Making a difference in children's lives: the story of Nancy, a novice early years teacher in a Jamaican primary school

Rose Davies

Institute of Education, University of the West Indies, Mona, Kingston, Jamaica

Online Publication Date: 01 March 2008

To cite this Article: Davies, Rose (2008) 'Making a difference in children's lives: the story of Nancy, a novice early years teacher in a Jamaican primary school', International Journal of Early Years Education, 16:1, 3 — 16

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09669760801892151
Making a difference in children’s lives: the story of Nancy, a novice early years teacher in a Jamaican primary school

Rose Davies*

Institute of Education, University of the West Indies, Mona, Kingston, Jamaica

Good teachers and good teaching have been shown by numerous research studies to be the critical elements which make the difference in effective early years education programmes. Becoming a good teacher is a process that begins with initial teacher preparation and progresses through a series of stages from novice through to expert status. It is generally acknowledged in teacher education literature that beginning teachers have much to discover and learn, perhaps over several years, before achieving professional excellence. Therefore a novice teacher demonstrating the attributes and competencies of an expert is likely to be seen as an aberration within the profession. This article shares the story of such a Jamaican teacher, Nancy (pseudonym), newly qualified and teaching grade 1 in an inner-city primary school. Nancy’s overall approach to teaching and building relationships with children and parents was exceptional in many respects. In analyzing Nancy’s performance as a first-year teacher, the article draws on relevant literature and research on initial teacher preparation programmes, constructivist pedagogy and the benefits of effective pedagogy in preschool education programmes. The discussion of implications for teacher recruitment and initial teacher preparation practices in Jamaica suggests an urgent need for local colleges to ‘fast track’ their reform toward more constructivist philosophy and practice.

Keywords: teacher preparation; beginning teachers; effective pedagogy

Introduction

Teaching is often described as the mother of all professions, as a teacher’s role in developing the human potential is undisputed. Globally, schools and teachers are rated next to the family with respect to their impact on child development and socialisation. In the Jamaican society, teachers traditionally have been regarded as societal role models and held in high esteem in their schools and home communities. However, changing values, cultural practices and lifestyles among parents and children have resulted in teachers today being less revered and respected than they once were. Research on a random sample of 9–17-year-old schoolchildren in Kingston, Jamaica (Meeks-Gardner et al. 2003) revealed that 39% of the students had threatened teachers, while 21% had physically attacked teachers and 38% of the parents had either threatened or physically attacked teachers.

Poor parenting practices among significant numbers of Jamaican families have contributed to the problem. Increasing numbers of children are being left to ‘raise themselves’ as parents seek to improve their financial fortunes in foreign countries. There is also a high prevalence of father absence in the homes of many Jamaican children. As parents abdicate their parenting responsibilities, Jamaican teachers have been faced with the challenge of trying to fill the gap in meeting children’s most basic needs at school due to their parents’ or guardians’ failure to do so at home. International research has shown that neglect of children’s development (health,
nutrition, education, socialisation), especially in the early years, is associated with poor adult outcomes and social and economic losses to a country (Handa 2007). These studies suggest that high-quality intervention programmes in the early years can compensate for many deficits and make a positive difference in children’s lives. This article shares the story of Nancy (pseudonym), a newly qualified (novice) Jamaican early years teacher whose surprising excellence as a grade 1 primary teacher made a difference in the lives of the children for whom she had responsibility.

