Instituting Universal Secondary Education: Caribbean Students' Perceptions of their Schooling Experiences

Verna C. Knight[*]   Jennifer Obidah
School of Education, Faculty of Humanities and Education, University of the West Indies
Cave Hill Campus, P. O. Box 64, Bridgetown, BB 11000, Barbados
* E-mail of the corresponding author: verna.knight@cavehill.uwi.edu

Abstract

As Caribbean governments continue to invest heavily in education as a major strategy for national and economic development, the question of student achievement and the need for increasing the effectiveness of schools in producing maximum student learning remains a dominant feature on the regional educational agenda, especially given recent education reforms which have mandated secondary educational provisions for every student in most Caribbean territories. However, despite this no Caribbean study thus far has examined Universal Secondary Education (USE) from the perspective of the students in the Caribbean who have now been afforded access to secondary education. This study takes an in-depth look at students' experiences at eight secondary classrooms in the tri-island state of Grenada, Carriacou and Petite Martinique with the inception of Universal Secondary Education (USE). The study sought to examine the experiences of students in the lower performing secondary schools most affected by USE. Data were collected through a mixed method approach which included a survey of fifty (50) students and one (1) student focus group from each of the eight targeted schools. Student responses were grouped according to the following categories derived from data coding and analysis: classroom relationships, classroom teaching and learning, school curriculum, and school infrastructure. The findings present students' explanations for the causes of poor student-teacher relationships, and inadequacies in teaching and learning, curriculum organization and physical infrastructure at the secondary level. This study therefore adds students' voices to the persevering debate on educational improvement in the Caribbean in the 21st century of universal access to education.
Keywords: universal secondary education, secondary schooling, caribbean education, access to education, student voice, schooling experience, student-teacher relationship, teaching and learning

1. Introduction

As Caribbean governments continue to invest heavily in education as a major strategy for national and economic development, the question of student achievement and the need for increasing the effectiveness of schools in producing maximum student learning remains a dominant feature on the regional educational agenda. The sub-regional education sector strategy for the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), known as the OECS Education Sector Strategy (OESS) 2012 – 21, was recently revised to reflect the theme "Every Learner Succeeds," (OERU, 2013). The theme of this sub-regional education strategy bears testament to its overarching emphasis on maximizing individual student learning, and is consistent with the international agenda on reforming education worldwide (UNESCO, 2010; 2013; 2014a; 2014b; Caillods, 2010; Konstantopoulos, 2006; 2008; Barro & Jong-Wha, 2001; Burnett & Harry, 1997).

Efforts to reform education to meet the needs of the student over the years have been supported by research in developing countries, which have found school factors to have a significant impact on student outcomes (Rutter, Maughan, Montrose & Ouston, 1979; Simmons & Alexander, 1980; Heyneman & Loxley, 1983; Evans, 2001; UNESCO, 2010). Simmons & Alexander (1980) in a meta-analysis of student achievement in developing countries concluded that while home background or parental socio-economic status generally had a stronger influence on student performance than policy-controlled school variables, this was more often the case in the primary and early secondary grade levels. Policy-controlled school variables generally had a stronger impact than home or parental background for students at the upper secondary level.

The findings of Simmons & Alexander (1980) were later confirmed by Heyneman & Loxley (1983) who concluded that findings which support the effect of home background or parental socio-economic status as having a greater influence on student achievement than schools, were more applicable for schooling at the primary up to the lower levels of the secondary school in developing countries, but diminished as students progressed through the education system. They concluded that in developing countries, school and teacher quality were the pre-dominant influences on student learning.

Rutter, et al (1979) also concluded that schools do make a difference to student achievement. They highlighted the following as characteristics of good schools which made a difference in terms of student achievement: work-oriented lessons with time focused on subject matter, rather than behavior or administration; hard-working teachers who planned together and were supported by strong supervision and coordination by senior teachers; formal reward-based systems, public commendation for good performance, and immediate

feedback to students; students who took responsibility for day to day matters in their school life such as caring for their own books and school facilities; homework that was set and followed up, an open emphasis on academic performance, expectations that students will work hard and succeed, and a good school climate.

Evans (2001) emphasized another element of great importance in student learning in the 21st century; the importance of teacher-student relationships and interactions. Teacher- student relationships and interactions were found to be important in facilitating or hindering the learning process. She noted, "The sentiments which teachers and students have toward one another are critical to this relationship and become the basis for successful efforts at teaching and learning" (Evans, 2001, p. 30). The relationship that teachers and students establish with each other creates a social setting within which teaching and learning must take place. Evans (2001) believed that it is the teacher's responsibility to initiate and develop good relationships with students, and thus create the appropriate social setting for maximum student learning.

