

Increasing Transformative Impact by Design in Education in the Caribbean

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Abstract

Educational researchers in the Caribbean have an opportunity to be part of the solutions to grand challenges, such as climate change, violence, and disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes. The transformative approach to research provides a framework that focuses on issues of inequities and power differences in a conscious effort to increase social, economic, and environmental justice. Examples of studies from different parts of the world are used to illustrate the application of this framework with the goal of increasing the research impact. The strategies used in the transformative approach, such as building culturally responsive relationships, integrating social activist strategies, developing coalitions, and addressing power inequities, can be applied in ways that are responsive to the culture and context of the Caribbean.

Keywords: transformation, social justice, coalitions

Introduction

Educators face challenges that are exacerbated by the global epidemic, the climate crisis, the increasing gap between rich and poor, and persistent inequities in educational access and outcomes. Some researchers accept the responsibility to contribute to positive transformative changes in light of these challenges. Researchers as a community can contribute to transformative changes by deliberately designing their studies using the

principles of the transformative approach (Mertens, 2018; Mertens, 2024; Mertens & Wilson, 2019). This requires a shift in thinking regarding the role of the researcher to incorporate strategies for increasing social, economic, and environmental justice into their studies. A transformative approach to research provides researchers with the opportunity to design their studies so that they increase the probability of addressing issues of inequity.

The Transformative Approach to Research

The transformative approach to research is informed by an ethical stance that calls upon researchers to make visible the structural causes of inequality and discrimination thus enabling the unmasking of versions of reality that support an oppressive status quo and reveals those that can lead to transformative changes (Mertens, 2024). The ethical assumption associated with the use of a transformative lens for research leads researchers to design their studies to explicitly address change in the form of increased social, economic, and environmental justice. To this end, researchers need to include a phase of building relationships with the full range of people impacted by the research (stakeholders), including those who are most marginalized and vulnerable, in ways that address differences in access to power. The formation of coalitions, collaborations, or partnerships provide a mechanism to inform the development of the research study and to sustain the needed changes. Transformative research generally uses mixed methods of systematic collection and integration of quantitative and qualitative data to facilitate inclusive relationship building, contextual analysis, and testing interventions.

Traditionally, researchers have occupied positions of power in their ability to determine the research questions and design, implement studies, and disseminate results through academic publication. However, a transformative approach asks researchers to reconsider how they engage in these activities by being inclusive of the voices of the full range of stakeholders, including those who are most marginalized (Mertens, 2024). This opens possibilities to address issues of importance to members of communities that are often ignored, even as they face increasing challenges such as the climate crisis and sustainable development. The importance of addressing environmental justice is critically important, especially for communities in island countries, such as the

Caribbean, who are most vulnerable to land, economic, and cultural losses (Mertens, 2020). McDougal (2021) provides an example of a transformative approach to environmental issues in her research in a Jamaican school that focused on environmental education and sustainable development. This study exemplifies the benefits of meaningfully engaging stakeholders, in this case students, as co-researchers. Building capacity of the stakeholders as they engage in the research process illustrates the type of reciprocity that is integral to a transformative approach. Capacity building is another part of the transformative approach. In McDougal's study, the students developed leadership skills that included increased self-confidence, commitment to action, and teambuilding. They also conducted cross-curricular research on place-based environmental improvement- a transformative change that is needed especially in island countries.

Structuring Research to Support Transformative Change

The key components to include in research that consciously seeks to support transformative change include: building culturally responsive relationships, adopting strategies of social activists and change agents, capacity building and reciprocity, developing coalitions for informing the process and sustainability of the research, and addressing power inequities (Mertens, 2020a). Cultural responsiveness includes a focus on increased equity, inclusion of a historical perspective on culture and context, and partnership ownership (Hood et al., 2015). The adoption of strategies used by social activists and change agents might appear to be controversial and in conflict with the role of researcher; however, if we seek transformative change, perhaps we can learn something from those whose focus has been on that issue. Coalition development as a part of the research process is relatively new, but some funding agencies, such as the Centers for Disease Control and the National Institutes of Health, are

requiring coalitions for the projects they support (Wolfe et al., 2020). These coalitions need to be built with a critical eye towards equitable power sharing to protect those who are most vulnerable as well as to improve the likelihood that interventions will be culturally responsive and sustainable. Several studies are described in the next section that illustrate strategies for building culturally responsive relationships, integrating social activist strategies, developing coalitions, and addressing power inequities.