Introducing Nancy
I met Nancy as a student in her final semester at a teachers’ college where she had pursued a three-year diploma programme in early childhood education. Nancy, along with three other student teachers, responded to my invitation to participate in the research study I was undertaking towards completion of my doctoral degree. The research was a qualitative multiple case study which explored the pedagogical practices, and their sources of influence, of four grade 1 primary teachers, two of whom had majored in early childhood education and two in primary education. The data collection process involved observation of the four teachers in their grade 1 classrooms over the period of one school year, having interviews and informal conversations with them, reviewing the journals they kept of their experiences in the first year of teaching, and examining relevant documents used or produced by the teachers as they engaged with their teaching. Data analysis involved grouping, regrouping and coding of data to reflect emerging themes, and check-coding of themes by peer researchers to increase clarity and reliability in the data analysis process. As I observed these four teachers during the year, I recognised that Nancy stood out among them in a number of ways. She was exemplary in her overall teaching competence and relationship with her students and their parents, and brought a high level of energy and motivation to her daily teaching and classroom interactions. This surprised me as I hardly expected to see such expertise in teaching displayed by a novice teacher. In order to fully appreciate Nancy’s performance as a novice teacher, it is useful here to briefly review the relevant literature on teacher education and pedagogy.

Defining ‘good’ pedagogy
Good pedagogy (excellence in teaching) and good teachers are not considered to be the immediate products of pre-service teacher education but rather the long-term outcomes of a process of learning that generally begins with formal teacher education preparation and progresses through many years of experiences with many children in many classrooms, before the ultimate goal of excellence in teaching is finally achieved. The literature on teacher education is replete with research studies on the challenges faced by newly qualified teachers in their first year of teaching. Most beginning teachers experience what is described as ‘reality or transition shock’, a term used by Veenman (1989) to refer to ‘the collapse of the missionary ideals formed during teacher training by the harsh and rude reality of everyday classroom life’ (143). Learning to teach is regarded as a journey of ‘stages’ that researchers have described in various ways (Katz 1972; Fuller and Bown 1975; Ryan 1986; Berliner 1988). However, in all these models three clear stage characteristics are discernible. In the first stage – usually the first year of teaching – teachers are typically self-centred and focused on basic survival. This is because they feel insecure and uncertain about many things – namely, their limited knowledge of teaching, the teaching environment and colleagues, difficulties with managing their students and coping with curriculum demands and the feeling of isolation, among others. Berliner (1988) describes the stage-one teacher as a ‘novice’.
In the second stage, teachers’ growing confidence and mastery of basic teaching tasks allow them to become more creative in efforts to increase their teaching skills and effectiveness. This corresponds to Berliner’s (1988) stage of ‘competence’. By stage three, teachers are comfortable and confident in their role as teachers and have developed pedagogical mastery; hence their concern now extends to the children and how they are learning. This corresponds to Berliner’s stage of the ‘expert’. The process of growing from novice to expert can span many years, but the novice stage is universally considered to be the most challenging. Veenman (1989) and other researchers (Kremer-Hayon 1987; Bullough 1989; Merrett and Wheldall 1993; Ben Peretz 1996; Ganser 2001) agree that common problems faced by beginning teachers include, among other things, classroom discipline, motivating students, dealing with individual differences among students, assessing student’s work, relationship with parents, organisation of class work, insufficient materials and supplies, and dealing with problems of individual students.

Some scholars and researchers have tried to identify those special qualities that create the synthesis of what ‘good’ teaching is. In his book *The Tact of Teaching*, Max van Manen (1993) offers the view that teaching is strongly associated with the act of parenting and that a good teacher exhibits very strong affective and caring characteristics in his or her relations with children within the classroom context. He defines the term pedagogy as ‘… “excellence of teaching or parenting” because it helps us to identify the essence of true child rearing and teaching … pedagogy orients us to children’ (32). Van Manen identifies the following, among other qualities, as essential to good pedagogy: a sense of vocation, love of and caring for children, a deep sense of responsibility, a pedagogical understanding of the child’s needs, a passion for knowing and learning the mysteries of the world, the moral fibre to stand up for something, and not the least, humour and vitality (8). He uses the term ‘pedagogical thoughtfulness’ to refer to that special quality in a good teacher that extends beyond knowledge and skills and cannot be taught formally; in other words, pedagogical thoughtfulness is ‘a multifaceted and complex mindfulness toward children’ (8).

Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) use the term ‘presence’ in their conceptualization of the essence of good reflective teaching. They explain the term ‘presence’ as:

> a state of awareness, receptivity and connectedness to the mental, emotional and physical workings of both the individual and the group in the context of their learning environments and the ability to respond with a considered and compassionate best next step … reflective teaching cannot be reduced to a series of behaviours or skills, but is a practice that demands presence. As such it involves self-knowledge, trust, relationship and compassion. (266)

Self-knowledge enables the teacher to be in touch with who she is as an individual and to experience continuity and wholeness in both personal and professional lives. There should be no discontinuity between who the teacher is as a person and as a professional; ‘when a teacher acts solely from an artificially constructed notion of who she should be, she becomes remote from herself and “presence” becomes difficult’ (Rodgers and Raider-Roth 2006, 272).

Pedagogical skills also contribute to ‘presence’ in teaching. The authors note:

> In order for the teacher to be free to be present to learning, it is necessary to have a deep knowledge of the subject matter, children and learning and a repertoire of pedagogical skills (from classroom management to lesson planning to curriculum design to design and execution of appropriate activities). (279)

Also important in maintaining presence in teaching is the knowledge the teacher has of each student as, according to Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006), this allows the teacher to be able to diagnose and respond in helpful ways to a child’s behaviour. A teacher’s failure to diagnose children’s needs results in poor teaching. The context of teaching also influences the teacher’s ability to have presence in teaching. Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) suggest that ‘relationally healthy
teaching–learning contexts are essential to teachers’ capacity to be present to their students learning’ (283). Such teaching–learning environments are built on the development of trust between teacher and students. Teachers create this trust by ‘staying connected to themselves, their students, their students’ learning and their communities’ (284).

Benefits of evidence-based effective pedagogy

Families and communities globally desire developmental and enriching early learning experiences for their young children. This has led to increasing demands on governments to provide early years educational programmes with well-trained practitioners who can lead the way in helping children maximise their potentials. Good teaching or effective pedagogy is central to the success of such interventions, and international research studies on early years programmes have shown that the quality of pedagogy in a programme is what makes the real difference in how children develop and learn. Two significant studies on the long-term impact of effective pedagogy on children’s developmental outcomes are the well-known American based Perry Preschool Study (Schweinhart et al. 2005) and the British-based Effective Provision for Preschool Education (EPPE) study (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva 2004).

The Perry Preschool Study

This longitudinal study (1962–1967) involved 123 African-American three- and four-year-old children born in poverty and at risk of failing in school. The children were randomly divided into two groups. One group received a high-quality preschool programme and the other group received no preschool programme. The high-quality programme was delivered using the interactive and effective High Scope Curriculum pedagogical model. This curriculum model emphasises adult–child interaction, a learning environment carefully designed to promote active learning from key experiences and a plan-do-review process for all learning activities. Data analysis at forty years since the study ended and involving 97 per cent of the original study participants showed that not only did the children during the study period demonstrate more positive and desirable developmental outcomes than the control group, but the gains made during the preschool years have endured over time. By age 40, the programme group continued to show more positive results in overall social behaviour, earning power as adult worker, educational achievement, and ability to maintain stable relationships.

Effective Provision for Preschool Education (EPPE) study

This five-year longitudinal study followed the progress of 3000 children aged three plus in 141 preschools throughout England. Twelve of the schools considered to be effective based on child development outcomes were selected for more in-depth follow up and qualitative analysis. The findings concurred with those of other studies that quality preschool education has significant positive impact on children’s overall development. However, the study further explored the particular pedagogical strategies applied in the effective programmes that support children’s development and readiness for school. The findings showed that the most effective strategies centred around adult–child verbal interactions; differentiation and formative assessment; parental partnership and the home education environment; and discipline and adult support in talking through conflicts.

