

The Future of Caribbean Scholarly Research: Towards greater community engagement

Lorna Down

The University of the West Indies, Mona

It is evident that the research of Caribbean scholars has shaped policy and practice in education and has influenced the making of Caribbean society. Caribbean scholars such as Errol Miller, Hyacinth Evans, and Zellynne Jennings (to name a few) have identified critical areas in Caribbean society. Through their research, they have provided insights, understanding, and clarity to troubling questions in the region and in the global society. These and other Caribbean scholars have clearly laid the foundation for Caribbean research and have indicated key roles and responsibilities through their seminal offerings. Yet as a new generation of Caribbean scholars and researchers grapples with the challenges of the 21st century and face an increasingly complex world, they will need to reflect on changing roles and responsibilities (and judging by the theme of this journal issue, that is what they are clearly doing). This paper aims to assist in contributing to the future of Caribbean scholarly research in education through critical reflection on selected areas of research, its context, and the community in which it is engaged.

Education for developing a caring, peaceful, and just society is the vision of educators attuned to people and place. It is a vision of education that is “based on ethics of care and responsibility to the common good, ethics of respect for the community of life” (Vilela, 2020, p. 9). Vilela’s discussion on education and the Earth Charter elaborates on this. She asserts the need for education to expand and deepen human vision

and consciousness regarding how we ought to relate with ourselves, with one another, and with the great community of life. Yet as Earl Lovelace’s *The Wine of Astonishment* (1982) discloses, education can disrupt (or conversely strengthen) the connections between people and their community, their environment, and their world. Through the character of Ivan Morton, Lovelace (1982) uncovers an education that recasts individuals into people who see themselves as a class apart and superior to those who are not formally educated and lack status in their community. Instead of being the formal voice of that wider community and representing their interests, these individuals simply follow their own power agenda. That anti-hero in effect impels us to envision other forms of education. One such form is that of an education focused on developing an ethics of care and responsibility for the common good and respect for the community of life (Vilela, 2020). In other words, an education for a sustainable world. That is the goal of education in many of our educational institutions. (See for example, Jules’ (2000) Caribbean Education Strategy Report). Scholarly research in education needs therefore to include a focus on how that goal is being realized and its outcomes in society. Engagement with the wider community for research is thus an imperative.

As we look therefore to the future of Caribbean scholarly research in education, we must reflect on the extent to which Caribbean researchers in education are responsive to the wider community and have avoided the Morton

trajectory. Our belief is that one of the primary roles of researchers is to create and connect with community. This will mean (among other things) engaging with the wider community in developing a research agenda and ensuring that research findings are disseminated and accessible to that community.

To elaborate on what I am proposing as a primary role for scholarly research in the region (that is, wider community engagement), I will begin by critically reflecting on a community of scholars whose work centres on Environmental Education (EE) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). I will discuss some of the interactions and outcomes of this community engagement through reviewing select papers in order to indicate roles and responsibilities for future Caribbean scholarly research in education. I will conclude with recommendations.

I begin with Down's paper, "Beginning Teachers as Change Agents—for Sustainable Societies". (Down, 2012), reprinted in this journal issue. It is a paper based on research into teacher professionalism, initiated by Hyacinth Evans and conducted by M. Collins-Figueroa, L. Down, C. Hordatt Gentles, M. Newman, and V. Davis-Morrison. In this paper, Down explores beginning teachers' understanding and practice of change agency within the context of sustainability. Specifically, she examines beginning teachers' role as change agents, their attention to the values of respect and care, as well as their knowledge of social justice and other sustainability issues. She concludes by reflecting on what is needed in teacher preparation. Several years later, Roofe, a fellow researcher investigates "Schooling, teachers in Jamaica and social responsibility: Rethinking teacher preparation" (see Roofe, 2018). What Roofe does is to extend the research done by Down. She responds to the questions that have been implicitly asked and elaborates on needed areas. Roofe explores teachers' perceptions of their preparation for being change agents. Roofe in fact argues that the decline in the moral and spiritual dimension of schooling is related to limited or lack of attention being paid to social responsibility.

Similarly other research conducted in Environmental Education and Education for Sustainable Development by Collins-Figueroa, Down, and others is furthered by the research of Bramwell-Lalor, Gentles, Ferguson, and Roofe—to name a few EE/ESD scholars. Collins-Figueroa (2012) for example, has examined whole school approaches to EESD; the integration of EE, ESD, and disaster-risk reduction into formal school curricula and teacher education institutions. Down, on the other hand, has explored various aspects of Education for Sustainable Development as a tool for societal transformation. She discusses ways of integrating ESD into the curriculum; pedagogical approaches, in particular community-based teaching and learning for SD; and the value of literature for ESD. These areas of research have been complemented and developed by Ferguson's study of teachers' perspectives on ESD; on climate change education and on peace in school initiatives. Further broadening the field has been Hordatt Gentles' (2023) investigation into the obstacles to ESD progress in teacher education and her exploration of "an ideology of caring in ... teacher education as a strategy for strengthening our motivation, capacity, and competence for ESD". Ferguson's later mapping of the research in EE/ESD field in the Caribbean (2023) reveals the research paths of this scholarship, its continuities, its extensions, and its limitations.