A SERCE study (Spanish Equivalent for the Second Regional Comparative and Explanatory study, 2008) conducted in 3065 schools throughout Latin America and the Caribbean examined factors associated with student learning in terms of both school equipment and processes, and characteristics of students. The study concluded that the most compelling school related factors that impacted children's learning ranked in terms of greater to lesser influence, were school climate, access to basic services, computer availability, school management and infrastructure (UNESCO, 2008). School climate was identified in the First Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study in 1997 as the single most important factor influencing student achievement, and was confirmed in the second study. School climate defined within this context referred to the existence of positive relationships among students, and between students and teachers (UNESCO, 1998). The SERCE study highlighted that as it relates to student characteristics, the single most important factor influencing student learning was grade repetition (UNESCO, 2008). Research conducted internationally confirms that the practice of grade repetition has a decidedly negative effect on student achievement. Although grade repetition was found to be a commonly employed school practice, the unintended consequences of grade repetition were found to be especially detrimental to the scholastic development of lower performing students, and proven to contribute to higher dropout rates because the students who were retained most often did not improve as a result of being retained (NASP, 2003; 1991; Konstantopoulos, 2006; 2008; Reynolds, Temple and McCoy, 1997; Shepard & Smith, 1990; UNESCO, 2010).

However, because the first and second regional comparative studies only collected data from two Caribbean countries (Cuba and the Dominican Republic), the extent to which these findings are also true for the Commonwealth Caribbean nations is uncertain and needs to be verified.

2. The need for the students' voice in the USE debate

Littky (2004) stressed the importance of utilizing the students' voice in the educational debate on improving schooling, and student academic achievement. In the process of improving schooling for Caribbean students in the 21st century, students' voices should be included. Examinations of current education systems directed at developing relevant policies for school improvement and school effectiveness must necessarily incorporate strengths and weaknesses seen through the eyes of the child for whom such educational plans are being developed. As Littky (2004) noted "You cannot know a [child] whose voice you don't listen to, whose interests are a mystery…and whose feelings are viewed as irrelevant to the educational process" (p.21), and so until a child shares with you what he or she is thinking, one cannot even begin to fully appreciate how their minds work, or know what are their real needs.

Caribbean governments' use of increased provision of educational access as a developmental strategy has been justified and driven in part by international initiatives such as the UNESCO led Education For All (EFA) initiative first launched in 1990 and reaffirmed in 2000, and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) initiative launched in 2000. However, although these international initiatives have generally emphasized the goal of the provision of quality basic education, which is defined by the Dakar Framework as the provision of primary and at least lower secondary schooling for all children (UNESCO, 2000), the focus of universal basic access to education in the Caribbean within the last two decades has been on the provision of universal access at the secondary level – Universal Secondary Education (USE). This is because universal access to education at the primary level has already been achieved in the Caribbean. At the secondary level, mass secondary schooling has been achieved throughout the region, with at least thirteen (13) of the eighteen (18) Commonwealth Caribbean countries having attained USE (Miller, 2009). Four of five remaining countries (Belize, Guyana, Jamaica and Grenada) have attained extensive coverage at the post-primary level but have not fully attained universal coverage (Miller, 2009; di Gropello, 2003). Antigua and Barbuda has only recently embarked on attainment of USE (Government of Antigua and Barbuda, 2014).

Research findings and reports evaluating Caribbean countries' experiences with USE reveals that it has exacerbated student educational risk factors such as low literacy and numeracy rates, increased retention and dropout rates, and increased misbehaviors at the secondary level (Knight, 2014; Marks, 2009; Thompson, 2009;

di Gropella, 2003). Such findings show that, paradoxically, increased access to education in the Caribbean has negatively impacted educational quality at the secondary level, and poses a threat to the ultimate EFA and MDG developmental goal of ensuring that every individual learner achieves their full potential or even adequate skills for life and work. In short, students' access to secondary education alone appears to threaten rather than advance the development goals aspired to by Caribbean countries.

However even though research clearly shows the importance of student voices and the many challenges of Caribbean countries in the implementation of USE, no study thus far has examined USE from the perspective of the students who have consequently been afforded access to secondary education. In a recent study of USE in the tri-island state of Grenada, Carriacou & Petite Martinique which sought to examine the process by which the policy of USE was implemented, as part of the data collected students were given the opportunity to voice their experiences with the current provisions of secondary schooling. This paper represents the voices of these students as they add to the on-going conversation vis-à-vis the provision of quality learning at the secondary level in the Caribbean. The paper examines students' account of their secondary schooling experiences and analyzes the implications of these perspectives for student achievement.

3. Methodology

There are 19 public secondary schools located throughout the tri-island state of Grenada, Carriacou and Petite Martinique. These schools serve a total of 10,171 students, and are staffed by 664 teachers (Statistical Division of the Ministry of Education, 2010). Sixty-two percent (62%) of the teachers at the secondary level of the school system are untrained; untrained being defined in this context as having completed teacher's training and successfully attained qualification (OECS Secretariat, 2013). The research population upon which this paper was based comprised eight public secondary schools. Two of these secondary schools were located on the island of Carriacou serving residents on the islands of both Carriacou and Petite Martinique. Given that these two schools were the first two schools in the entire tri-island state where USE was fully implemented, both were included in the sample of schools to be surveyed. The remaining six schools were selected from the seventeen (17) secondary schools on the mainland of Grenada. The schools on mainland Grenada, which were selected to be part of the study, were predominantly low performing schools since these were the schools to which the increased numbers of students transferred were allocated. The names of these schools were selected from a master list, which highlighted the performance of secondary schools in Grenada for the years 2007-2009 (Compiled from ministry reports on the overall performance of students in the public secondary schools). The eight schools which participated in this study were therefore purposefully selected.