The most effective early years settings encouraged adult–child interactions that were balanced between child-initiated and teacher-initiated activities and involved ‘sustained shared thinking’ between adult and child, particularly during periods of free play which provide opportunity to extend children’s knowledge. Findings showed that the most effective settings had the
most qualified teachers who engaged in the most direct teaching but were also the most effective in the practice of sustained shared thinking interactions with children. The most effective settings had practitioners with a good grasp of pedagogical content knowledge and who practised curriculum differentiation and formative assessment, and had strong parent participation and disciplinary practices that prioritised the rational talking through of conflicts. The foregoing discussion on teacher education and the benefits of effective pedagogy provide a fitting frame of reference for sharing the story of Nancy, an exceptional teacher.

Nancy’s story
Nancy was in her early twenties and had entered teachers’ college immediately after leaving school; hence, this was her first real-world experience of teaching in her own classroom. Nancy’s interest in teaching developed in childhood because of her admiration for an aunt who was a teacher and whose teaching style she admired. She was particularly interested in teaching at the early childhood stage because of the possibility of having greater influence on children who were not yet ‘fully molded into personality types’. Nancy’s primary school was a large public co-educational institution located in an inner-city community in the capital city of Kingston. Most of the students lived within the community. Nancy’s grade 1 classroom was located on the ground floor of one of the school’s two buildings. It was somewhat dark inside but Nancy decorated the space with short, brightly coloured curtains which made the classroom cheerful and attractive. In spite of the limited space, Nancy organised a number of learning centres around the room (e.g. maths, blocks, science, shop, music, library, art and dress-up areas). The classroom was stimulating, with many attractive and colourful charts and pictures mounted on the walls, a wide range of manipulative table top materials – most of them made by Nancy from discards – various small toys, books of all types, musical instruments in a box, a small aquarium with darting guppies, several plants and interesting natural and mechanical items arranged in a discovery (science) centre. It was clear that Nancy had invested a great deal of time and thought in preparing the classroom to receive her 44 six- to seven-year-old grade 1 students.

Setting the stage for supporting children
In our first interview Nancy expressed her love for young children and a desire to influence their development in positive ways. She had familiarised herself with the home backgrounds and special circumstances of every child in her class. Nancy said she wanted to be able to make a difference in the lives of these grade 1 students particularly because of their home background. She wanted them to achieve academically as well as in other ways. Nancy expressed the belief that ‘Children will achieve if the teacher starts with a view that they can. I believe in my children’s ability and capacity to achieve.’ Becoming literate was integral to such achievement; hence, an important goal for Nancy was that all her students be able to begin reading at least functionally by the end of the school year.

It appeared to me from observing Nancy’s interaction with her students throughout the year that from the outset she had thought through a set of personal and social values that she wanted the children to embrace. Of foremost importance was the need for them to develop a sense of responsibility and independence.

Other valued behaviours that from my own observations Nancy intentionally encouraged in her daily practice included respect for each other, honesty, truthfulness, cleanliness, caring, sharing, patience and tolerance, good manners and the social graces. She was not deterred by the challenges or criticisms she encountered at times from her own colleagues. One such example was her effort to get the children to show some responsibility in keeping the classroom clean. When
efforts to borrow brooms from the main school office to sweep the classroom floor were unsuccessful, Nancy asked the children to come up with a solution to the problem and they suggested that the class collect money to buy their own brooms (these were quite inexpensive and sold on the school compound). The children, with Nancy’s encouragement, collected the money, purchased the brooms, developed their own duty roster that assigned two students per day to the task, and faithfully swept the classroom each day thereafter.

Another example was when Nancy asked each parent to supply their child with a place mat and a rag because she wanted the children to learn to clean up after themselves, to be independent and acquire some social graces relative to eating and mealtimes. She required the children to set out their own mats and eat at their desks and she stayed in and ate with them. After eating, each child would use the rag to wipe the desk and the mat before returning it to where it was stored. I observed this to be an established pattern on the occasions when my visit extended into lunchtime. Nancy said she met opposition initially from other teachers who told her that eating in the classroom was not allowed as the children would make a mess of the classroom. She confronted this by telling them:

I think my children should learn how to eat properly at their desk … this is my way of dealing with lunchtime. When they eat they clean their desks. If they spill something there is a mop in the classroom they can use to wipe it up and the classroom can be clean. (Davies 2004, 142)

Nancy was undaunted by the frustrations she faced and would find a way to consistently do what she thought to be important. Even when thieves robbed the school and stole the children’s place mats, Nancy soon replaced them, with assistance from the parents.

