Graduates' Perceptions of an Early Childhood Education Teacher Training Program in Jamaica

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Abstract

Teacher training institutions in Jamaica have been developing and revamping undergraduate degree programs, however little evaluation of these efforts have been conducted. The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to examine The Mico University College's early childhood education undergraduate degree program by exploring the lived experiences of its graduates. Organization development and performance improvement served as theoretical frameworks. Data were collected via in-depth semi-structured interviews and supported by memoing, reflexive journaling and document review. Data analysis methods consisted of coding interview transcripts and identifying common themes. The results of the study indicated that the participants commended many of the program's policies and practices, but they also identified challenges. This study may be used to motivate program policy enhancements at The Mico and other institutions in Jamaica and the Caribbean. By strengthening program offerings, these institutions have the potential to improve performance and to contribute to sustainable national development.

Keywords: teacher training, undergraduate, lived experiences, Caribbean

1.0 Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore participants' perspectives about the new bachelors' degree program in Early Childhood Education at The Mico University College (The Mico) in Jamaica. This new degree program was introduced as part of the institution's strategic plan in changing from a diploma-granting institution to a degree-granting institution. This change has been in keeping with current trends towards reforms in teacher education that address issues such as curricula, and accreditation and certification of teachers and teacher training institutions (Pantić, 2012).

The study was conducted against the background of the theories of organizational development and performance improvement. Both are applicable to The Mico because, in an attempt to improve its effectiveness, the institution is placing emphasis on strategies, structures, and organizational processes and organizational design (Cummings & Worley, 2009; Ghorbanhosseini, 2013). Van Tiem, Moseley, and Dessinger (2012) suggested that for performance improvement to take place there must be opportunities for individuals and communities to develop their potential and capacities, and a system's capacity to anticipate, apprehend, and add to positive potential must be strengthened.

1.1 Problem statement. There has been little evaluation of the newly developed undergraduate degree programs in teacher training in Jamaica in particular and the Caribbean in general. That is, there is inadequate information on how these programs are being implemented, on the challenges involved, on the elements that are working versus those that are not, and on how the programs can be improved.

A United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report in 2013 claimed that until recently, many reformers, including international lending agencies, paid scant regard to institutional capacity and the problems of reform implementation. The report suggested that now reformers have learned that the process of actually developing the reforms and the necessary human capital are critical to reform projects.

There is a plethora of published studies about contemporary education, including its impact on society and on the need to have an educational system at all levels that meets the needs of a fluid society that is technologically advanced and is situated in a highly competitive marketplace. Glewwe, Hanushek, Humpage, and Ravina (2011) opined that there is a large amount of evidence that education increases workers' productivity and consequently their incomes. In their study, these researchers examined the effectiveness of school and teacher characteristics on improving students' years of completed schooling and learning, and they found that education increases the rate of economic growth. The literature is replete with studies on such topics as curricula and professional development, and increasingly studies have been published on the programmatic changes at various educational levels. Lawrence (2010), for example, explored how teacher experience, education, and program characteristics contribute to classroom quality. Pantić (2012), on the other hand, examined reforms and developments in teacher education in southeastern Europe, while Newman (2013) reviewed the elevation of publicly-owned teacher training institutions offering certificate programs to prepare teachers for basic schools in Ghana to the tertiary status of colleges of education. Educational issues across various countries have come in for some attention. Martin & Bray (2011), for example, studied tertiary education in small states globally, while George and Lewis (2011) focused on Caribbean programs infusing curricula that are geared towards a global education agenda with local knowledge.

Nonetheless there are gaps in the literature. One is that many of the studies are presented through the eyes of educators and administrators. Hyson, Biggar, Tomlinson, and Morris (2009), who sought to better understand the relationship between the quality of early childhood education programs in tertiary institutions in the United States and children's development and learning, suggested that studies had been done on the benefits of having teachers who had an undergraduate degree or an associate's degree, but noted that these studies had not examined quality, and quality-improvement efforts, in teacher education programs. They further suggested that it might have been useful to examine what factors may contribute to and/or impede efforts being made to raise the quality of these programs. Their participants were faculty and other program leaders. Kagoda and Ezati (2013) explored the relationship between primary teacher preparation and the quality of teachers produced in Uganda. They too used selected tutors as their participants.

Crossley (2011) purported that there has been "substantial" literature on educational research capacity within the last twenty years, but that there has been a concentration of the research within elite specialist organizations and university departments. He argued that in the United Kingdom and the United States, the interest in research has been due in part to criticism that much of the existing social and educational research is faulty. Two of the reasons suggested for this are that the research has not been particularly pertinent to the needs of policymakers and that it has not been accessible to stakeholders. Pantić (2012) said that there is a "dearth of opportunity for student teachers' reflection linking theory and practice" (p. 81), and that that is one of the most highly recognized deficiencies of teacher preparation in south eastern Europe.

Specifically, one does not find much research about how new and evolving degree programs in the Caribbean, and in Jamaica in particular, are working. Abdul-Hamid, Abu-Lebdeh, and Patrinos (2011) claimed that there is scarce literature on the effectiveness of education initiatives in developing countries. Steinbach (2013) noted that in the Caribbean island of Trinidad and Tobago, there is a lack of a scholarly culture of inquiry and research with respect to the public school system and other educational institutions.

The literature seems to indicate that one factor contributing to the lack of reviews is a lack of uniformity in regulations. According to the UNESCO (2013), there is a relative lack of regulations with regard to the quality of teacher training, although there are accreditation systems, albeit insufficient ones. They further proffered the viewpoint that uniform quality cannot be assured in many countries because of the heterogeneity of the training provided by virtue of the multiplicity of autonomous teacher training institutions. The recognition that reviews are necessary is highlighted in the UNESCO report by the disclosure that the majority of the countries that were reviewed (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru, and Trinidad and Tobago) were taking action to draw up standards that would enable them to determine the thrust of initial training.

The report further explained that some countries in Latin America and the Caribbean face similar challenges in teacher training, but to date there has been no comparative studies on curriculum guidelines and the content of training programs. Where regulations of training programs exist, the report claimed that some are not satisfactory because many regulatory policies and instruments are currently being reviewed.