The data for the study was collected over a three (3) week period in February 2011, during a study of USE in Grenada. Using surveys and interviews, the study sought to examine from the perspectives of teachers, principals and students, how school processes had been impacted by the policy of Universal Secondary Education. As part of this study, data was collected from students in order to develop an understanding of students' experiences as part of the current secondary school system. At each of the secondary schools, surveys were distributed to fifty (50) students (ten students from each class level – a total of four hundred students,) and a focus group session was held with students (two students selected from each class level – ten students per group). The data that informs this paper were taken from the survey of four hundred students and the eight focus group sessions. Teachers were responsible for the selection of willing students, and were asked to ensure that the students selected represented a mixed range of academic abilities.

4. Data analysis

The quantitative and qualitative data were each analyzed separately, and then later combined at the data interpretation stage. The quantitative data was analyzed using a statistical programme known as SPSS, which allowed for calculations of central tendencies and variability, and a graphical portrayal of the results. This data provided the context for the descriptive findings obtained from the qualitative data. The qualitative data was analyzed according to themes arising out of the transcripts. The quantitative and qualitative aspects of the results were then collated, and the combined findings presented. This paper is therefore based on the findings from the students' survey and focus group discussions.

Through the processes of data coding and analysis, the following categories emerged: classroom teaching and learning, classroom relationships, schools' curriculum, and schools' infrastructure. Classroom teaching and learning as a category takes into account teaching methods utilized during teaching, as well as student assessment practices in schools. Classroom relationship as a category examines both student-teacher relations and student-student relations. The category that speaks to the schools' curriculum takes into account the scheduled subjects on the curriculum, as well as after school programmes and activities organized and managed by schools. The physical infrastructure speaks to the physical school plant as well as its surroundings.

5. Findings

As Table 1.1 depicts, the areas which were most commonly identified by students as requiring improvements in order to improve student learning at the secondary level have been listed in order of highest to lowest scoring. Classroom relationships scored the highest, followed by classroom teaching and learning processes, then the schools' curriculum, and the physical infrastructure. Other areas that were also identified included disciplinary procedures and social services offered at the schools.

Table 1.1 Summary of areas in which students identified weaknesses at the secondary level by percent

School Processes	Number of Respondents	Improvements	No Improvements
Classroom Relationships: Student – Teacher Student – Student	400 400	69% 48%	31% 52%
Classroom Teaching and Learning: Teaching Methods Student Assessment	400 400	62% 41%	38% 59%
Schools' Curriculum: Formal Curriculum Extracurricular programmes	400 400	47% 50%	54% 50%
Physical Infrastructure: Buildings & Surroundings	400	50%	50%
Other areas: Disciplinary Procedures Social Services	400 400	40% 34%	60% 66%

Students' explanations of the weaknesses in the above aspects of their secondary schooling and the resulting student failures were elaborated on during the focus group discussion sessions. Student explanations are presented under the headings that emerged from the data coding and analysis: classroom relationships, classroom teaching and learning processes, the schools' curriculum, and the physical infrastructure of the school.

5.1 Classroom relationships
5.1.1 Student-teacher relationships

Student-teacher relationships were identified as being the single factor most requiring attention and improvement at the secondary level. During the focus group discussions students revealed that they "got along" with "some teachers" but not with "some others." They claimed to get along well with teachers who: 1) showed them respect (they believed teachers should give respect to get respect), 2) showed a positive interest in their welfare, 3) taught well, 4) taught subject areas they liked, 5) set boundaries for students' conduct, 6) had good attitudes and, 7) were willing to help students when they needed help. Students claimed to not get along well with teachers who: 1) did not show they care, 2) had favorite students, 3) focused on the fast learners, and are not much help for the slower learners, and 4) teachers who called students derogatory names that offended them. Comments made by students included:

"Student – teacher relationship needs improving," (Group #3, fn. February 21st, 2011).
"We get along well with those who show us respect…show interest in us…if we like their subject…if they hear something and will not form judgments first before speaking to students…if they have good attitudes," (Group #8, fn. February 28th, 2011).
"Some teachers do not listen…to our problems…they do not care…some have favorite students who they pay attention to," (Group #3, fn. February 21st, 2011).
"We like those teachers who come down to our level…who understand and care for us, but set boundary lines," (Group #1, fn. February 16th, 2011).
"Those [teachers] who care make the effort to teach well….explaining things in class…those who don't seem to care… we don't get along well with them…[teachers] should all care…only some do," (Group #8, fn. February 28th, 2011).
Students believed that some teachers did not know how to appropriately speak to students, and so students

responded in a negative manner to them as a result of the teacher's negative approach. They believed that most misbehavior occurred because some teachers were not mature enough and needed to be better trained to manage student behaviors in the classroom before these behaviors got out of control. Students believed that teachers' inability to effectively manage behaviors in the classroom facilitated further misbehavior and much class time is wasted.

"Some teachers need to be trained to control students' behavior in the classroom… [Teachers] need to respond in the right way and not overreact…some teachers are piggish…get really angry and curse students…lots of time get wasted," (Group #8, fn. February 28th, 2011).