Near to the end of the school year, Nancy shared with me an incident which had made her ‘fall out of grace’ with her grade-level colleagues. In planning a field trip for students, Nancy strongly opposed her colleagues’ proposal to go to a very distant location as she thought a long journey would be too exhausting for grade1 children. Her colleagues had chosen that location as it would be a new experience for them (the adults). Nancy opted not to take her children on the trip and made her own arrangements to take them elsewhere. In defending the stance she took, Nancy said, ‘I have to do what I feel is right for the children. I am not prepared to turn from what I know to be proper because of any other teacher. I will stick to my beliefs that put the children’s interest first.’ This willingness to ‘stand up for children’ is a characteristic that van Manen (1993) ascribes to the ‘true pedagogue’ or excellent teacher. From her willingness to guide children in wholesome directions and defend children’s rights when necessary, Nancy earned the title of ‘true pedagogue’ many times over.

Building positive relationships with children

On my first visit to Nancy’s classroom early in the school year, I found the children to be extremely noisy, non-compliant and untidy. Nancy was well aware of the characteristics of the communities where her school was located and where her students lived. She said that she was not surprised at the children’s behaviour patterns, given the kind of home environment from which many of them came. She also revealed her expectation that the children would ‘test her to the limit’ as in the first week of school, she had told them that, ‘I do not beat children’. This was surprising to them, as in many of their homes, corporal punishment was the dominant disciplinary practice. They expected to be spanked for misbehaviour or for failure to do their homework. Nancy reassured the children repeatedly that she would use methods other than physical punishment when this was necessary. Nancy’s aim was to build trusting and comfortable relationships with the children as she did not want them to be fearful of her, but rather regard her as their friend and confidante with whom they could speak freely, including correcting her when she was wrong:
I try not to make my students fearful of me. So we have a relationship. When they came in, the first thing I said to them was, ‘If Miss pronounces your name wrong, you can correct her … it is not rude to correct Miss because teachers make mistakes sometimes.’ This understanding between us works very well because they feel they can approach me and talk about anything. There is no fear of me. (Davies 2004, 161)

As I observed Nancy interacting with the children over time, I sensed that a strong, warm rapport existed between them. Nancy cared about the children’s needs in a holistic way, not only in the patience she demonstrated in helping them acquire new skills and information during lessons, but also in the genuine concern she showed for their physical and emotional well-being. For instance, Nancy always kept a small bag with contingency money in her desk drawer to ensure that no child in her class went hungry because of lack of money to buy lunch. She showed understanding when children were tired, hurt or sad and was generous with the hugs that she gave them to alleviate such distress. I share two examples below:

While the children are exiting through the classroom door, a girl breaks the line and comes up to where Nancy has just sat down. She tells Nancy that she is feeling sad because she misses her mother. Nancy pulls her nearer and hugs her. She tells the girl that after she eats her lunch she should draw a picture of her mother and write the words ‘I love you’ at the bottom. Nancy tells her that she can give her mother the picture later. The girl nods and then leaves to join others outside. (Davies 2004, 161)

Nancy announces that all children who need to purchase lunch tokens should go now and buy them. A boy comes to Nancy and asks her to ‘make up’ his money to buy his lunch ticket. He tells her that his mother only had ten dollars to give him this morning. Nancy takes the money from the bag in her desk drawer and gives it to the boy, holding on to his hand until he says ‘Thank You Miss’ and leaves the room. (Davies 2004, 162)

On several other occasions, I saw Nancy respond to individual children’s needs in a way that suggested full knowledge of their personal circumstances.