While homogeneity in regulations does not exist and may not even be desirable, regulations do set some standards. With limitations to the establishment and adoption of such standards, there is an even greater need for educational institutions and systems to routinely review their programs to determine their efficacy. Such reviews require, among other things, the garnering of information on the experience of stakeholders within the teaching-learning context, and there is not enough of that. This means that there has to be critical reflection, which according to Wiggins (2011) is necessary if learning from experience is to occur.

1.2 Vision 2030 plan. In Jamaica, The Ministry of Education has developed a robust plan for the education sector as part of a national development plan, and as a response to the demands of the 21st century and the need for continued and improved nation-building. Called "Vision 2030 Jamaica—National Development Plan" (The Vision 2030 Plan), this plan interprets the National Social Policy Programme as implying that education is not only about equipping students with appropriate occupational and academic skills, but also about having an educational system that will "produce full literacy and numeracy, a globally competitive, quality workforce and a disciplined, culturally aware and ethical Jamaica citizenry" (The Vision 2030 Plan, 2009, p. 49). The Vision 2030 Plan is designed to put Jamaica in a position to achieve developed-country status by 2030, and the vision for the education sector is to have a "well-resourced, internationally recognized, values-based system that develops critical thinking, life-long learners who are productive and successful and effectively contribute to an improved quality of life at the personal, national and global levels" (p.44).

Teacher training institutions in the country have an integral part to play in the attempt to achieve this specific goal, and in meeting the needs of the 21st century society. They have been initiating new programs and revising the not so new. While all of this is commendable, there must be some means of determining the extent to which the programs are working. This is where there has been a gap. There is not enough feedback on or review of the programs, and it is this gap that I have sought to fill in this study. Indeed, as Wiggins (2011) has contended, "Learning from experience in education has been the subject of little investigation" (p. 19).

1.3 Profile of The Mico. The changes in the educational landscape and the demands of a competitive global marketplace call for the evaluation of policies for teacher-training colleges in the Caribbean that are now offering degree programs rather than just teaching certificates and diplomas. The Mico is the first teachers' college in the English-speaking Caribbean to attain university college status and to offer degree programs. This metamorphosis is occurring as The Mico tries to maintain "its capacity to respond to the changing developmental needs of the Jamaican and Caribbean society" and to "attract able and ambitious students and to provide them with high quality education" (The Mico, 2013, p. 3).

The Mico is seeking to develop a more strategy-based and futuristic approach that, among other things, focuses on maintaining "the requisite standards, and quality assurance measures" (Packer, 2013, p. 6). The Mico wants to be the hallmark of "good governance" and wants to define what it calls the "new teacher" and "the new leader" (Packer, 2013, p. 8). This ambition is borne out in the mission of the institution:
To support national and regional development through well-educated populations by equipping local, regional, and international students with the required Teacher Education knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values. (The Mico, 2013, p. 10)

1.4 Purpose of the study. The purpose of this study was to review The Mico's Early Childhood Education undergraduate degree program through the lived experiences of current elementary school teachers who had completed the program. I asked the teachers to reflect on their experiences as undergraduate students pursuing their degree at The Mico. They commented on how the degree program and the change process from a diploma-granting to a degree-granting institution reflected organizational development at The Mico and related to performance improvement. Additionally, participants were asked to opine on how the changes reflected public educational policy shifts in teacher education and to prognosticate how these policy shifts may increase the efficacy of future programs at The Mico and similar institutions regionally.

Having the graduates share their experiences and perspectives was important, as this established a groundwork for a review of the particular degree program and other programs at The Mico, and has implications for policy evaluation and policy implementation. It is important to glean information from the greatest cross-section of views and to have thorough program assessment along with in-depth expert analysis when conducting research. These are regarded as necessary to prevent the avoidance of important questions or contradictions, and to avoid reaching conclusions and constructing explanations that are largely based on empirical data.

The Mico needs to determine the efficacy of its programs because they are new and they have been developed in response to the country's economic and development needs, and to national and global educational trends. Guzmán, Castillo, Lavarreda, and Mejía (2013), in making a case for the revamped and evolutionary programs in teacher education, posited the view that effective teacher training policies are needed for the creation of conditions and opportunities for the enhancement of school effectiveness and student learning. In describing the changes in teacher education in the Caribbean, Conrad and De Four-Babb (2013) explained that it evolved from being a "terminal post-secondary certificate for in-service primary teachers to a job entry-level requirement of a degree" (p. 70). Implicit in this statement is what these researchers claimed to be a need for teacher educators to assess and improve their programs, their practice, and their students' learning. They encouraged educators to review their programs and to compare them with others.

1.5. Research questions. Four research questions guided the research. They were:
1. What are the perceptions of the graduates of the undergraduate degree program in Early Childhood Education about the new undergraduate degree program they recently completed?
2. What are the perceptions of the graduates about how the new undergraduate degree program reflects organizational development and relates to performance improvement at The Mico?
3. What are the graduates' views about how the change is being implemented?
4. What are the graduates' views about how the new undergraduate degree program aligns with the major national policy shifts in teacher education and how these policy shifts can improve future processes at The Mico and similar institutions regionally?

1.6 Theoretical framework. Organizational development (OD) and performance improvement (PI) were the theoretical frameworks for this research paper. The Mico is in the middle of a change process that has been planned, is long-range, system-wide, and top-down. This change is largely in response to the demands of the external environment including global economic and social trends, evolutionary changes in educational theory and practice, and current policy foci of The Ministry of Education in Jamaica. The changes in policies and subsequently in the academic programs and administrative and support services include elements of the behavioral sciences such as stakeholder participation, human performance, and human development. All these elements fit with the concept of OD.

At the same time PI also applies. The Mico is in fact trying to address a number of problems and issues. These include ensuring that teacher candidates are being adequately trained to meet the demands of the educational sector, and offering programs relevant to the wider society which are aligned to current educational theory and are at the cutting-edge of educational services and practice. In addressing these issues, The Mico cannot ignore the matter of human resources. It must include its workforce in the change process while at the same time endeavoring to strengthen its employees' capabilities and performance. At the heart of this process, therefore, is the institutional culture which must be developed to support the goals and objectives of The Mico.