"Some teachers act like little children … [they] do not act like mature adults when dealing with children in and out of the classroom…some teachers argue with students and when students respond they send them to the Principal's office," (Group #1, fn. February 16th, 2011).

"Some teachers attitudes stink…they need teaching too," (Group #1, fn. February 16th, 2011).

"Respect have to be both ways…some teachers don't know how to speak to students," (Group #2, fn. February 16th, 2011).

Students expressed the feeling that teachers dealt with too many of their misbehaviors in front of other students. They complained of feeling insulted, embarrassed and often demeaned during these interactions. From the emotional way students expressed themselves regarding this issue, it was observable that students' images in the eyes of others was very important to them at this stage of their life; even at the expense of academic success.

"They deal with too much things in front of other students…they embarrass and insult us," (Group #3, fn. February 21st, 2011).

"Some [teachers] call students bad names…they tell us we're stupid…and we respond too," (Group #6, fn. February 24th, 2011).

"Some teachers have a bad attitude towards students," (Group #6, fn. February 24th, 2011).

"Some teachers simply do not like some students...it is obvious," (Group #3, fn. February 21st, 2011).

Students also complained that some teachers developed inappropriate relationships with students and even shared details of their personal lives and relationships with these students. This breach in privacy students believed contributed to disrespect later when there were disagreements between these students and these individual teachers. Some female teachers were said to be disrespected because of the provocative and distracting way they dressed, and some male teachers were criticized for displaying inappropriate attention towards some female students.

"Teachers need to be careful to develop proper relationships with students so that [students] don't disrespect them," (Group #8, fn. February 28th, 2011).

"Some male teachers overstep the boundaries…they show personal interest in female students," (Group #8, fn. February 28th, 2011).

5.1.2 Student – student relationships

Students explained during focus group discussions that relationships among students were generally good, but often punctuated with instances of fights, bullying, and disagreements. They say that they learned to stay away from certain students whom they don't get along well with. At one school it was noted that relationships until recently had been really bad due to the presence of gangs but with recent measures implemented due to changes in principal leadership over the last two years these 'bad boys' were gone and things have improved greatly.

"Some of them dropped out of school…some were expelled by the new Principal," (Group #4, fn. February 22nd, 2011).

Students were however concerned that when misbehavior did occur some teachers did not get involved, which led to these issues escalating unchecked. Two types of bullying were identified: students in the higher forms taking advantage of the smaller students in the lower forms, and some students getting teased because of speech impediments, poor reading and/or writing skills.

"Higher form boys take advantage of younger boys…they bully those from the lower forms," (Group #6, fn. February 24th, 2011).

"There is bullying in the lower forms," (Group #7, fn. February 25th, 2011).

"Lots of them get teased because they can't speak well…can't read well…can't write well," (Group #3, fn. February 21st, 2011).

5.2 Classroom teaching and learning

The second element of schooling that students cited most often was teaching. Students explained that they experienced challenges in understanding lesson content when some teachers taught. They explained that many teachers did not practice re-teaching even when students indicated that they had not understood what was taught. Some students even claimed to have been put out of class for saying that they did not understand. Students were of the belief that some of their teachers did not want to be in the teaching profession.

"Some teachers explain when you say you don't understand but some don't" (Group #3, fn. February 21st, 2011).

"[Teachers] teach and if you miss out, you miss out…they don't like to re-teach," (Group #6, fn. February 24th,

2011).

"Some [teachers] don't even bother when students tell them that they don't understand…some [teachers] write notes on the board that they themselves don't understand," (Group #8, fn. February 28th, 2011).

"Some students having problems…need extra help from teachers to do better…but some teachers act like they don't care," (Group #3, fn. February 21st, 2011).

"Some teachers really don't want to teach…they don't like teaching…they [are] only here for the money," (Group #1, fn. February 16th, 2011).

"We don't like being put out of class for saying we don't understand," (Group #1, fn. February 16th, 2011).

The predominant use of "chalk and talk" was one practice especially criticized by students. Students complained of a heavy dependence on note-giving by teachers; often by writing on the chalk board or reading the notes out loud. This was a problem especially for students with weak writing skills:

"Some teachers are coming in, putting work on the [chalk] board without explaining…they don't care…some of us are able to follow them and some of us can't," (Group #8, fn. February 28th, 2011).

"They [teachers] need to practice more questioning and taking contributions from students about the topic…involve us in the learning instead of just presenting the information in the class," (Group #7, fn. February 25th, 2011).

"Too much reading of notes out loud…some students can't keep up or even write the notes," (Group #1, fn. February 16th, 2011).

"We have to write too much notes…some students cannot write well," (Group #8, fn. February 28th, 2011).

"They [teachers] need to do more to help us understand and remember," (Group #5, fn. February 23rd, 2011).

Students admitted that some teachers do use additional materials [teaching aids], and when these teachers do, it helps them [students] to better understand what was being taught. However they asserted that use of teaching aids was not a common practice by teachers at the secondary level. Students asserted that they learned better when they could see and touch things, and through games.

"We would like to see more diagrams used in the class, not just coming to class and talking…some students learn in different ways, by feeling things, playing a game for example, not just chalk and talk" (Group #6, fn. February 24th, 2011).