Classroom management and guiding children’s behaviour

As a classroom manager and disciplinarian, I rated Nancy in the range of good to excellent. She confronted the task of management and discipline in her class with a self-assurance, consistency and inclusiveness of approach that yielded a good measure of cooperation and responsiveness from her students. In my opinion, the warm, caring and respectful relationship that Nancy shared with her students was the main pillar of support on which her success in classroom and behaviour management was built. Like many of her primary school colleagues, Nancy faced the daily challenges of high noise levels, cramped space, inappropriate physical setting and a high ratio of healthy, active and oftentimes chaotic children. Early in the school year Nancy’s students were a challenge to manage, but as the weeks passed, she gradually established a workable code of conduct by involving the children in initial decisions about classroom rules and punishment for inappropriate behaviour.

In my analysis of Nancy’s approach to classroom management and discipline, I discerned four main strategies: (1) building and maintaining positive, caring and respectful relationships with the children; (2) creating an orderly classroom environment with acknowledged rules; (3) proactively motivating and recognising good behaviour among the children; and (4) using specific and consistent approaches for punishing inappropriate and unacceptable behaviour. In this regard, Nancy communicated very clearly with the children her expectations for behaviour in the classroom and that there would be consequences for breaking the agreed-on rules. Over time I recognised some of these rules to include: forming lines to lead out and re-enter the classroom, putting away materials after use and keeping the classroom floors clean, raising hands when desirous of speaking, not shouting at each other or the teacher; not interrupting someone who was speaking, not coming up to the teacher’s desk unless called, sitting quietly and waiting your turn to be
called, no laughing at or jeering each other, no copying or cheating, no fighting in the classroom, and not bringing and using prohibited items in class.

Nancy devised various disciplinary strategies for dealing with children’s challenging behaviours in the classroom. She used traditional approaches, such as reasoning with the children about their behaviour and providing materials such as punching bags, pillows and play dough to alleviate aggressive urges. She also used self-created forms of punishment based on her intimate knowledge of the children’s likes and dislikes. For example, a child who had particular pride in sitting at the desk with his or her personal name card would be asked to sit elsewhere as a form of punishment, or a child who liked to help to distribute materials would be denied the privilege for a day or two. At no time during any of my observation visits did I see her resort to physical punishment of any kind. What impressed me most about Nancy was the consistency with which she applied her behaviour management techniques. With respect to managing her classroom, Nancy’s preferred approach was pre-emptive rather than reactive. I formulated a list of the strategies Nancy frequently used to maintain classroom order. These included:

*Classroom patrol:* Frequently walking between the rows of benches so the children could feel the teacher’s presence.

*Acknowledging and praising good behaviour:* Proactively calling attention to and praising exemplary behaviours (e.g. listening, working on task, sharing).

*Involving troublesome children in classroom duties:* Helping in distributing and collecting books and papers, erasing chalkboard, sharpening pencils, etc.

*The freeze game and the face puppets:* Playing the ‘freeze’ game to restore order, using face puppets to show teacher’s feelings about children’s behaviour.

*Finger plays and jingles:* To refocus children who were inattentive and getting out of control.

*Heads on the desks and count to ten:* Children who have become too noisy were required to put heads on the desks and remain composed while teacher slowly counted to ten.

*Body Language:* Teacher’s eye contact with stern glare and serious facial expression effectively used to get disruptive children to cease such behaviour.

In summary, Nancy was an effective manager of both her classroom and her children, demonstrating skills and confidence befitting an expert teacher. She had developed her own philosophy of what comprised desirable and undesirable approaches to this task and was assisted in the process by her knowledge of and concern for the children. Nancy’s strategies and the consistency of approach made a difference in her students’ lives as I watched them develop from an unruly bunch at the start of the school year to responsive, cooperative and responsible individuals by the end of that year.

