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**Curriculum Leadership in Teacher Education:
Implications for 21st-Century
Classroom Practices**



Tamekia Green-Mitchell

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Curriculum Leadership in Teacher Education: Implications for 21st-Century Classroom Practices

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Tamekia Green-Mitchell

Lecturer in the Department of Professional Studies
The Mico University College



Overview

My role as a practicum supervisor has provided opportunities for me to get a first-hand view of how the pre-service teachers, who my colleagues and I spend approximately four years preparing, implement curriculum. During recent visits, I observed units focusing on municipal corporation delivered through teacher led discussions and notetaking with minimal focus on collaboration and problem solving. Immediately, I reflected on the profile of the 21st-century learner, the significant role of the municipal corporation in decision-making and problem solving, and the importance for students to get a fulsome understanding of its functions. These sessions triggered one essential question that I recorded in my visitation logbook: Are we really preparing teachers for the 21st-century classroom?

Responding to the challenges of an ever-evolving world has been the principal focus of many fields. In fact, education scholars and policymakers believe education is a key element in responding to present and future challenges. Scott (2015) contends that “all countries will face consequences if today’s learners are not adequately prepared to collaborate and resolve the world’s economic, environmental, health, social, and political challenges” (p. 9). Notably, as the demand for students who possess the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of problem solvers, designers, and creators increases, school curricula and students’ roles have shifted drastically. The goal of 21st-century curricula is to produce learners armed with 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, collaborative problem solving, communication, cultural competence, and digital literacy. Furthermore, in the 21st-century classroom, students have transitioned from simply being participants to active participants, where student agency and co-agency with their teachers and peers are emphasised (OECD, 2019).

Importantly, the National Standards Curriculum (NSC), implemented in Jamaican primary and secondary schools in 2016, has responded to the demands of developing students who possess 21st-century skills. Its constructivist underpinning requires teachers to engage students using project-based learning, problem-based learning, and STEM/STEAM methodologies. These 21st-century methodologies provide opportunities for hands-on learning where students collaborate to solve real-world problems. To this end, teachers engaging students in 21st-century classrooms, specifically Jamaican classrooms, should be able to effectively use these methodologies to engage students and develop their 21st-century skills. Practicum observations reveal that while some pre-service teachers demonstrate the ability to develop 21st-century skills such as the 4Cs in learners, gaps exist. More often than not, pre-service teachers tend to camp around the periphery of these skills without allowing students to fully develop them. For instance, collaborative activities usually do not require much collaboration and key elements such as leveraging student’s individual expertise and collaborative problem solving are usually omitted.

Implications for Practice

What does this mean for teacher training institutions? Kim et al. (2019) assert that teachers need to be regarded as learners, and the learning that is expected in our children should be taking place with our teachers. Drawing on the principles of social learning theory, situated learning theory, and constructivism, if teachers are to be effective in using project-based learning, problem-based learning, and STEM/STEAM methodologies, teacher training programmes should be delivered using these methodologies. Furthermore, if teachers are to develop problem-solving and other 21st-century skills in students and create opportunities for students to utilize these skills, they first must possess these skills and demonstrate competence in their use. Social Learning Theory emphasizes that new behaviours are learned through observing, modelling, and imitating the behaviours of others (Bandura, 1977). Lave and Wenger’s (1991) Situated Learning Theory posits that the learner is an active participant in the learning process and that the learning community is a critical component of the learner’s gradual growth as he/she moves from a novice to an expert. Constructivists view the learner as a key player in the learning process and an active participant in meaning-making and generating understanding (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018).

What role does curriculum leadership play? For this article, curriculum leadership and the role of curriculum leaders will be examined through the lenses of social learning theory, situated learning theory, and constructivism. Curriculum leadership is a dynamic process that involves collaboration with school officials to design, implement, and monitor the total learning experience of students. Fundamentally, curriculum leadership must prioritize teacher preparation as the core driver of educational quality and the chief response to global challenges. Notably, no curriculum—no matter how well designed—can succeed without teachers, key players in curriculum implementation (Fullan, 2007), who are trained to implement it with creativity, accuracy, and cultural responsiveness. Therefore, though well-designed, successful implementation of the NSC and effective use of its methodologies depend on the quality of teachers.

Most importantly, the majority of the teachers trained in Jamaican teacher training institutions will end up working in Jamaican classrooms. This means that they will be integral in actualizing the goals of the Jamaican curricula. As a result, a general preparation model for teachers is not prudent. Teacher preparation should be context-specific and culturally relevant. In other words, teacher training programmes must be thoughtfully designed to ensure relevance to Jamaican realities. Does this mean ignoring the preparation of teachers for the global marketplace? Absolutely not; however, it does mean giving foremost attention to alignment with the Jamaican context and the needs of the Jamaican classroom. Consequently, the role of curriculum leaders in teacher training institutions is to engage in what I call bespoke teacher preparation. With this, just as a tailor who has been contracted for a custom-made design stitches his client's suit with precision, teacher training institutions must prepare teachers who are fit for purpose, having the requisite knowledge, skills, and dispositions for curriculum implementation in the Jamaican context. This, however, requires deliberate, evidence-based planning and partnerships between teacher training institutions, the Ministry of Education, Skills, Youth, and Information (MOESYI), and schools.