"Not enough work is being done in class yet with little understanding we have a lot of homework which we can't complete," (Group #1, fn. February 16th, 2011).

"We need facilities to enable students to practice skills in the different subject areas," (Group #4, fn. February 22nd, 2011).

One group asserted the following about the good teachers:

"They listen…they teach well…make students understand…they show interest, (Group #7, fn. February 25th, 2011).

Problems experienced also related to textbooks. Lack of textbooks and inadequate use of listed textbooks were two problems voiced by students. Students explained that the lack of textbooks especially affected their ability to complete assignments, and even attend classes.

"Books are a problem…we don't always have the books and when teachers give work from the textbook in class…and for homework…we can't follow," (Group #3, fn. February 21st, 2011).

"We have more work to do in our books at home than during class…even when we don't understand…more work should be in class where we can get help," (Group #1, fn. February 16th, 2011).

"Books [provided by government] are never enough because of poor management by students," (Group #1, fn. February 16th, 2011).

"Some students can't afford to rent the books government provides," (Group #8, fn. February 28th, 2011).

"We also don't want to take responsibility for the books…because young brothers and sisters can damage them," (Group #8, fn. February 28th, 2011).

"Some teachers even throw students out of class for not having books…the government programme does not provide all the books…we have to buy some," (Group # 3, fn. February 21st, 2011).

"The textbooks listed on the booklist are not always the ones used in class," (Group #2, fn. February 16th, 2011).

"The books on the booklist are not fully used in the classroom…sometimes the teacher uses another book instead," (Group #8, fn. February 28th, 2011).

"Many textbooks when you purchase them…are not well utilized in the classroom," (Group #1, fn. February 16th, 2011).

"There are too many textbooks…and they change too frequently," (Group #4, fn. February 22nd, 2011).

Two groups of students (Groups# 1 and #3) were especially vocal in their belief that technology could be better utilized at the classroom level to help them learn. They explained that technology was currently being reserved for use in the computer and technology classes, and even in these two courses of study, students' access and use of these computers and other technological equipment was limited. Access was greater for the higher forms preparing for CXC examinations (the 4th and 5th form students).

"Technology is only used in computer classes," (Group #3, fn. February 21st, 2011).

"Teachers need to use more technology in teaching…especially in computer classes and technology classes" (Group #1, fn. February 16th, 2011).

Students also felt that some teachers had given up on some students' ability to learn, that is those students who were academically weak or identified to be slow learners, and those demonstrating behavioral problems. However students added that:

"Some teachers don't give up; they will try until they force it in" (Group #6, fn. February 24th, 2011).

Students claimed that they respected those teachers who did not give up on encouraging them to succeed at school but who kept trying with all students (especially the slower learners).

Students also expressed concern about the high teacher attrition levels at their schools, and the youthfulness and inexperience of some of their teachers. They believed that the attrition rate among teachers was too high. They were also concerned about the increasing number of young and in-experienced teachers who were often hired to teach them.

"Teachers are changing too often…they are hiring too many young, inexperienced teachers," (Group #1, fn. February 16th, 2011).

"Too many young, inexperienced teachers are coming to teach directly from community college…they need training first…let them teach at the primary level first," (Group #8, fn. February 28th, 2011).

"We need more trained teachers who know what they are about," (Group #2, fn. February 16th, 2011).

5.3 The school's curriculum

5.3.1 The formal curriculum

Students' perspectives on the curriculum were broad. Students believed that their schools generally offered a wide breadth of subject options from which students could choose and they were generally satisfied with this breadth. This breadth of subject areas included a wide range of technical and vocational subjects, which they were especially appreciative of. They however felt limited in choosing the subjects they were really interested in pursuing because of subject clashes. This was a complaint echoed:

"[The] subject options are too limited," (Group #1, fn. February 16th, 2011).

"We have interests in many areas but the clashes limit us," (Group #4, fn. February 22nd, 2011).

"The way subjects are categorized is a problem…sometimes we must select an entire category which might not have all the subjects we want to do," (Group #5, fn. February 23rd, 2011).

"We want to be free to choose the subjects we want…we don't perform well in those other subject areas," (Group #5, fn. February 23rd, 2011).

Due to timetable scheduling and how school administrators grouped subject options, many students ended up choosing to pursue some subjects that they had little interest in. Students claimed that they performed poorly in those subjects areas they were forced to pursue simply because they were grouped together with another preferred subject but which they have little interest in pursuing.

"The [subject] clashes limit us … [Students] have interest in many areas…are limited by the way subjects are grouped together," (Group #4, fn. February 22nd, 2011).

"We need freedom to choose the areas we want to do, and not be forced to do some other areas…we perform poorly in those areas we are not really interested in," (Group #6, fn. February 24th, 2011).

Students were also concerned about those in their midst who had weak literacy skills. They explained that these students did not have the skills to successfully engage with the current curriculum. Students expressed the belief that those students who were not academically strong should at least be able to learn a skill before leaving secondary school.

"Some students transferred from primary school to secondary school but they don't have the skills to succeed or understand the subjects the school offers," (Group #2, fn. February 16th, 2011).

"Those who are weak need extra help from teachers in some areas but don't often get it," (Group #6, fn. February 24th, 2011).