Addressing Educational Disparities

Schools have diverse populations; some students enjoy the privilege of attending schools that are supportive and responsive to their cultural backgrounds. However, other students attend schools in which they have more negative experiences than positive ones, resulting in disparities in their academic achievement, and, as a consequence, their life chances are less optimistic. A team of researchers in the United States used a transformative mixed methods approach to understand the experience of students who were marginalized and vulnerable, and to develop strategies to improve their educational experiences (Garnett et al., 2019). Traditionally, school reform comes from the “top”, however, this model of decision making is questionable given the historical disparities that persist in terms of academic achievement, school attendance and participation, and access to behavioral support services. Historical and contextual analysis reveals that the dimensions of diversity that manifest disparities include: race/ethnicity, ability, gender sexual identity, language, immigrant/refugee status, and economic status. Garnett et al. started with the assumption that they needed to consciously “flatten systematized power hierarchies” (p. 3) to support transformative change.

The school in which Garnett et al.’s (2019) research took place was in a rural area; however, due to a recent increase in the number of refugee families, many of the students were English language learners. Using a transformative

lens led the researchers to explicitly surface the history of White supremacy and an ableist legacy that resulted in greater educational disparities for Black and Brown students and for those with disabilities. The school system adopted a zero-tolerance exclusionary discipline policy that disproportionately affected the marginalized and vulnerable students and resulted in a higher suspension rate for this group of students. The higher suspension rate also correlated with higher involvement with the juvenile justice system, thus feeding the school-to-prison pipeline. This disciplinary policy and its consequences for those most marginalized is a manifestation of the historical legacy of White supremacy. At the request of the school district, the school and a team of university researchers formed a partnership that specified the use of transformative mixed methods action research and incorporated strategies from Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) approaches. The key question that challenged the researchers was how to build trusting relationships with students, given the traditional power and privilege enjoyed by researchers.

Meeting the challenge of building trusting relationships between researchers and marginalized and vulnerable students was not a smooth process (Garnett et al., 2019). However, the researchers said they were committed to ensuring that the students’ voices would influence the development of the research topic, questions, and methods used in the study. The relationship building began by using a variety of experiential activities such as vocabulary exercises and storytelling in an effort to bring forward the students’ perceptions and concerns in a safe space. The researchers had conducted a preliminary survey about perceived discrimination based on gender, religion, and race. The students began debating the validity of the results of the survey; they communicated their concerns about how the research was framed and implemented to the university research team. The flattening of the power structure was evident when one Black female student challenged the adult facilitators

on the development of the research questions. The adults then acknowledged that they had not acted in accordance with the YPAR principles and modified the questions in response to these concerns. In addition, the students critiqued the survey items, and the survey was then modified to focus more explicitly on accounting for injustices experienced by marginalized students and discrimination in school. The collection of quantitative data on school disparities and the effect of the discipline policy were integrated with qualitative data collected from the students about their experiences. These results were then used to modify the curriculum intervention that had been planned (by the school district) to reflect the students' concerns. Trust was enhanced when the students saw that the researchers were serious about sharing power, they were listened to, and the research study and intervention were modified to be responsive to their concerns.