2.0 Materials and Methods

2.1 Sample. This research was a qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological study. Ten graduates of The Mico who completed the Bachelor of Education Degree in Early Childhood Education were interviewed. The group was representative of the cohorts that had graduated from the program between 2012 and 2015, and consisted of both male and female graduates of varying ages who had different pre-matriculation qualifications and different work experiences before and after pursuit of the degree program. This demographic information was garnered from the questionnaire that I asked the prospective participants to complete prior to the interviews.

A small sample size is quite apt for the qualitative model of data collection and analysis because, according to Sailor (2013), it serves as a platform for the unique experiences that are being studied. Ten participants were adequate for this study because data from 10 interviews would lead to saturation and what Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, and Fontenot (2013) called the "point of diminishing returns" (p. 23).

Exceeding that number would very likely have resulted in a high level of repetitiveness without providing new insights. The efficacy of a small sample size is borne out by Hayes (2012), who in her dissertation used six participants. She argued that this sample size was adequate as it allowed for the collection of deep and rich information, and that the time was ample for the interviewing of the participants. In concurrence with Hayes' position, Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, and Hendry (2011) likewise argued that one benefit of having a reduced number of participants is a richer depth of analysis.

2.2 Additional methods employed. In addition to the interviews, several additional methods were used to enhance data: thick (rich) description, memoing, and reflexive journaling to add depth to the content and promote trustworthiness. Additionally, I reviewed the current policy documents of The Ministry of Education in Jamaica, the Vision 2030 Plan (2009), the programme document of the Department of Early Childhood Education, The Mico website, and two graduation booklets. Before the interviews, each participant was surveyed to facilitate the procurement of some background information, and a pilot test was conducted with two graduates. Both of these strategies added validity and trustworthiness.

A qualitative, phenomenological approach is quite effective for this kind of study because it is flexible and adaptive. The researcher is able to explore the meaning the subjects ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2012). When searching for the meaning, structure, and essence of the "lived experience" (Sailor, 2013), phenomenology in particular has much utility. Moustakas (1994), and Patton (2002), Sailor (2013) stated that phenomenological research must encompass people's lived experiences as it seeks to provide deeper insight into the nature or meaning of everyday experiences. The focus is on how people make sense of their experiences and the world, how they develop a worldview, and how they transform their experience into consciousness. One important advantage of this type of research is that it may minimize certain unethical consequences of situations where researchers who, having to display two "faces" when confronted by the requirements of "so called" scientific knowledge and objectivity in the research process, may consequently change their ontological and epistemological assumptions (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2009).

2.3 Data collection. Data collection and analysis occurred between August 2015 and January 2016. The 10 participants met the predetermined inclusion criterion of having completed the Bachelors' Degree in Early Childhood Education. Snowball purposive sampling based on the year of graduation and cohort. Three participants from cohort one were purposefully selected because contact information for them was readily accessible. Additionally, there was only one male in that cohort so I thought it prudent to invite him to participate to have both sexes represented. The heads of departments and sections in the Faculty of Education were also asked to make available contact information for suggested participants from the other cohorts.

There were three participants from cohort one, two from cohort three, and five from cohort four. Nine participants were part-time students (evening), and one was full-time (day). There were two participants who had previously completed the Diploma in Early Childhood Education. One participant was a principal of a pre-primary school. All 10 participants had a high school education, and five had completed a certificate course in early childhood education at The Human Employment and Resource Training Trust, National Training Agency (HEART/NTA). Six participants had experience in teaching while the only experience four had was teaching practice which was part of their training. These details were gleaned from the pre-interview questionnaire.

Having participants with varying demographic characteristics and from across cohorts results in imaginative variation, one of the definitive elements of phenomenological research. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) have noted, "There is an interweaving of person, conscious experience, and phenomenon" (p. 27). Various perspectives are presented from different angles, providing for more depth to the narratives. This variation was advantageous to this study because it aided in building greater trustworthiness. In sharing their perspectives, the participants of course engaged in some degree of interpretation, and this contributed to the hermeneutic element of this study.

2.4 The interviews. In order to maintain anonymity, research participants were assigned a number and a pseudonym. There were 11 open-ended questions with 15 follow-up probing questions. Before the interviews, all participants were briefed on the research's focus and the protocol involved. This included instructions for the informed consent and the completion of the pre-interview questionnaire, consensus on the interview methods, and approval of the transcriptions. Before each interview, pre-interview survey was administered to procure background information on the participants.

During all 10 interviews, Livescribe Echo Desktop (which is comprised of both written and audio components) was used as the primary data recording method. Additionally, for the Skype interviews an MPS Skype recorder was utilized as a secondary means of recording because it automatically recorded the interviews. Once the interviews were completed, Livescribe was used to re-play them. This facilitated transcription. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour. A follow-up email containing the transcription was sent to each participant to thank him or her for participating in the study and to solicit approval of the transcription. Clarification of information concerning the interview and the questionnaire in a few instances was sought via telephone and email.

Once transcribed and verified, all data collected from the interviews were transferred to a secure, password-protected laptop. Written documentation was kept in a locked file cabinet until completion of the study and then destroyed. Electronic data will be retained for a period of five years as per IRB regulations and then destroyed. All agreements made with the participants in respect of their privacy and confidentiality in this study was strictly followed, and there were no significant occurrences during the period of the study that changed the context of the study.

Coding was the main analytical method. To begin the process, 'horizontalization' was employed to lay out the data for examination and to treat the data as having equal weight (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Topics of significance were then determined *a priori* and were generally based on the research questions, and more specifically on the interview questions. The concepts were then initially coded. Other sections, including memo and properties were added to aid in the development of rich description. These are outlined as follows:

a) Concepts – big ideas generated from the research questions and specifically the interview questions,
b) Comments - what each participant had to say (in note form),
c) Memo – researcher's comments while interviews were being conducted, and
d) Properties – additional details from interviews that elucidated the participants' main comments.

Once concepts were delineated, selective coding was used to identify codes, and axial coding to determine relationships between the codes. Variable names and labels were given to the codes, after which the hardcopy of the transcripts was reviewed once again to solidify and refine the previously determined codes, to remove unneeded codes, and to add any other code deemed to be important.