"Students having problems need extra help from teachers to do better at school but some teachers act like they don't care," (Group #7, fn. February 25th, 2011).

"We need trained teachers to help those who are weak and struggling,"(Group #8, fn. February 28th, 2011).

"Those [students] lacking skills are sent to secondary school and they give more trouble than anything else…they need help," (Group #2, fn. February 16th, 2011).

"Those students [with weak literacy skills] should at least be able to learn a skill before leaving secondary school…have a trade school or something like that attached to the secondary schools," (Group #8, fn. February 28th, 2011).

Some suggestions were made regarding help for students who were transferred to the secondary level but had weak literacy skills. These included developing a trade school programme attached to the regular secondary school programme to teach practical skills in some areas of interest; organizing the curriculum so that technical and vocational subject offerings should be available at all form levels; and leaving students at the primary level

until they obtained the necessary skills.

" They [administration] need another institution to help those lacking the skills to gain it before moving to the main secondary school…they can move them to forms 2 or 3 once they have the skills…otherwise they create a distraction," (Group #2, fn. February 16th, 2011).

"Technical subjects should be available to students at all levels and not just forms 3-5," (Group #6, fn. February 24th, 2011).

"Some students are not ready for secondary school," (Group #4, fn. February 22nd, 2011).

"Those who are not ready should remain at primary school level until they are ready," (Group #7, fn. February 25th, 2011).

5.3.2 Extra-curricular programmes and activities

Students indicated that there was a wide selection of extra-curricular clubs available at most of their schools and that students were free to join if they so desired. They however expressed the belief that improvements were needed to strengthen the extra-curricular aspect of the school's curriculum. They believed that extra-curricular clubs and activities were good to become involved in but most students admitted to not being a member of such clubs for a variety of reasons: they didn't have much free time because of heavy school work, the clubs were weak and inactive, and many clubs only became active when they were needed for official functions like Independence Day celebrations. Students wanted these clubs to become more active, to organize more interesting activities to attract students and maintain their interest. The varying of meeting times for clubs was also a suggestion.

"They [clubs] need to be strengthened…but they are doing a good job," (Group #2, fn. February 16th, 2011).

"Some [clubs] are very inactive – they're not doing much…only function when key times come around" (Group #4, fn. February 22nd, 2011).

"They [clubs] need to be more actively functioning," (Group #7, fn. February 25th, 2011).

"Clubs must motivate students throughout the school to join," (Group # 6, fn. February 24th, 2011).

"They [clubs] lack commitment and continuity… they also meet on Saturdays when some students have church," (Group #4, fn. February 22nd, 2011).

5.4 School infrastructure

Students want improvements in the school's physical infrastructure. This was the feeling in seven of the eight focus group sessions. The only school where students reflected general satisfaction but welcomed any further improvements later was one where recent renovations had taken place, and where the grounds were regularly up-kept. Students stated that poor facilities at their schools affected their learning. They highlighted the need for blackboards, proper lighting, doors for classrooms, fans (since rooms were too hot,) lockers for storing their 'too many books', larger and well equipped cafeterias with sufficient space for students to sit and eat, proper bell and/or intercom system to facilitate better communication throughout the school, and the upgrading of physical buildings which had cracks. Some classrooms were too narrow, and they wanted removed rust from the buildings and graffiti on the walls and surroundings:

"We like our school surrounding, but we need more classroom space for the different subject areas…some of the buildings have cracks," (Group #8, fn. February 28th, 2011).

"The school needs larger blackboards…doors for the classrooms…the lighting makes it difficult to see…fans…the Principal and teachers' offices have air conditioning but we are hot…there is water in the classrooms when it is raining," (Group #1, fn. February 16th, 2011).

"The banisters are breaking down…there is graffiti on the walls…rust needs to be removed from the windows," (Group #7, fn. February 25th, 2011).

Students indicated that classrooms were generally overcrowded. The schools were too small for the number of students being served, they explained. They also stated the need for essential facilities such as well-equipped school libraries, proper toilets that were regularly cleaned and which were equipped for proper hygiene, netball and basketball courts, gym and swimming facilities, and better equipping of school labs.

"The physical buildings are not so comfortable…the school is too small…classes too narrow and not enough space," (Group #6, fn. February 24th, 2011).

"Labs need improving…cafeteria needs expansion…students eat lunch in the sun…need proper libraries with good books for students of all levels… and of different interests…research books too…toilets stink…no toilet paper often…needs regular cleaning…need proper doors and locks," (Group #3, fn. February 21st, 2011).

"We need larger playing field…need a cafeteria…have to stand outside the tuck shop to buy lunch," (Group #8, fn. February 28th, 2011).

"We need a basketball court and swimming pool…" (Group #4, fn. February 22nd, 2011).

Mention was also made of schools not being properly equipped to accommodate the blind and other students with similar special needs who were recently being included into the secondary school system.

"Not every time a teacher will be there to help them, so they need to cater for them," (Group #6, fn. February 24th, 2011).

