholar, and despite extensive search in the library I never succeeded in finding anything from the Caribbean.

The *Caribbean Journal of Education* (CJE) was not launched until 1974. Twenty-three years later another journal of education was launched — the *Journal of Education and Development in the Caribbean* (JEDIC). The objectives of this journal were “(i) to provide an outlet for the deliberations and research which must inform educational decision-making and development issues in the Caribbean; (ii) to provide a linkage between professionals, including classroom teachers, who are interested or involved in Caribbean education; and, (iii) to assist in the dissemination of findings from studies which, though carried out in other parts of the world, hold relevance for education and development in the Caribbean” (Jennings, 1997, p. i). JEDIC’s concern with development issues, public engagement, and collaboration with scholars outside the Caribbean underscores a marked attempt to address the concern outlined by McGinn (1997, p. xii) that “university researchers almost always derive their problems for study not from the practice of education but from gaps or inconsistencies in their theoretical frameworks. As a consequence, at first glance they seem to offer little of value to the education policy maker or administrator looking for practical advice”.

When I first joined the university, my head of department advised that my survival in the university would depend on my success in doing research and getting it published. “Publish or perish”, he said. Nothing was said about doing research that informed education policy makers, administrators, or other professionals who needed practical advice. Furthermore, I was advised “to work on my own” because when it came to promotion, the assessment and promotions committee was only interested in research in which I was the sole author. In other words, collaborative work with colleagues was not encouraged. I was also encouraged to publish in international refereed journals, which implied that local (i.e. Caribbean) journals were not considered on par with these.

Much has changed since my days as a young lecturer. Today universities from all over the world enter collaborative relationships with each other and scholars are encouraged to collaborate

in research. Local journals must meet the same rigorous criteria relating to ethics and integrity, quality, and impact as international journals and so attitudes towards them have changed.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on research conducted by Caribbean scholars over a period close to three decades and to recommend some gaps in research that need to be filled in the future. Knowledge produced needs to be published for reasons already given by Gilbert (2001). To aid in my reflection, I analyzed research articles published in JEDIC during its lifetime. For the period 1997–2010 I had hard copies of the journal and so I was able to examine 89 research articles. Fifty-five research articles were reviewed for the period 2011–2023, mostly online. I was particularly interested in noting any changes in the focus of the journal between the two periods. The contents of the articles were categorized, noting the level of education treated, the country focus, the methodology, and the country of the authors). In reviewing the articles, I also wanted to find out the extent to which the focus was local, regional, or international and the extent of collaboration in research. I end the paper with some recommendations that I think Caribbean scholars need to consider in future research.

Retrospect: The What and How of Past Research

In the period 1997–2010 the topics most frequently covered centered around secondary education (19), development (14), and higher education (14). At the secondary level the sciences, Geography, and English were the subjects of research, as well as analyses of performance in the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC). There were few articles on primary education (7) and even fewer on early childhood education (3). Other articles centered on: teacher training/teacher education (9), distance education/information communication technology (6), and gender issues (4).

"Development does not start with goods: it starts with people and their education..." says Schumacher (1974, p. 140) In other words, development is people-oriented, in that it fosters the well-being (physical, economic/social/cultural/spiritual/mental) of all members of society in an equitable manner (Cole, 1997). Articles on development range from poverty related issues affecting school attendance, and experiments of Caribbean women's groups in developing political literacy, to the impact of maternal schooling on children's health and overcoming the unemployment problem.

Topics in the higher education category included the articulation of programmes in tertiary level institutions with those at the university, the sustainable development of higher education, and the financing of higher education. There were 4 articles that dealt with funding, one of which drew on Caribbean databases to examine international funding of family planning programmes in Barbados, and another was a review of strategies for funding public education in Jamaica.

The 2011–2023 issues followed a similar trend, with 18 articles featuring secondary education, and 11 on higher education. There were more articles on primary education (12), but only 2 articles on early childhood education. One volume focused on issues related to the Caribbean diaspora in terms of policy, education, and development. New areas featured included special education (1), out of school youth (1), and tourism and hospitality (2). There were four articles on technical and vocational education and training (TVET) as well as Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). There were also more comparative studies; for example, one on a meta-analysis of quantitative research studies that examined the academic achievement of African American and African Caribbean students, and another on the effects of language use on the written production of English among students of African heritage in England and Jamaica.