3.0 Results and Discussion

From the data, 151 codes were identified and the generated into themes. The process included phenomenological reduction in which the essence (the essential; the invariant structure) of the experience was continually returned to in order to derive meaning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To aid the process, reflective notes were also reviewed as well as the "structural descriptions" that the participants had provided in their responses (see Table 1).

In general, the participants identified commendable aspects of the program such as its value to the institution and to the country as a whole, the grounding in educational theories that it provides, and the tailoring of the curriculum to fit the needs of the students in the Jamaican classroom. They also offered their views on what they saw as some of the weaknesses and challenges regarding program elements and policies at the institution, proffering their own suggestions on how some policies may be strengthened or new policies that ought to be introduced. All of these were set against the backdrop of policies of the Ministry of Education including initiatives promoting literacy for all, initiatives providing teaching and learning opportunities that seek to "optimize access, equity and relevance throughout the education system," and initiatives supporting student achievement and improving institutional performance to achieve national targets (Vision 2030 Plan, 2009, p. 7). This revamping of programs mirrors international trends in education such as the upgrading of programs. According to Darling-Hammond (2010), nations around the world are expanding educational access and "revising curriculum, instruction, and assessment to support the more complex knowledge and skills needed in the 21st century" (p. 5). These codes and themes are discussed herein by research question.

3.1 Research question 1. In general, the participants were of the view that the program prepares candidates to teach and meet the needs of students. There was the feeling that the courses suited the task of teaching candidates how to teach in early childhood education institutions, and, through exposure to educational and learning theories, established a formative framework for the prospective teachers. There was talk, for example, about learning to write lesson plans and engaging in teaching practice, about theories of scholars such as developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky and about courses such as classroom management (see Figure 1).

There were 36 codes for Research Question 1. These are represented graphically in Figure 1 in terms of their frequency. The codes most repeated were the physical environment and specifically the temperature of classrooms, as well as the adequacy of library materials, and the recording and posting of examination results.

There was the feeling, however, that some courses were redundant and that they were given different names to different cohorts but had the same content. Research, in particular, came in for special attention because some participants felt that not enough guidance was given in terms of instructional material, and that guidance from lecturers was wonting. One participant added that there was an absence of studies conducted by past students.

Complaints among students about curriculum are not unusual. Roofe and Miller (2013) made the point that the "curriculum of any teacher preparation programme is one of the criteria used to judge the quality of the programme. Therefore it must be carefully designed to incorporate all the elements that will contribute to positive outcomes" (p. 9). The students in that study expressed concern about an extreme workload in semester two, the lack of adequate equipment, and the cost for practical courses. The researchers opined that concerns such as these may "enable or constrain students' decision-making towards success or progression in a programme" (p. 9).

Some participants in this study on The Mico felt that more hands-on training like the making of charts was needed. The importance they placed on such activity is consonant with current literature. Reece (2013) in his study on the perspectives of teacher students in first-year studies courses about teacher-student engagement reported that participants spoke about how much they liked that they were engaged in hands-on activities, and that they thought they "learned by actually doing and got more out of the class because it was practical" (p. 37).

The participants all thought the lecturers basically seemed to have good command of the content, although it was obvious that some were teaching new courses. Participants also noted that some did a good job at delivering pedagogy, but felt there was a need for improvement in other cases. There was the suggestion that some lecturers needed to engage in more research to prepare for their classes, and another that some ought to pay attention to how they delivered instruction, for example by having more student engagement in the lessons. The call for more research was similarly made by UNESCO in its 2013 report in which it recommends the integration of research into initial teacher-training programs for the production of "knowledge on key aspects of teacher training, teaching processes and educational work with pupils based on practical experience" (p. 110).

Timetabling seemed to pose some problems. For example, participants shared how students and lecturers would sometimes turn up for classes and would find someone else in the classrooms. It was somewhat of a norm for students to go looking for classrooms and just "capture" a room. Other problems related to timetabling was "group-specific. There was a complaint about evening students having to attend classes every day at first, and on the other hand one participant fussed about day students having classes from 8 am up to 8 pm for lectures and 9 pm if they had to stay back to collaborate with each other on assignments. The timetable was eventually adjusted and allowed Fridays off, for example, for evening students. Other issues included uncertainty about the lecturer assigned to a course as well as the sequencing of courses. For instance, Participant 5 complained about a course being pertinent to teaching practice being done in year four, after teaching practice.

With regards to the physical environment the size and comfort of the classroom came in for most attention. Participants lamented the size and the heat of the classroom on the older building because many of them had no air condition. Some also spoke about the shortage of chairs in some classrooms especially when chairs were diverted to the gymnasium for the hosting of events.

One main complaint was the wait time in processes such as registration and in accessing services at Examinations. Additionally, there was the complaint that the traditional method of posting examination results on noticeboards was too open. The point was made that if persons knew the identification number of a person they could see the results. More than one participant also averred that sometimes the results were inaccurate. But the inaccuracy did not only rest with Examinations. One participant, Participant 6, actually shared her experience of discovering that a lecturer did not have grades for her after Examinations had posted her results with a grade for that subject missing. The participants seemed to welcome the new online system although one participant was not impressed about its functionality.

The fact that the participants had grouses about matters of timetabling, support services, and resources, is not surprising given the fact that the literature shows evidence of similar complaints by participants in other studies.

For example, in the study conducted by Roofe and Miller (2013), student-teachers expressed concern that the instructional technology module had not adequately exposed them to technology and that lecturers had not made use of advancements in technology to equip them for teaching (p. 10). The authors supported that finding by observing that the concern by the student teachers was aligned with the authors' view, that "despite the rapid technological changes that have taken place, countries within the developing world, including Jamaica, are not equipped to deliver the benefits to their people" (p. 10). They lamented what they deemed as a lack of usage of information and communications technology (ICT) in the institution they studied, saying that, "Teacher preparation programme is problematic given its technological thrust and the Jamaican Ministry of Education's efforts to embed ICT in teaching and learning (p. 10).