Building Safe Spaces for Youth to Reduce Violence

Violence in and around schools is a problem around the globe. Knights (2014) documented the difficulties in trying to reduce violence and crime in Trinidad and Tobago because of issues in the wider community related to the illegal drug trade and an increase in access to guns. This same problem exists in communities in the United States, especially in high poverty areas. Dhaliwal et al. (2020) decided to integrate strategies used by social activists in their research on the reduction of violence and creation of safe spaces for youth in California. The researchers consciously chose a liberatory stance, informed by strategies used by change agents to move toward increased equity. Instead of starting the research by formulating research questions and testing the effectiveness of an intervention, the research team engaged in a phase of relationship building with the program founders, partners, and staff of a youth center. A youth-led data collection effort, in the form of a survey to assess the needs of the youth to identify what they needed to have a safe space to call their own, had been conducted prior to engagement

with the researchers. Results of this survey were used to frame the research plan, data collection tools, and use of the findings. Once the research plan was developed, the researchers conducted a member survey that quantitatively assessed the young people's experiences in the youth center. Rather than thinking they had finished with their needs assessment with one survey, the youth center staff adopted a model of continuous learning that included a quantitative annual survey. The qualitative portion of the research design took the form of a Listening Campaign in which staff asked the young people about their needs and priorities and what was needed to address their challenges. They integrated the results of the two methods using media, the arts, cultural programming, youth-led capacity building exercises in the form of youth participatory action research.

The results of the data collection and the interactions with the team and youth increased the understandings of the adversity that the youth faced and their coping strategies, and formed the basis for discussions at regular retreats where they made their plans for the next year (Dhaliwal, et al., 2020). A chat lounge was established and staffed by the high school community health interns. This provided a safe space for the youth to discuss the problems they faced with violence, as well as to examine the dynamics of the school-to-prison pipeline that disproportionality affects youth of color. The early relationship building with continuous attention to issues of power and engagement resulted in an empathic community that branched out from the youth center to include school administrators, teachers, parents, and students. This transformative, liberatory process yielded an intervention that is continuously examined to ensure that the community it is intended to serve sees it as valuable and usable.

Shier (2015) expands on ideas for doing research in which children are co-researchers based on her work in Nicaragua. Strategies to engage with children that equal the playing field include:

- First, the children need to see that they are recognized as holders of legitimate knowledge and given the opportunity to determine the problems that they see as most pressing.
- Second, the children may need technical support and resources so that they can meaningfully engage in the planning and implementing the research, as well as how to disseminate the research findings in ways that contribute to transformative change.
- Third, adults can be recruited to provide the necessary training in research methods, teamwork, data analysis, and report preparation.

The strategies that Shier recommends provide guidance for researchers who wish to do transformative work with children as co-researchers. To support taking action, to support transformative change based on the research, organizations (e.g., schools, community centers) need to make a commitment to sustained support for the children and facilitate implementing the recommendations that come from the research findings.

Social Activist Strategies to Incorporate into Transformative Research

Three strategies that social activists use have potential to increase the transformative impact of research are advocacy, mobilizing, and organizing (McBride et al., 2020). Advocacy means that researchers incorporate strategies in their designs to motivate decision makers to act toward increasing the common good. McBride et al. demonstrated advocacy as a part of their design to study how a social services group that served a high-poverty area in Chicago could advocate for increased resources when their government funding was cut. Mobilizing is a more expansive concept than advocacy and involves including not only leaders, but also the people, programs and community organizations that have a mission to increase equity. McBride et al. used mobilizing in a study of how arts-

based interventions could effect change in the criminal justice system. The research team built the capacity of the people, programs, and community organizations to create change at all levels. Community organizing goes a step further as a strategy to work directly with vulnerable and marginalized communities to support needed changes. McBride and associates used community organizing with groups of parents who wanted a community center for their children and access to affordable housing. By building the parents' skills in how to organize and conduct surveys to document their needs, the community was able to bring about the changes that they valued.