**Nancy the ‘present’ teacher**

In a previous section, the characteristics of teacher ‘presence’ as conceptualised by Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) are described. These include: the teacher’s knowledge of self; ability to build trust within the learning environment; knowledge of subject matter; importance attached to planning and preparedness for teaching; knowledge of individual children’s needs and personal circumstances; ability to provide and engage children in activities and experiences that allow for experimentation and hands-on learning; and an all-encompassing love of and concern for children. From my observations, Nancy demonstrated many of these characteristics as a teacher. She credited much of her approach to teaching to her college preparation programme:
‘Seeing that I never taught before, everything that I learned in college is what I now try to use in my teaching.’ The early childhood college diploma programme subscribed to a philosophy of early childhood education that was oriented to child centeredness, learning through play and hands-on activities and experiences, integrated curriculum, emphasis on building relationships and values such as independence and a sense of responsibility and considering children’s interests, background and culture in planning for their learning. Student teachers were exposed to methods of teaching and learning at college that mirrored the methods they were expected to use with children in classrooms. In reflecting on her training experience, Nancy said:

> At college we were not placed around a desk and merely told what to do. We did things hands-on. We all had to set up learning centres and each group of us was assigned to a particular centre. We had to participate in activities at the centre and discuss how we were benefited by the experience. And while we were interacting in the centres we just remembered the kinds of things we would do as children and we started to understand the impact better … and we just came to the conclusion that we must have similar materials in our classes when we teach because without them we will not have a good class…. I make an effort to set up interest centres as they help to keep children in control and children can use these centres to discover many things on their own. (Davies 2004, 121)

Nancy’s commitment to the learning centre approach forced her to be very creative in planning the physical environment of the classroom because of the number of students and the limited space available. She had to contend with other challenges in her classroom that made teaching in her desired approach difficult. For instance, opportunities for small group cooperative learning were limited because of the inappropriate furniture and lack of space to allow greater flexibility. At times it was difficult to use grouping effectively because of the large number of children and her being the sole teacher. The school’s timetable also was more in sync with a subject-based curriculum approach than with the integrated curriculum Nancy adhered to. For all these reasons, Nancy stressed the importance of careful planning for teaching: ‘We as teachers are training and molding young youths for the future. Planning is Key.’ Over the months that I observed her, I was quite impressed with her consistency and dedication to planning. I recall writing in my journal, ‘She seems so sure of herself in front of the children. What I admire about her are the following: (1) her organization and planning, (2) her consistency in what she does, (3) her leadership as a teacher.’

Nancy’s careful planning was evident in her preparations to: teach her lessons, go on a field trip, organise an outdoor playground session, introduce different curriculum themes during the year, and include extra activities in the curriculum to ensure that the children could have a ‘well-rounded experience’. In the latter case, Nancy had acted on her own initiative to broaden the curriculum of her grade 1 class to include music, drama and computer literacy, explaining, ‘I strongly believe that such activities are important, because in college our lecturers stressed the importance of providing rounded development for children’. At Nancy’s school, only grade 2 upward was included in the activities provided by the specialist teachers for music, drama and computer studies. Nancy told me, ‘I found this to be very peculiar, the fact that grade 1 children were not included in activities such as music, drama, Red Cross and Cub Scouts.’ Nancy asked the specialist teachers to accommodate occasional sessions of music, drama and computer literacy for her class and they consented to do so. Nancy said that she was guided in her planning by the children’s needs and interests.

Nancy demonstrated a high level of competence in her teaching skills. I use the term ‘teaching’ in this context to refer to the methods and strategies that teachers use to impart concepts and facts, build skills, inculcate values, and influence attitudes in children. According to some scholars, teaching in early childhood is closely associated with parenting because of the holistic nature of young children’s needs. Grant (1982) and Smith (1993) use the term ‘educare’ to describe teaching in early childhood, since education and care cannot be separable components
of children’s environments, whether home or school. Learning environments at this stage must be warm, secure, responsive and nurturing. Max van Manen (1993) shares a similar perspective in referring to the good teacher’s role as being ‘in loco parentis’, and he uses the term ‘pedagogical thoughtfulness’ to describe the teacher’s capacity to understand, empathise, love and respond appropriately to individual children’s needs, in the various situations that occur in day-by-day classroom interactions.