Glewwe et al. (2011) who examined the effectiveness of school and teacher characteristics on improving students' years of completed schooling and learning, stated that perhaps the clearest finding was that "having a fully functioning school – one with better quality roofs, walls or floors, with desks, tables and chairs, and with a school library – appears conducive to student learning" (p. 41). They provided additional fodder for the point of view that non-academic issues need to be addressed, by claiming that much of the research literature seem to focus on basic school and teacher characteristics, when in fact the ways that schools are organized may actually require more attention (p. 46). The UNESCO report (2013) further recommended that institutions and their staff create conditions to acquire the requisite capacities to design and introduce teacher training opportunities at a new required level.

3.2 Research question 2. The participants were of the view that The Mico brand is well-known and is a model for other territories. There was a general opinion that the program prepared prospective teachers to meet the academic needs of students and supported the overall development of children. The latter agenda was highlighted by the OECD in its 2015 report. It was argued in that report that developing children's social and emotional skills at an early stage is particularly important since these skills develop progressively and build on past investments made on them. The claim was made that children "with higher levels of social and emotional skills (e.g., self-confidence and perseverance) are likely to benefit more from further investments in cognitive skills (e.g. math and science classes)" (p. 14).

Five codes were determined for Research Question 2 and Figure 2 shows that most of the participants (seven) commented on the applicability of the program to the classroom, and its relevance to teacher candidates (six) [see Figure 2]. Relevance to the Jamaican context, the basis for the program, and the institution's reputation were also noted (four, four, and three responses, respectively).

The participants in this study being presented also suggested that value was added to the program because of the fact that the need for parental involvement in the schooling of their children was given some priority. The Ministry of Education alluded to the importance of parental involvement by listing one of its concerns as the "absence of adequate parenting support for the children and the schools" (Vision 2030 Plan, 2009, p. 21). The need for parental involvement was also supported by the OECD (2015) which cited multiple sources in its claim that supportive parents who are actively engaged in literary and writing activities "enhance children's cognitive, social and emotional skills" (p. 82). The OECD (2015) went on further to suggest that "Parental involvement in children's schools, like attending parent teacher meetings, may foster children's social and cognitive development by improving family and social learning contexts" (p. 41). Additionally, some participants pointed out that candidate teachers were exposed to training in tasks such as events planning and were able to hone administrative and clerical skills. These, the participants had found useful at the workplace in as well as outside the field of education.

3.3 Research question 3. Research Question 3 generated 31 codes (see Figure 3). Although the codes were numerous, the frequency level for each was predominantly low. It was mainly one or two participants who commented on each code. This is probably suggestive of the wide breadth of issues the participants deemed as challenges. There were two codes that three and six participants respectively spoke about. Six participants spoke about customer service and three mentioned the cost of tuition.

Some of the challenges facing administration according to the participants in this study on the new degree program at The Mico related to program elements such as the qualification of staff, training and recruitment of staff, teaching practice, communication, and accreditation. The participants felt that some attention needed to be given to the support services and to resources such as books, internet, technology, and food.

There seemed to be a general consensus that the recruitment and training of office staff needed some shoring up with a focus on improving customer service. One participant mentioned that the upgrade in the status of the institution required training in computer skills. They also explicated that the administration needed to better communicate with the student population concerning processes such as registration and examination, and expressed some disquiet about the length of the accreditation process.

There was a concern raised by participants that merits some attention by administration. That related to differences in the program and how the program was being managed for full time (day) students and part-time (evening) students. Of course both day and evening students would have looked at some issues through different lens, but considering that the grouses ranged from differences in the courses and examinations, to the schedule of classes, to access to support services, the issue probably should not be ignored.

3.4 Research question 4.   The matter of policy addressed in Research Question 4 was comprehensively discussed, resulting in 36 codes (see Figure 4). As shown in Figure 4, these included current requirements that inductees in the programs at The Mico and the graduates are required to meet, as well as policy foci of the Ministry of Education including the qualification of teachers in early childhood education institutions, student assessment, and parental involvement in their children's lives at school.

Policy foci at The Mico that was highlighted included Literacy, Education, Integrated Math and Science. The latter had to do with the concept of teaching Math and Science as one subject and is representative of the focus of The Ministry of Education on integrating these two subjects. Another policy item at The Mico discussed by the participants was the matriculation standards and in particular the opportunities afforded prospective students to improve their qualifications to matriculate. For example, students may be asked to complete a math course if they had not gained a pass in math in CXC or GCE, and that was seen as being praiseworthy. Another participant commended the policy of having students spending two years to complete courses to matriculate. She explained that that was how she managed to eventually pursue and complete the Degree. Other policy issues that were lauded included the fact that some courses and electives are compulsory. There is now the requirement for students to complete training in CPR and to procure a food handler's permit and a police record before they can graduate. There is also a uniform policy about which some person felt more attention needed to be given.

In terms of educational policy at the national level there was general admiration for the Ministry's focus on early childhood education, exemplified by the fact that all children at the Grade 1 level must be registered for school. This focus is reflected by the Ministry's motto which is, "Every child can learn . . . Every child must learn" (Vision 2030 Plan, 2009, cover) and in its declaration that there ought to be universal access to education to early childhood, primary and grades 7 to 9 of the secondary level (Vision 2030 Plan, 2009, p. 8).

A Ministry initiative deemed to be meaningful is having more teachers at the early childhood level trained. In particular, its stipulation that each early childhood education institution should have at least one trained teacher, was deemed to be commendable. One participant went a step further and posited the view that the number should be raised to two to provide employment opportunities for more teachers with degrees.

The participants commented on policies regarding instruction and assessment. For example, the Grade 1 Learning Profile which determines the level at which children at the Grade 1 level are performing, and the Grade 4 Literacy Test were spoken about as being useful. Regarding instruction one participant liked the fact that The Ministry was requiring that lesson plans meet certain criteria that allow substitute teachers to effectively execute them.

The policy of meeting the holistic needs of a child was addressed by the participants. There was mention for example of attempts to get increased parental involvement towards this venture, and to train parents to help their children develop positive values and attitudes through the P-VAPP which is part of a larger Ministry of Education initiative, the Respect Agenda Programme. Administrators are trained and they in turn conduct workshops with parents who earn a certificate on completion of the sessions. The Ministry of Education website does indicate however that other school personnel such as deans and guidance counsellors are trained and that the training provided is aligned with a public educational campaign. Materials are provided to both parents and school personnel. One main material is a manual, "Strictly Positive: A Resource Guide on Positive Disciplinary Practices," an adaptation from "Positive Discipline in the Inclusive, Learning Friendly Classroom" by UNESCO. This manual reflects the Ministry's official policy of ending the use of corporal punishment of all forms in schools.