What we have here is a community of scholars, responding to each other's work (consciously and subconsciously) and so validating and building on the research in EE/ESD and no doubt in other fields. Knowledge, awareness, and understanding of this field are thus strengthened. Everyone benefits from such collaboration.

This kind of community engagement highlights the value of regional research, as well as the ongoing need for structures to share research and to allow for collaboration. Here the research, in revealing what is happening locally and regionally, is clarifying major global issues impacting the region. The research is also showing pathways for sustainability. Equally important, it is both uncovering the achievements and the gaps in the content of teacher preparation programmes

and practices. The research is further drawing attention to the kinds of critical support needed for education to contribute to the development of sustainable societies.

When we think, therefore, about the future role and responsibilities of Caribbean scholarly research in education, we need to ensure that these present roles and responsibilities are maintained and extended. Useful too would be more research across disciplines so that the reader receives a multi-perspective on the issues researched.

As we look to the future, a community of scholars and researchers like this one will prove invaluable. Apart from the usual structures in place of sharing work through common journals and conferences, we need to ensure that regional research is as recognized as that of non-regional; that citation of regional research is treated as valuable or even more so than that of non-regional. What would be most useful for further research is the extension of the mapping work done by Ferguson so that the gaps and omissions in the field of education in general are clearly shown. And even though the paper's focus is on scholarly research in education, I would also suggest that a trans-disciplinary "whole university approach" to research be furthered, despite the many challenges in doing so.

Equally important to having a community of regional scholars and researchers is the expansion of this community to embrace the wider community as "co-researchers" who truly become their "voice", their representatives, even as they lead in research for which they have specialist knowledge. In that way, academics fulfil one of the hopes of a society growing towards sustainability. Imagine the impact of research on the wider community as they are actually engaged in determining the research agenda as well as being invited responders to the research findings.

The Research Agenda

The research agenda of universities is often primarily and solely the provenance of universities. The ESD research agenda, though

valid and diverse as our earlier discussion shows, is still determined primarily by academics and shared among academics. Given the urgency of the times and the need for all citizens to be actively engaged, this paper argues for a more inclusive approach. The engagement of the wider community is needed, including those who are often informally educated. Moreover, education for the future also requires connecting with the younger generation in setting the research agenda. Through discussions with the wider community on what they know, need to know, what actions are being taken, and what actions need to be taken for a thriving society, scholarly researchers can then formulate a research agenda truly grounded in the realities of the times.

Ultimately, a research agenda conceptualized by a more inclusive group has ready pathways for the application of its findings. I illustrate through the following example of civil society's disconnect from knowledge acquired formally and informally with their practice.

This disconnect from knowledge and practice may be clearly seen in the way Kingston, Jamaica is being changed and developed. The awareness of sustainable development that many in the wider community possess has not prevented the growth of the recent concrete landscapes. On the micro level, a grove of *lignum vitae* trees is cut down to make way for a car lot. Townhouse owners cut down ackee and breadfruit trees because they spoil the concrete landscape. On the macro level, skyscrapers and other forms of urban concrete sprawl replace trees, bushes, and plants.

So we have architects, builders, buyers of concrete structures, politicians (the wider community) opting for the destruction of fruit trees, flowering trees, and green areas in the name of what they see as progress and development. Yet this wider society is also aware at some level that development which destroys the environment is unsustainable and threatens human lives.

I propose that scholarly research engaging this wider community will lead to a disentangling of the complicated, confusing, and contradictory

threads that comprise webs of development. A clear and sustainable pathway between the socio-economic aspects of development and that of respecting the natural environment can be found. Architects, developers, and consumers for example, along with scholarly researchers, can investigate the cost of destroying the environment versus the profit of high-rise buildings. I sometimes wonder what happens to the spirit of those participating in the actual destruction of nature for concrete structures and economic gain.