6. Discussion of findings

The four most critical areas of secondary schooling identified by students as requiring immediate attention and improvements (in order of most highly scored to least highly scored) were: classroom relationships, classroom teaching and learning, school curriculum, and school infrastructure. The voices of students in this study were clear, precise and emphatic. Students highlighted these as areas of their secondary which must be addressed if the quality of education at the secondary level was to improve. In an era in which policies like USE are heavily supported as being investments aimed at poverty alleviation and the development of country, the shortcomings of implementation must be evaluated. As such, these students' voices provide insightful feedback to inform future education and policy reform.

As it relates to classroom relationships insight was provided into the principles which students believed guided good student –teacher relationships at the secondary level. These included mutual respect between students and teachers; positive teacher interest in student welfare; good teaching skills; clearly established boundaries for student conduct/misconduct; teachers possessing effective classroom management skills; teachers' willingness to provide needed help to all students – inclusive of slow learners; decent, respectful dressing on the part of teachers – especially female teachers; and the avoidance of in-appropriate personal relationships with students. Students were adamant that negative teacher relationships were a consequence of any of the above behavioural principles being breached by their teachers.

In relation to classroom teaching and learning teachers were portrayed as being unprepared for meeting the needs of all students. Students pointed to poor teacher preparation for effective teaching, especially given increased students with limited abilities entering secondary schools. Good quality teaching to students would mean teachers improving their teaching practices beyond the current rote learning. Students indicated a need for improvements such as greater use of a wider variety of teaching strategies (less dependency on 'chalk and talk'); more flexible teaching which was responsive to teachers' assessment of whether or not students had learnt that which was taught and a willingness to re-teach if needed; extending care and concern, as well as additional instructional support for students who were ill-equipped to handle secondary schooling given their previous academic performance; and finally for their teachers to exhibit a passion to see all students learn – not only the fast learners but also the slower learners. Such findings provide empirical support for the recent decision of the OECS member states to re-design their sub-regional education policy towards a central focus on ensuring "Every learner succeeds" (OERU, 2013).

Students' responses show that these incoming student resulting from USE implementation, are very aware of their teachers' shortcomings and what is needed in the secondary school environment for them to succeed. However, they are also very aware of what they perceive as teachers' reluctance to provide the necessary classroom environment for learning enhancement. While student counseling is recognized as being valuable by students, they believed its effectiveness was challenged by insufficient numbers of counselors attached to schools given the high demand for counseling, and evidence of breach of trust by some counselors.

Students were generally satisfied with the wide breadth of subject offerings at the secondary level, especially the inclusion of technical and vocational subjects in all schools. This supported their belief that secondary schooling should allow even the slow learners to at least learn a skill. However, when schools attempted to facilitate their (students') interests by providing more technical and vocational offerings, the timetabling of courses disallowed students from pursuing courses in which they were really interested. Even assistance with school supplies (e.g. textbooks from the government and access to technology at school) proved problematic because of students' financial challenges in one instance and limited technology access in another instance.

Interestingly, while not identifying themselves as the students who "can't speak well, can't read well…..can't write well" or the students who "need extra help from teachers to do better" or students who "can't afford to rent the books government provides", students were very aware of the realities of their lack of preparedness for the opportunity of USE. Note however, that they never say that these students who experienced myriad academic and financial challenges should forego the opportunity of USE. Rather, they ask for attention to be paid to the areas of challenge to allow students to achieve once they are finally allowed to attend secondary school. Students went as far as to suggest that students with weak academic skills should "remain at primary school level until they are ready". Importantly, students still felt that the opportunity for a secondary education should be afforded to these students but only when they "were ready".

As one quote succinctly states (earlier noted but worth repeating here): Those (students) lacking skills are sent to secondary school and they give more trouble than anything else …. they need help " (authors emphasis).

Lastly, the schools' infrastructures were in dire need of repairs. Students highlighted the following problems with school infrastructure: lack of proper equipment, missing doors, poor lighting, poor ventilation, need for lockers for storing an increased number of books, need for improved cafeterias, need for proper bell or intercom system for improved staff communication with the entire school body, needed improvements in facilities such as bathrooms, needed netball/basketball courts, gym and swimming facilities, need for well-

equipped school labs, and lack of general expansion and physical upgrade of the school plants. The poor conditions of the secondary schools in Grenada may have been a hindrance to learning for the students who attended these schools prior to USE. However, schools' poor conditions were exacerbated by increased numbers of students, facilities, need for well-equipped school labs and lack of general expansion and physical upgrade of the school plants.

7. Conclusion

In this article we've presented students' perspectives of their schooling experiences as a result of the implementation of Universal Secondary Education access in the tri-island state of Grenada, Carriacou and Petite Martinique.   Studies analyzing the effects of USE on student academic achievement—and by extension, countries' development—have failed to include the perspectives of those most affected by the policy, that is, the students themselves. Through our findings the study demonstrates the value of students' perspectives in both identifying the challenges as well as offering viable solutions in key areas of schooling in order to attain the desired results from this policy implementation. The value of the students' perspective in improving secondary education in the Caribbean as we struggle with planning for and adjusting to the demands of USE should therefore not be underestimated. The students' voice can assist in ensuring greater congruency between our educational provisions and our students' needs. Engaging students' input is also fundamental to all student improvement thereby ensuring positive development in the future of Caribbean countries.   As such, this study highlights the need for future researchers to engage more directly the silent voices of students in researching other key education issues in the Caribbean region.