Other initiatives catering to the needs of a child which impact learning include the Path program. This actually provides a cash grant for children who are in need of that kind of support, although one participant said it provides bus fare and breakfast for children. Mention was made of a related policy which requires children younger than Grade 1 to take their own lunches to school. The government's attempts to address the holistic needs of the child was also borne out by the Minister of Education in the aforementioned speech. He posited the view that providing nutrition in schools is adding value to the lives of young children and brightens their prospects. He further explained that one of the Ministry's targets for the succeeding financial year was to "spread around 20% of the school-feeding budget of $4.6 billion on locally grown fruits, vegetables, tubers, eggs and other proteins" which he insinuated was a great improvement coming from "zero use of local produce." He added that the aim was to get to 50% in three years (Thwaites, 2015, sec. Early Childhood).

The participants thought that educational policy and policy specifically at the early childhood education level are important. In general, they commented that policy at this level establish foundational skills on which students build at the other levels. It was also regarded as being pertinent to the remuneration for teachers. It was also spouted as being necessary beyond the classroom because it contributes to the establishment and maintenance of social structures, and the alleviation of social problems such as crime and poverty.

3.5 The social implications. Education is widely accepted as a means of upward mobility and social change. It is an integral part of the political processes of national as well as local governments and has much utility in addressing social ills such as the intergenerational transmission of poverty, increased demand for costly social services, and in some cases political instability (Britto, Engle, & Super, 2013). In the Caribbean, poorer countries as indicated by lower per capita income or human development indicators and economic constraints contribute to educational inefficiency, and according to Hickling-Hudson (2014) in Jamaica, this contributes to a "20.1% illiteracy rate, an unemployment rate of 14.2% in 2012, a high poverty rate, and a high rate of violent crime (p. 4).

Some researchers argue that these types of economic and social problems are heightened by the gap between scientific knowledge and the implementation of relevant policies and programs in early childhood education. Britto et al. (2013) further expounded that this gap is demonstrated through "poor health; inferior cognitive skills; lowered lifetime earnings; and reduced contributions to family, community, and society" (p. 4). Any gap between early childhood education and individual as well as communal development and sustainability has to be bridged by the quality of teacher training that early childhood education teachers receive. They further argued that what is required is a "comprehensive, cohesive, evidence-based framework to guide investments and action for programs and policies to improve outcomes in children's earliest years" (Britto et al., 2013, p. 4).

This study was meant to address this gap between early childhood education and social development and sustainability, by shedding some spotlight on teacher training for early childhood education teachers. In particular, it was used to examine the training being offered by The Mico in its newly developed bachelors' degree program in Early Childhood Education. The information and insight gained from this study have the potential to influence future teacher training and educational policies not just at The Mico but also within the educational landscape in Jamaica. It is our hope that The Mico will take practical steps towards addressing the concerns raised here. These concerns have to deal with issues such as pedagogy, research, and library materials. If The Mico were to do this, then the quality of training teacher candidates receive, will improve. Enhanced training means that graduates would have been prepared to deliver a higher quality of service – instruction. Children in the early childhood institutions where these graduates teach, in turn should have enhanced education. If they do, then they are better prepared for the higher levels of education, and ultimately a better quality of life.

The Mico is a leading teacher training institution in the English-speaking Caribbean. It is the first teacher training institution to offer undergraduate and graduate degrees in Jamaica and the English-speaking Caribbean. Because of its eminent role, what happens there has the proclivity to be replicated or at least modeled in other teacher training institutions. When other teacher training institutions improve their offerings then the teacher candidates in their institutions will be better trained. Of course there is then a ripple effect as better teachers deliver better pedagogy and better pedagogy means more meaningful learning for students.

With The Mico performing a leading role in teacher education the latter will continue and perhaps become more effective in shaping policy on education and in preparing teachers to become transformative agents (Steinbach, 2012). Down (2011) agreed that teacher training institutions have a leading role to play.

She asserted that "teacher training institutions have the potential to bring changes within the educational systems that will shape the knowledge, skills, and perspectives of future generations" (p. 42). Functioning as a transformative agent, The Mico will endeavor to develop critical, literate socially aware citizens who are acutely aware of their civic responsibility and the need to help build social capital (Collins-Figueroa, Down, Gentles, Newman, & Davis-Morrison, 2011).

3.5 Recommendations for action. This study has been conducted with the hope that the institution as a whole and the Faculty of Education and the Department of Early Childhood Education in particular will use it to stimulate a review of how the Bachelors' Degree in Early Childhood Education and all the other degrees are being implemented. Some of the issues discussed by the participants in this study relate to institutional policies and practices. These include for example policies related to examination and registration procedures, and the alignment of educational policies to the perceived needs of students in Jamaican schools and to the policies of The Ministry of Education. The institution and the faculty can therefore use the feedback from the graduates in this study to review and revamp all the relevant programs. Of course it would be prudent for the Department of Early Childhood Education to do likewise, and to take measures to address some of the challenges outlined in this study. In order to do the latter, the Department of course would have to seek the support and permission of the faculty and the institution at large.

The literature reinforces the need for teacher training institutions to evaluate their programs. Glewwe et al. (2011) adumbrated that part of the future success in designing and implementing effective education policies lies in introducing an "evaluation mindset." They also opined that, "The absence of interest in learning about the efficacy of new programs or policies is not restricted to developing countries, but is indeed present in developed countries" (p. 45). But apart from the institution in general, various group and individuals at the institution should take the initiative and engage in reflective practices to improve their pedagogical skills, practice and/or work. Based on the participants' responses although there is much to commend lecturers about, there is room yet for improvement in how records are kept, how classes are conducted, and how research is presented to students. Lecturers could therefore on their own volition engage in professional activities to improve their craft.