One of the key strategic recommendations of the Report on Caribbean Education Strategy (Jules, 2000, p. 43) is that Caribbean nations should address “the inefficiencies and inequities in the education system which have led to, and which continue to lead to the current low levels of achievement and widening disparities in the society”. Another significant recommendation of this report is for a “more concerted effort into promoting the cohesion and self-esteem of Caribbean people to dauntlessly face the future”. The Report demands that scholarly research revisits three key aspects of education:

1. What knowledge is taught as a priority;
2. How that knowledge is assessed; and,
3. How “smadiffication”—to quote Nettleford (2006)—is being developed. That is, how self-esteem and confidence is learned in our schools. Noddings’ (2002) assertion that children need desperately to know how to care for themselves and others remains valid.

In revisiting these three key areas for research, we must acknowledge that the knowledge and the assessments conducted are still a limited academic exercise. A recent Calvin and Hobbes’ cartoon (see Watterson, 2013) succinctly illustrates this. Calvin is pictured as angry at his teacher’s dismissal of his question, which he considers important, and so shouts out, “for some reason, they’d rather teach us stuff that any fool can look up in a book”. He is of course punished for this outburst. Yet, Calvin’s response begs us to look at what knowledge is prioritized and what is ignored. The cartoon

suggests that the real questions and issues that students have are ignored. An imperative then for future research is that of determining what the troubling and complex issues are for a new generation. Researchers need to recognize generational differences as they formulate a research agenda for the transformation of society. The younger generation’s perception of what they need to know is crucial in determining not only curriculum and pedagogy, but also research.

Calvin’s statement is also applicable to our various forms of assessment. Are students being tested on “stuff that any fool can look up in a book”? One of the priority areas in the Report on Caribbean Education Strategy (Jules, 2000) is preparation of students for the world of work. That is clearly important. Yet what appears missing is the urgent matter of the preparation of students for societal transformation and how assessment enables that focus. Research on measures that assess students’ actual change work in their community, therefore, needs to be prioritized. At the core of this research is the question of the extent to which the knowledge and values learnt in schools are applied and reflected in the community.

In examining the third aspect of education, I posit that at the core of creating a caring and just world is self-respect, of individuals knowing and being comfortable with self. Self-respect intersects with respect for others and the environment. Yet the research on the relation of caring for and respecting self to the creation of a sustainable world appears to be negligible. Much in our postcolonial society hinders the nurturing of respect for the self. The individual in these contexts and in the global context of materialism often acquires importance and status through possessions, race, colour, and titles. Similar to the Morton figure referenced earlier, in Earl Lovelace’s (1982) classic fiction, *The Wine of Astonishment*, the individual is trapped in notions of self-worth defined by possessions, race, and colour. Caribbean scholarly research needs to address, therefore, this key issue of how we educate for self-esteem.

In this regard, Rex Nettleford's concept of "smadiffication", of self-esteem, of people having power and agency, is worth re-examining (see Scott, 2006). In his critical reflection on the NDTC (Nettleford, 2012) he asserts the importance of recognizing and valuing what is here. He writes of the importance of turning inwards to find one's own unique forms. He asserts that this is necessary for building self-esteem. Yet how that valuing of self and who we are is being incorporated into the education system does not appear to be a priority on the research agenda. The call of the Jules' Report (Jules, 2000, p. 43) for a more concerted effort that promotes the cohesion and self-esteem of Caribbean people to dauntlessly face the future must in fact inform future research. Caribbean people need to know how this is to be effected.

If turning inwards to find one's unique form and ascribing value to who one is, leads to a self-confidence, trust, and respect; then scholarly research needs to examine what enables this. Miller (2003) also raises this question within the context of what he posits as the teaching profession's loss of its moorings in religion (the "turning inwards"), more recently in nationalism, nation building, and the current pervasiveness of the merchant ethos. He focuses our attention on teachers' functioning, with the concept of education being the path to upward social mobility—to acquiring resources and status in the merchant ethos. He notes the ambivalence and ambiguity of purpose that the profession must now be facing. These are crucial questions that Caribbean research needs to confront. If education is key to helping one shape self-identity and national identity, how is this to be accomplished in an ethos which declares that possessions are the determinant of selfhood, especially when education has bought into this notion at some level. A key research question therefore must be based on how the teaching profession should function in an ethos that is antithetical to the creation of a sustainable world.

Dissemination of Findings

This paper also argues for a more inclusive approach to the dissemination of research findings as scholarly researchers move towards increased

engagement with the wider community. Much of the valuable research is locked away and archived (literally and figuratively) in theses, tomes, and journals for the readership of academics. Yet disseminating findings in non-technical and non-scholarly language and in open formats, for example, in social media, will create a wider readership and have a greater impact. See for example, Miller (2011) *Marginalization of the Black Male* and Miller (1991) *Men at Risk*, and the difference between both these publications, where the earlier publication is an easier read for the wider public. "Easy" access to research findings is essential for the necessary life-long education of the public.