While community-based organizing is a familiar concept in the Caribbean, it is still challenging to use this strategy. Knights (2014) examined the history of community-based organizing in Trinidad and Tobago in the form of village councils that were established in the early 1940s to support welfare reform. She used a transformative mixed methods design that began with a literature review and a contextual analysis of the historical and socioeconomic context in Trinidad. She used extant data on drug offenses, violent crimes, and contract awards as quantitative indicators of the challenges faced in this context. The historical qualitative data revealed that the village councils changed their roles and responsibilities over the years, but they were seen as a model for the establishment of Community Action Councils as part of a six-year government intervention to reduce violence and improve economic conditions. However, the intended role of the Community Action Councils was compromised by corruption and the lack of supervision (Mertens, 2020). Knights integrated qualitative and quantitative data to document that the criminal gangs were the beneficiaries of large amounts of the resources intended to support infrastructure improvements. However, the money was used by the gangs to purchase more guns. Gang members even killed each other over the awarding of contracts to rival gangs. The collection of this historical and contextual data reveals the importance of understanding the challenges experienced by communities when attempting to use social activist strategies.

The second phase of Knights' transformative mixed methods research involved building relationships with the village council and leaders. In consultation with these community members, she continued her study by using quantitative data from the Crime Victimization Survey and qualitative data collected through interviews and focus groups. She integrated these two sources of data to formulate recommendations for community-based activism in the interest of reducing violence and increasing community capacities.

Gender-based Violence in Universities

Another example of the use of a transformative approach in an educational setting is provided by Puigvert et al. (2017) who examined how gender-based violence could be reduced in universities in Spain. In this study, resistance to change was rooted in a misogynistic structure in the universities that allowed sexual harassment to be accepted as normal. The researchers also faced personal challenges when they were threatened and falsely accused of using sexual favors for advancement at the university that were spread through social media. To provide a safe space for the people who shared their gender-based violence experiences with them, the researchers promised anonymity to their key informants. They used a mixed methods approach that included quantitative surveys, in-depth interviews, and storytelling sessions where participants could share their daily life experiences. The researchers integrated the quantitative and qualitative data to provide a picture of the pervasiveness of gender-based violence, and the lack of the universities' ability or willingness to respond to these issues. Using social change agent strategies, the researchers engaged in dialogues with many different stakeholder groups and made presentations at academic conferences and government agencies, as well as publishing the results in public media. This brought pressure on the universities to develop gender equality offices and protocols for preventing and responding to gender-based violence.

Implications for Educational Research in the Caribbean

The sample studies that illustrate a transformative approach cited in this article may seem foreign when thinking about research in the Caribbean because they were conducted in a variety of countries, including the United States, Spain, and Nicaragua. However, the issues that were addressed in the studies are highly relevant in this region of the world. Climate change, educational disparities, reduction of violence, and prevention of gender-based violence all are of concern in schools. The strategies used in the transformative approach that are key to applying this method include building culturally responsive relationships, integrating social activist strategies, developing coalitions, and addressing power inequities. These need to be applied in ways that are responsive to the culture and context of the Caribbean (Mertens, 2020).

Wilson, et al. (2019) noted that much research in this region has not exemplified a transformative, culturally responsive approach. They recommend that researchers consider incorporating naturally occurring forms of socialization such as conversations that occur in town squares, 'liming' and 'ole' talk be incorporated into research methods to make use of relationships that already exist. "Liming takes place in a number of countries within the Caribbean, though different terminologies are used depending on the country to describe this type of engagement (e.g., *bemberria* in Dominican Republic, *janguero* in Puerto Rico, *par* or *lyme* in Jamaica). Ole talk has been recognized by many scholars and writers as a uniquely Caribbean way of engaging with each other in small or large groups." (Wilson, et al., 10) It is most important to acknowledge the colonial past that these islands share, the heterogeneity in languages, traditional power structures, and the ability to collaborate for social change.

Researchers in the Caribbean who choose to use a transformative mixed methods approach can adapt the key strategies, building culturally responsive relationships, integrating social

activist strategies, developing coalitions, and addressing power inequities, to the culture and context of the Caribbean. Incorporation of these strategies would provide one way to increase Indigenous cultural responsiveness in research based on the experiences of those who still suffer from the consequences of colonization. Adaptation of these strategies to local conditions provides a potential pathway to increase the impact of research in pursuit of social, economic, and environmental justice. Challenges exist in a shift to the role of researcher to incorporate social activism; however, the research community and the communities they serve could benefit from examining how this could be done in contexts of adversity.

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