3.6 Recommendations for further study. This study fills a gap as there was a need for research to evaluate the implemented changes and inform the direction of future practices (Pantić, 2012). The 2013 UNESCO report which actually examined the education system in eight countries in Latin America and the Caribbean postulated that there is an absence of rigorous evaluations, and assessments or studies to determine the feasibility of programs. There is of course a dearth of evaluation of reforms in education globally, but that is perhaps even more acute in the Caribbean and of course that applies to Jamaica. According to Britto et al. (2013) there is a minimal inclusion of evidence in early childhood education literature from lower and middle income countries due mainly to a scant regard for program evaluation and monitoring. The UNESCO report further suggested that there is not much strong evidence about how the quality of training processes influences the teaching practice, and consequently student learning

Many of the teacher's colleges in Jamaica are upgrading, but not much evaluation has been put in the public domain. The UNESCO in the report mentioned above claimed that there is no current comparative study among the countries in the Caribbean that were studied, but noted that there were parallel trends. The lack of comparative study holds true for teacher training institutions in Jamaica. In general, there is a shortage of studies and a shortage of journal articles. With regard to The Mico in particular there are now 21 undergraduate degrees being offered, but this study is the first formal in-depth evaluation of any of them.

Studies of elements of teacher training need to be conducted across the Caribbean including Jamaica. It really stands to reason that if teacher training institutions are upgrading their status and are now beginning to offer undergraduate degrees, then some research ought to be undertaken and must form part of the platform for policy formulation and policy implementation. This study can serve as a guide into areas that these training institutions may want to examine, and may be instructive of the kinds of policies that are needed. In fact, other teacher training institutions and The Mico may follow the recommendation of UNESCO (2013) to engage in joint studies.

Sections of this study may particularly prove useful. For example, the literature review could be used to yield further scholarly work on phenomenology as a research method, leadership, or on the management of change. Papers could be written and offered to academic entities for publication in Jamaica and the Caribbean.

Such entities include the *Caribbean Journal of Education* published by the University of the West Indies School of Education. If The Mico in particular is to continue on its path towards performance improvement and organizational development, then further studies are required. In addition to perhaps examining the programs in general and how they are being implemented, there is scope for further studies on the policies that undergird these programs. Some areas that some participants identified as problem areas included registration protocols and the handling of student records, and these are two areas that certainly could be examined.

4.0 Conclusion

Teacher training institutions in Jamaica and countries the world over have been revamping, developing and introducing new educational policies and programs to meet the demands of technologically advanced and pluralistic societies that have increasingly become economically competitive. Among these policies and programs are those related to early childhood education and teacher training. The Mico Teachers' College in Kingston, Jamaica, in a strategic move, upgraded its status to a university college and its suite of offerings to include undergraduate and graduate degrees. However, there is very little evaluation (formal and informal) of these newly developed programs at The Mico and at other institutions across the Caribbean and beyond.

The purpose of this qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological study was to examine The Mico University College's Early Childhood Education undergraduate degree program through the lived experiences of 10 graduates of the program. The aim was to have the graduates reflect on their academic experiences, share their perceptions about the quality of the degree program, and about how the change is being implemented and how it impacts organizational development and performance improvement. They were also asked to address specifically issues of policy and to comment on (a) how the major policy shifts at The Mico relate to changes in national educational policies and (b) how together these policy shifts may impact future processes at The Mico and the educational system in Jamaica, and aid the development of the country.

The interviews generated some insightful information about policy issues related to issues such as pedagogy, courses, timetabling, examination and registration protocols, and resources including technology and the library. Commendable elements were identified in all areas and as one would expect the participants identified weaknesses as well. Importantly, they pinpointed congruence between policies at The Mico with some of those at the Ministry of Education and added some that they thought either The Mico or The Ministry should pay more attention.

It is our expectation that this study will stimulate discussions and research at The Mico and similar institutions revamping and introducing undergraduate and graduate programs. From the lived experiences of the graduates, lessons can be learnt, and strengths and weaknesses can be identified. The Mico should then be better able to align its policies to practice, and to garner the necessary resources to support any initiative being pursued. All of this is necessary if The Mico is to achieve its goal of supporting "the development of a whole child – one who is knowledgeable, healthy, motivated and engaged" (The Department of Education, 2008, p.13). With such a foundation, children should grow to become citizens "who can play an active and constructive role in society and develop educable individuals who have the creative and analytical skills, the attitudes to learning, and the emotional intelligence, that equip them for on-the-job training and lifelong learning" (Vision 2030 Plan, 2009, p. 49).

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Table 1
Themes Generated from Concepts