References

Barro, Robert J., and Jong-Wha Lee. (2001). "Schooling quality in a cross-section of countries' *Economica* 68 (272), pp. 465–88

Burnett, Nicholas, and Harry Patrinos. 1997. "Education and the Changing World Economy: The Imperative of Reform." *Prospects,* 27 (2), pp. 223–30

Caillods, F. (2010). Access to secondary education: Asia-Pacific secondary education system review series. Bangkok, Thailand: UNESCO. Retrieved from: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001900/190007e.pdf (February 12, 2014)

Di Gropella, E. (2003). *Monitoring educational performance in the Caribbean*. Washington, D.C: World Bank. Available:http://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/pdf/10.1596/0-8213-5516-3 (February 12, 2014)

Evans, H. (2001). *Inside Jamaican schools*. Kingston: University of the West Indies.

Government of Antigua and Barbuda. (2014). *Five Islands secondary schools construction ahead of schedule.* Available: http://www.ab.gov.ag/article_details.php?id=4744&category=38 (June 16, 2014)

Heyneman, S. P., & Loxley, W. (1983).The effect of primary school quality on academic achievement across twenty-nine high and low income countries. *American Journal of Sociology*, 88, pp. 19-23.

Jencks, C. (1979). *Who gets ahead?: the determinants of economic success in America*. New York, Basic Books.

Knight, V. (2014). The policy of Universal Secondary Education: Its influence on secondary schooling in Grenada. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 9 (1), 16-35.

Konstantopoulos, S. (2006). Trends of school effects on student achievement: Evidence from NLS: 72, HSB: 82, and NELS: 92. *Teachers College Record*, 108, pp. 2550-2581.

Konstantopoulos, S. (2008). Do small classes reduce the achievement gap between low and high achievers? Evidence from Project STAR. *Elementary School Journal*, 108, 275-291.

Littky, D. (2004). *The big picture: Education is everyone's business*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).

Marks, V. (2009).Universal access to secondary education in St Vincent and the Grenadines. *The Journal of Eastern Caribbean* Studies, 34 (2), pp. 56-70.

Miller, E. (2009). Universal Secondary Education and Society in the Commonwealth Caribbean. *Journal of Eastern Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 34, (2), pp. 3-18.

National Association of School Psychologists [NASP]. (2003). Position statement on student grade retention and social promotion (revised April 12, 2003). Available: http://www.nasponline.org/information/pospaper_graderetent.html (February, 12th, 2014)

OERU (2013). OECS Education Sector Strategy 2012-2021. St. Lucia: OERU. Available: www.OECS.org (February, 12th, 2014)

Reynolds, A. J., Temple, J., and McCoy, A. (1997). Grade retention doesn't work. *Education Week*,17(3), pp.36.

Rutter, M., Maughan, B., Mortimore, P., Ouston, J., & Smith, A. (1979). Fifteen thousand hours: Secondary schools and their effects on children. Somerset, UK: Open Books.

Shepard, L. A. and Smith, M. L. (1990). Synthesis of research on grade retention. *Educational Leadership*, 47(8), pp. 84-88.

Simmons, J., & Alexander, L (1980). Factors which promote school achievement in developing countries: A review of the research. In J. Simmons (Ed.). The Education Dilemma: Policy Issues for Developing Countries in the 1980s. Elmsford, N.Y.: Pergamon Press.

Thompson, B. (2009). Disruptive behaviours in Barbadian classrooms: Implications for universal secondary education in the Caribbean. *Journal of Eastern Caribbean Studies*, 34(3), 39-58.

UNESCO. (1998). First international comparative study of language, mathematics, and associated factors in third and fourth grades. Santiago, Chile: Latin American Educational Quality Assessment Laboratory. Available: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001231/123130eo.pdf (February 12, 2014)

UNESCO. (2008). Student achievement in Latin America and the Caribbean: Results of the Second Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (SERCE).Santiago: Regional Bureau for Education in Latin America Latina and the Caribbean OREALC/UNESCO. Available: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0016/001610/161045e.pdf (February 12, 2014)

UNESCO. (2010). Factors associated with the cognitive achievement of students in Latin America and the Caribbean. (Briefing Paper). Santiago: Regional Bureau of Education for the Latin America and the Caribbean. Available online at: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001902/190213e.pdf (February 12, 2014)

UNESCO. (2013). Education Systems in ASEAN+6 Countries: A Comparative Analysis of Selected Educational Issues. Available: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002267/226757E.pdf (February 12, 2014)

UNESCO. (2014a). Education For All Goals. Available: http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-all/efa-goals/ (February 12, 2014)

UNESCO. (2014b). EFA Global monitoring report: Teaching and learning, achieving quality for all. Available: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002256/225660e.pdf (February 12, 2014)

The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open-Access hosting service and academic event management. The aim of the firm is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the firm can be found on the homepage:
http://www.iiste.org

CALL FOR JOURNAL PAPERS

There are more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals hosted under the hosting platform.

Prospective authors of journals can find the submission instruction on the following page: http://www.iiste.org/journals/ All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Paper version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

MORE RESOURCES

Book publication information: http://www.iiste.org/book/

IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digtial Library , NewJour, Google Scholar