Methods

During the period 1997–2010, 13 of the articles were on research methods. Most of these were in a special issue on qualitative research. However, only 8 of the JEDIC research articles used qualitative research techniques. Five used case studies and 24 used quantitative methods. Six used mixed methods. The majority (27) did not involve collection of new data but a critical examination of existing data (e.g. CXC results) or existing systems. Fifteen of the articles were more reflective in nature, for example on how to deal with violence in schools, and 18 of the articles published between 2011–2023 used qualitative methods, including a special issue on curriculum reform in Jamaica that used qualitative research almost exclusively. Ten articles used quantitative research. While the same variety of methods—mixed (8), critical review (5), reflection (4), and case studies (4) were evident as in earlier articles, new featured methods were critical content analysis and action research.

Local, Regional, and International Focus

Fourteen of the articles published from 1997–2010 did not focus on any particular country. The countries mostly focused on were Jamaica (31), Barbados (8), Guyana (6), and Trinidad and Tobago (2). One article focused on Martinique. Other countries that featured were the United States of America (USA), Canada, and India. Twenty-five articles had a Caribbean-wide focus. From 2011–2023 most of the articles (28) focused on Jamaica. Other countries featured were Trinidad and Tobago (7), the Eastern Caribbean (5), Barbados (2), Belize (2) and the United Kingdom (2). Apart from 2 general articles, there were individual articles that focused on Venezuela, Cuba, the USA, and Nigeria.

In the 1997–2010 issues, the number of authors who identified their locations were as follows: Jamaica (47), Barbados (11), Trinidad and Tobago (4), United Kingdom (UK, 4) and USA (4). There was only one example of colleagues

from Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad and Tobago collaborating in research. One paper each was written by authors from Australia, Grenada, the United Arab Emirates, New Zealand, and Canada. The later issues of the journal continued the trend of most authors originating in the campuses of the UWI, but there were also authors from other parts of the world including Canada, the USA, the UK, and Nigeria.

Prospect: Filling the Gaps in Future Research

There are four areas to which I think Caribbean scholars need to give attention:

1. the extent to which Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)4 is being achieved;
2. the impact of COVID-19 on education in the Caribbean;
3. the integration of advances in technology into teaching and learning; and
4. collaboration in research.

Achievement of SDG4

Looking back on 26 years of a journal's life, it is clear that Caribbean scholars have been publishing widely on a range of topics using varied research lenses. The Diploma in Education (Dip. Ed.) students of 1976 would have been proud. While sustainable development has been explored in higher education and from the perspective of indigenous people, research has not so far evaluated the extent of achievement of SDG4 by countries in the Caribbean. The year 2030 is rapidly approaching and there is a need to take stock of this. For example, there is a wealth of research on secondary education, but what does this tell us about the achievement of free, equitable, and quality education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes for *all* boys and girls? The SDG for education includes promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, but this area was not addressed in the research reviewed. The same can be said of universal

youth literacy, which is another target outcome of SDG4. This includes young people who dropped out of school or had a record of absenteeism.

Impact of COVID-19 on Education

COVID-19 has made it all the more critical for researchers to also look at absenteeism and school dropout at the primary and secondary levels. Mervosh (2024) found that absenteeism has become chronic in schools in the United States, increasing from 15% pre-COVID-19 to 28% in the 2021–2022 school year. To some extent this was linked to the introduction of a flexible remote work policy since COVID-19, with more people wanting to work from home and wanting their children to learn from home. Disengagement from school was noticed among all income groups, but was most chronic amongst students from low-income homes who would have greater difficulty in making up for learning losses. With reference to Latin America and the Caribbean, the World Bank Group (2021, p. 9) states that as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic "learning poverty could increase by more than 20 percent, equivalent to an increase of roughly 7.6 million learning poor".

Caribbean scholars need to delve deeper into the impact of COVID-19 on the education system. There have been small beginnings. Keshinro (2023), for example, explored Jamaican secondary students' perceptions of the impact of remote instruction on their learning and found that they reported challenges with ICT availability, accessibility, affordability, and connectivity as well as teacher's skill in the use of ICT. The sample, however, was only 28 students interviewed by phone. Research needs to address not only the challenges of online teaching and learning but how these challenges can be overcome. How, for example, did schools deal with limited resources such as availability and accessibility of the internet and technological resources? How did students and teachers adapt to online teaching and learning, given the feelings of isolation which must have been experienced? How have students' mental and emotional health been addressed? All

these questions relate to the implementation of innovative ideas introduced as a result of the closure of schools during COVID-19. We need to know what worked and what didn't, so that the next pandemic does not take us by surprise.