| Concepts	Themes
Research Question 1	
	Teacher preparation to meet the needs of students; Relevance of courses; Teaching practice; Course content; Timetabling; Lesson plans
Pedagogy	Preparation of teachers; Efficacy of delivery of courses; Scoring protocol; Student presentations; New courses for lecturers; Knowledge of content
Physical Environment	Size of classroom; Comfort of classroom; Classroom furniture
Timetabling	Room assignment; Lecturer assignment; Schedule of courses across year groups
Orientation/Registration	Wait time; Inaccurate information; Online registration
Examination	Posting of results; Inaccurate Information/ poor record-keeping; Examination office; Online system; Physical environment (Gymnasium)
Library	Quality of books; Copies of materials (books. Journals, studies; Internet access; Library hours
Technology	Accessibility to labs; Size of labs; Timetabling of labs; Laptops on loan
Research Question 2	
Value of Program	Mico's brand; Preparation of teachers; Meeting needs of students; Model for other territories; Transferal of skills; Parental involvement; Preparation for the workplace
Research Question 3	
Challenges for Administration	Qualification of staff; Training and recruitment of staff; Teaching practice; Communication; Accreditation; Resources eg. books, internet; Technology; Food; Tuition; Timetabling; Registration
Challenges for Staff	Courses; Communication; Research skills; Pedagogical skills; Professionalism; Materials; Support (office) staff; Teaching practice; Salary
Research Question 4	
Policy Foci at The Mico	Literacy; Qualification for teaching; Special Education; Integrated Math and Science; Compulsory courses; Electives; Course protocol; Uniform policy
Policy Foci at The Ministry of Education	Teacher qualification; Staffing of early childhood education institutions; Quality assurance; Professional development; Early childhood education; Assessment; Parent involvement; Lesson plan; Integration; Inclusion classes; Student welfare program
Importance of ECE Policy	Foundational Skills; Relationship to other levels; Remuneration for teachers
Importance of Educational Policy to Nation-building	Social issues; Social structure; Personal development
Policy Focus Needed at The Mico	Personal development; Preparation of teachers; Teaching practice; Certification for teachers; Grooming for candidate teachers; Salary
Policy Focus Needed at The Ministry	Staffing in early childhood education institutions; Salary
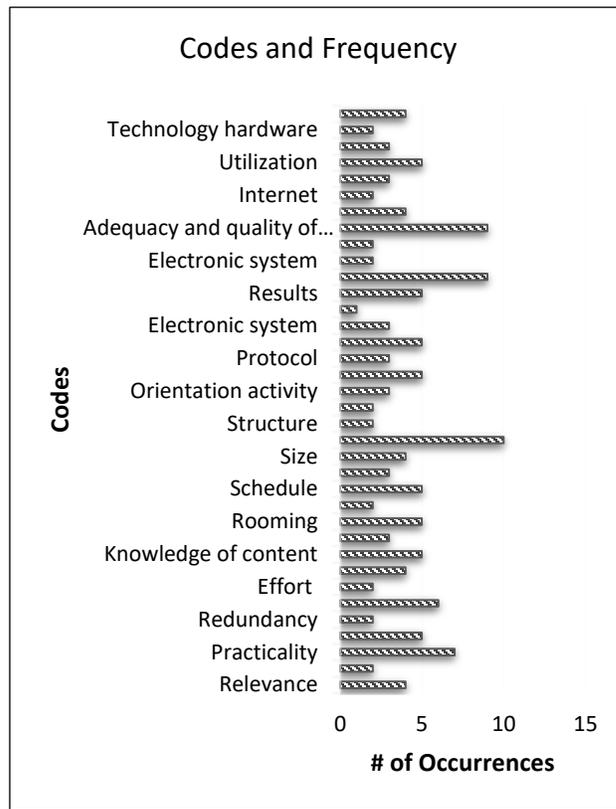
Figure 1. Code frequency for Research Question 1.
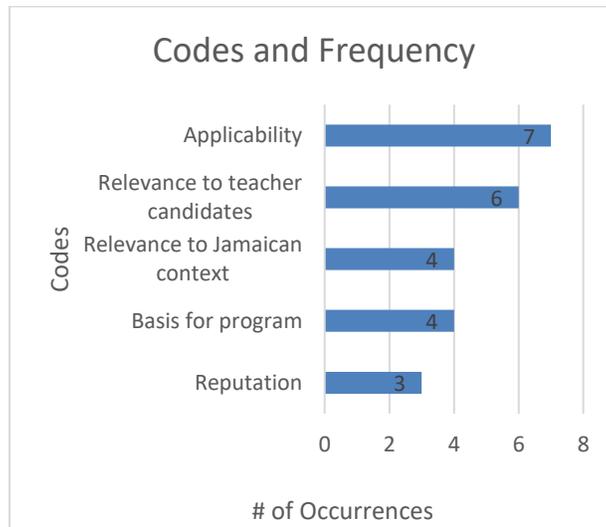

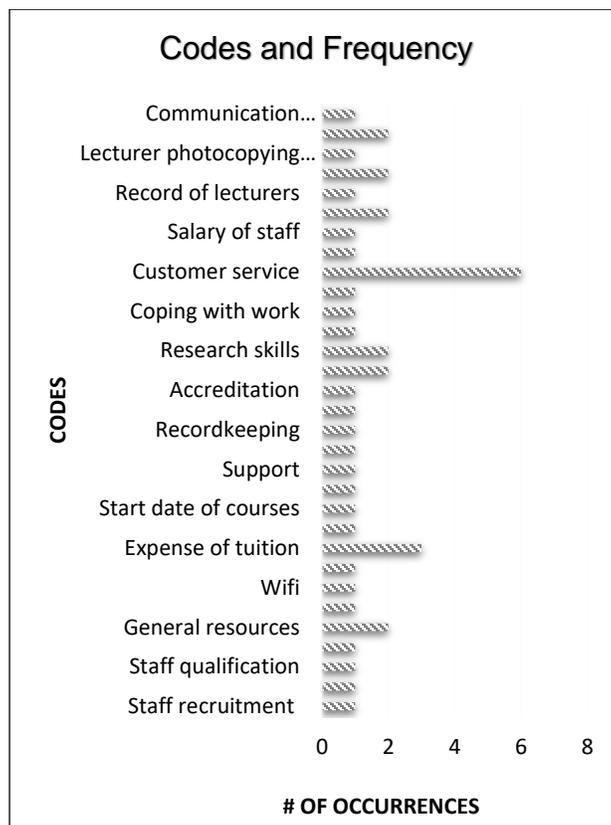*Figure 2*. Code frequency for Research Question 2.
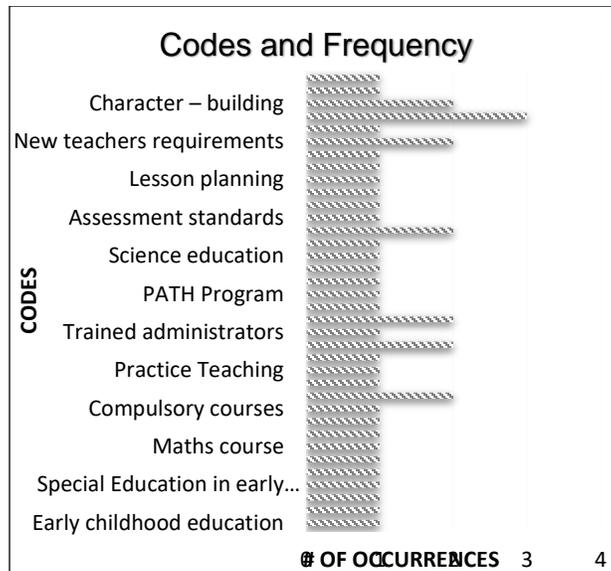
Figure 3. Code frequency for Research Question 3.

Figure 4. Code frequency for Research Question 4.