Recommendations

This paper has aimed to show the necessity for Caribbean scholarship and research to engage more fully with its wider community and with society. The paper has proposed that for Caribbean scholarly research to be relevant in the 21st century, and to respond effectively to the major challenge of a sustainable future facing humanity, it will need a more inclusive and diverse community of researchers.

The paper has acknowledged the rich community of educational scholars and researchers that exists. It argues, however, for their promotion so that each scholar has easy access to a database of the research path and subjects of their colleagues in the various research communities.

The paper recommends that this community of scholars be expanded to include more of the wider community—civic society and youths in particular. This means among other things Schools of Education inviting civic society to help set the research agenda. In addition, these Schools must attend to ways of disseminating research findings to those outside the academy. Key research findings need to be translated into a language and format that is readily accessible and easily understood by the public. And public spaces for dissemination of key findings should be considered.

As part of this wider community thrust, Caribbean scholarly research needs to investigate the priority given to teaching and learning for peace, for the care and respect of others and the environment. In effect, research on how learning for community transformation is mainstreamed needs to be extended.

Along with this must be research on assessment for community transformation. Research needs to be undertaken on the factors that promote or limit the mainstreaming of assessment for service learning and community projects and the values that underpin them. There needs to be investigation into what limits assessments based on students' actual contribution to the development of their community.

Finally, there is the issue of care for self, self-esteem, "sma diffication". The importance of this has been clearly recognized from the research. What increasingly needs to be done here is research on how this is being taught and learned in our educational institutions.

The significance of Caribbean scholarly research to the region is evident. However, given the increasing sustainability challenges, there is now an urgency for the wider community to be engaged at the more inclusive level of "co-researchers". The collaboration between the wider community and the academic community must be treated as an imperative if the overarching goal of research is a peaceful, just, and caring world.

Lorna Down, PhD is a retired Senior Lecturer in the School of Education, The University of the West Indies, Mona Campus. Her areas of specialisation include Teacher Education, Education for Sustainable Development, Literature and Literature Education. Her most recent publications include *Education for Sustainable Development in the Caribbean, Pedagogy, Processes and Practices* (co-authored with Therese Ferguson) and *Caribbean Writers on Teaching Literature*, co-edited with Thelma Baker.

Email: lornadown@gmail.com or
lornadown02@uwi.edu.jm

References

- Collins-Figueroa, M. (2012). Biodiversity and education for sustainable development in teacher education programmes of four Jamaican educational institutions. *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development*, 6(2), 253–267.
- Down, L. (2012). Beginning teachers as change agents—for sustainable societies: Exploring the relationship between beginning teachers' concept of change agency and the concept of sustainability. *Caribbean Journal of Education*, 33(1), 39–60. <https://www.mona.uwi.edu/soe/publications/cje/article/1312>
- Ferguson, T. (2023). ESD progress, problems and prospects in the English-speaking Caribbean: Some perspectives from the field. *Environmental Education Research*, 29(7), 1025–1042. <https://doi.org/10.1080/013504622.2022.2054961>
- Hordatt Gentles, C. (2023). Teaching as a work of heart. Why teaching teachers to care is important in ESD work in Jamaica. *Environmental Education Research*, 29(7), 1010–1023. <https://doi.org/10.1080/013504622.2022.2128058>
- Jules, D. (2000, January 4). *Caribbean Education Strategy*. UWISpace, <https://uwispace.sta.uwi.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/51359e4b-55ba-44f8-bbf1-f6b8b5d682dc/content>
- Miller, E. (1991) *Men at risk*. Jamaica Publishing House
- Miller, E. (2003). *The prophet and the virgin: The masculine and feminine roots of teaching*. Ian Randle Publishers.
- Miller, E. (2011) *Marginalization of the Black Male*. Author.
- Nettleford, R. (2012). *NDTC Journal*, 2, 9–12.
- Noddings, N. (2002). Educating moral people: A caring alternative to character education. Teachers College Press.

- Roofe, C. (2018). Schooling, teachers in Jamaica and social responsibility: Rethinking teacher preparation. *Social Responsibility Journal*, 14(4), 816-827. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SRJ-10-2017-0202>
- Scott, D., & Nettleford, R. (2006). To be liberated from the obscurity of themselves: An interview with Rex Nettleford. *Small Axe*, 10(2), 97-246. <https://doi.org/10.1215/-10-2-97>
- Vilela, M. (2020). Sustainability and global citizenship values education with the earth charter: Reflections, experiences, and pedagogical elements. In M. Vilela & A. Jiménez (Eds.), *Earth Charter, Education and the Sustainable Development Goal 4.7* (pp. 8-19). UPEACE Press in collaboration with Earth Charter International.
- Watterson, B. (2013). Calvin and Hobbes. Andrew McMeel Publishing.
-