Integration of Advances in Technology into Teaching and Learning

On the teacher as a performing artist Sarason (1999, p. 133) writes, "Behind the script and the audience is a performing artist whose artistry determines to what extent the audience will be stimulated, moved, energized, and responsive, or unmoved, disinterested, bored". During my lifetime as a university teacher, the "script" has gone through many changes as I moved from face to face to distance teaching, to mixed modality, and online. The artistry that Saracen speaks of perhaps today lies both in the skill in the use of technology in teaching and in the engagement of the learner face-to-face. Today many students come to school or university "with computers, cell phones, iPods, digital cameras, Blue-tooth teacher enabled devices...and high expectations of the role that IT will play in their education" (Thomas, 2010, p. 27). Technology advances at an incredible pace and the more recent developments in the use of Artificial intelligence (AI) provide assistance to students which impact on the role of the teacher. For example, ChatGPT can function as a personal tutor to students and they can ask ChatGPT to produce a summary of their state of knowledge for purposes of assessment. Teacher educators can use ChatGPT to generate content for their courses and classes and even for their academic articles. Although the application of this technology can be widely used in tertiary education, it has already been banned in some universities due to concerns over academic integrity, especially the increased risk of plagiarism and cheating, lack of regulation, and privacy (Sabzalieva and Valentini, 2023). The use of AI is so recent that it does not feature in articles in JEDIC. But it is a technology that is rapidly developing and needs to be the subject of future research.

Collaboration in Research

While the Caribbean-wide focus is well represented in research, the country focus of the articles has tended to be on the original campuses of the UWI, especially Jamaica. Most of the authors are also from these campuses. With the expansion of the campuses of the UWI, Caribbean scholars need to broaden their scope to include research in individual Eastern Caribbean countries. We need to revisit the concentration on the English-speaking Caribbean and embrace other languages represented in the Caribbean community. CARICOM is an integration movement comprising 20 member states (including Haiti and Suriname, which are French and Dutch-speaking respectively). There are no articles that feature Haiti and Suriname among those reviewed. Interestingly, there is only one article in JEDIC on higher education in Venezuela written by Latin Americans. In their reports international agencies tend to pool Latin America with the Caribbean. Given the size of the former compared to the latter, these reports tend to "tell the Latin American story". Forging collaboration with our Latin American colleagues may be a way of correcting such imbalances in future reports.

The internationalization of universities creates opportunities for Caribbean scholars to collaborate with colleagues from all over the world. Some amount of collaborative research has taken place in the past, resulting in informative comparative studies. Collaboration in research with stakeholders such as school leadership and education officers is another strategy that Caribbean scholars could use. The bottom line is that we need to be more proactive in disseminating the ideas in research papers so that they can be used by the target audience. Surprisingly, there has been very little cross-campus collaboration in research, despite there being a School of Education on each campus. A comparison of experiences of participation in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (e.g. between Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica) and an

evaluation of attempts to transform curricula at the primary and secondary levels are but two examples of the kinds of comparative research which could be done.

Conclusion

Although McGinn's (1997, xii) view that university researchers "offer little of value to the education policy maker or administrator looking for practical advice" is not supported by Caribbean scholarly research more needs to be done. We need to move away from the "objective, distanced space between researcher and the researched" (Jamieson, 2009, p. 66) and find a voice that enables us to reach a wider audience, including the educational planner, the policy maker, the teacher, and parents. Condensing the research paper into two pages and exposing this on social media is a strategy which has been used. But has this had the effect desired?

Research is costly in terms of time, hard work, and money. Caribbean scholars are at a disadvantage compared with their colleagues in North America and Europe who have more funding opportunities for their research. They can conduct massive studies with large samples that can lead to generalizations which are usually favoured by funding agencies. The increase in the number of qualitative studies in the 2011–2023 period of JEDIC may be an indication of a growing crisis in funding for research. Given the importance of research in informing decision-making, creative strategies for increasing funding for research in education need to be explored with urgency.

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