Suggestions for Improvement and Implications for Classroom Practices

Evidence-based teacher training. One key factor in ensuring that teacher preparation programmes produce teachers who are fit for purpose is for curriculum leaders to engage in evidence-based planning, anchored in research and trends in education. A staple in teacher training is the practicum experience. This is where teacher training institutions partner with schools, providing opportunities for pre-service teachers to complete practical training. Essentially, practicum allows teacher training institutions to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of their programmes and the preparedness of their teachers to implement curriculum and respond to classroom needs. Data collected from the practicum experience should answer the hard but important questions and ultimately influence curriculum decisions. Some of the questions include: Are our programmes contextually relevant? Are they aligned with national curriculum goals? Have we prepared bespoke teachers who are fit for purpose? Are they able to use the required methodologies for curriculum delivery? Are they able to develop 21st-century skills in students? Answers to these questions should be the foundation of curriculum review and capacity building.

Considering the importance of 21st-century skills in classrooms that use 21st-century methodologies and the noticeable gaps observed on practicum, I deliberately target these skills in my own classroom. For example, a common challenge observed is pre-service teachers' ability to promote problem-solving and critical thinking in learners due to poor questioning techniques. Consequently, in my lessons, I intentionally focus on developing pre-service teachers' questioning techniques by asking questions that encourage deep thinking, challenge assumptions and elicit divergent perspectives.

Learning by doing. Using the principles of social learning theory, situated learning theory, and constructivism, curriculum leaders must ensure that the methodologies used to deliver programmes are aligned with those pre-service teachers are expected to use in their own classrooms. Many teacher training programmes teach pre-service teachers about 21st-century methodologies such as project-based learning, problem-based learning, and STEM/STEAM methodologies. However, not many deliver their programmes using these methodologies. For instance, many pre-service teachers complete teacher training armed with the knowledge of the steps involved in project-based learning and problem-based learning, and the STEM/STEAM approaches, but lack the skills necessary to engage students using these methodologies. Although knowledge of these methodologies is important, it is even more important to develop the skills that will complement the knowledge. Principally, this great responsibility lies with teacher educators. Teacher educators must provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to experience these methodologies at work in their classrooms—as students—and develop 21st-century skills as they solve real-world problems with their peers. These experiences will allow pre-service teachers to see what works and what does not. With course facilitators modelling these methodologies and the active participation of pre-service teachers, they will eventually grow from novices to experts and from simply knowing to being skilled and better prepared to engage their own students using these methodologies.

To better align programmes with the expectations of the NSC, my institution developed and implemented two courses targeting STEM and STEAM integration. Through these courses, pre-service teachers will get the opportunity to develop the skills necessary to design and implement STEM and STEAM lessons. Notably, while these methodologies, including project-based and problem-based learning, are integral for the 21st-century classroom, their implementation at this level can be superficial if not carefully designed. Therefore, to ensure pre-service teachers receive authentic and sustained immersion in these methodologies, curriculum leaders must address potential structural, pedagogical, and institutional barriers.

Continuous professional development for faculty. The demand for education to solve the world's problems, the shifting roles of teachers and students, and emerging trends in education have given rise to the need for the continuous professional development (CPD) of faculty. Importantly, for course facilitators to prepare pre-service teachers using 21st-century methodologies, they must first be experts in their use. Additionally, if pre-service teachers are to be prepared to function effectively in 21st-century classrooms, course facilitators must view the teacher preparation classroom as a 21st-century classroom. Through CPD, facilitators remain competent, current, and contextually relevant. They engage in reflective practice to identify their learning needs, then seek to acquire new knowledge and refine their skills. To this end, curriculum leaders must establish systems for continuous professional development. Furthermore, curriculum leaders must establish mentoring systems and professional learning communities that create a platform for facilitator collaboration and growth.

Following the development of the STEM and STEAM courses at my institution, my colleagues engaged in training sessions to be equipped to facilitate them. This demonstrates the importance of teacher educators being experts in 21st-century methodologies in order to effectively prepare pre-service teachers to use them.

Conclusion

This article highlights the significant role teacher training institutions play in preparing teachers who are relevant for the Jamaican classrooms. It underscores that along with curriculum leaders, my role as a teacher educator determines whether pre-service teachers are fit-for-purpose and armed with the required knowledge and skills to facilitate lessons using 21st-century methodologies and develop 21st-century skills in students.

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Tamekia Green-Mitchell is a lecturer in the Department of Professional Studies at The Mico University College. She is a graduate of The University of the West Indies, Mona, where she earned a Master of Education in Curriculum and Instruction with distinction. She is a course developer and a published author. She served as the secretary of the Caribbean Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies (CAACS) from 2020 to 2025. Her research interests include curriculum and instruction, sustainable development, educational leadership, and teaching and learning in the 21st century. Guided by the mission of education for transformation, Tamekia prides herself on creating meaningful learning experiences for students that challenge them to not only be receivers of knowledge but to be creators, innovators, and problem solvers. Recently, she has developed a passion for public speaking. Through this platform, she encourages people to tap into all the gifts that God has given them to excel. 

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