In spite of the inherent disadvantages of her classroom setting, Nancy made efforts to use teaching strategies that were consistent with good practice. An important objective of teaching for her was to keep her children motivated and interested in learning. She made use of many interesting teaching aids, which she changed periodically to add ‘freshness’ to her teaching. She encouraged hands-on learning and interaction with the wide range of games and manipulative materials she provided. Story telling was a strong feature of Nancy’s teaching. Many of the stories were self-created to simplify concepts and facts for children’s better understanding. She used humour to great advantage both in her story telling and as a general practice in her teaching. She used her facial expressions and dramas very effectively, making funny faces and imitating silly actions that the children found amusing. I observed other exemplary teaching strategies, such as commending children appropriately for their efforts, tactfully eliciting the participation of shy or withdrawn children, making timely and effective connections with ‘about to be disruptive’ children, and providing individual attention to each child as needed. Nancy frequently invited resource persons to come as guests to her classroom. She explained the value of this in her journal:

Although I am the class teacher, a resource person who is in the particular field is more qualified to talk about it … I invited the Curator of Hope Zoo to visit our class and speak to the children on the topic, ‘Care of Animals’. He brought along animals such as a snake, turtle, rabbit and a flying mantis. Most of the students who had never experienced live animals other than dogs and cats and so on, were excited and enjoyed the experience. Many of them are used to thinking about killing or hurting animals, but after this visit they spoke eagerly about going out and helping to protect the animals around them. (Davies 2004, 157)

Partnering with parents

Nancy felt that it was important to involve parents and communicate with them not only about matters related to their children but also about the curriculum and classroom activities. She said, ‘I learned about how to work with parents in a college course, Parent and Community Involvement, and have tried to put what I learned into practice.’ Nancy received overwhelming support from parents at all times. Many of the parents were poor but made the effort to contribute what they could to raise funds to support Nancy’s initiatives. They helped to repurchase children’s table mats after a robbery, and acquired fans for the very hot classroom as well as a clock and a cassette tape recorder. Some parents accompanied the class on field trips and they also supplied many books for the reading area. Nancy seemed quite at ease with the parents and was very satisfied with the relationship she had managed to build with them.

In one instance I observed Nancy with a father and his daughter engaging in block play. She later explained to me that the father had earlier expressed concerns about what his child was doing at school. He did not see the value of all this play activity and felt that the children should be involved in ‘real learning’. Nancy invited him to engage in block play with them and to take note of all that it was possible for his daughter to learn by simply playing with blocks. His attitude changed after that experience. I was personally impressed by the ease with which parents seemed to come to the classroom and interact even briefly with Nancy. She relied on their support not only for raising funds when needed, but also for helping her to enrich her curriculum offerings in the classroom.
Reflecting on Nancy, effective pedagogy and implications for initial teacher education

The high level of expertise that Nancy demonstrated as a first-year ‘novice’ teacher is an unusual phenomenon in the field of teacher education. Berliner (1988) and Schempp et al. (1998) conducted research to ascertain differences between novice and expert teachers. Their findings generally concurred that expert teachers have a good knowledge base; use clear signals to start and finish a lesson; establish clear routines, procedures and rules; are effective in classroom organisation and management of children; anticipate children’s likely behaviours and plan carefully to prevent or deal with problems; are consistent to the point of developing a level of ‘automaticity’ in responding to classroom events; show a high level of emotional commitment to their work; take at least partial responsibility for the learning outcomes of children; and are knowledgeable about the backgrounds of their students. From my observations, Nancy’s overall behaviour and stance as a teacher was closer to being expert than they were to her novice status. At times it was difficult for me to believe that Nancy had never taught before entering college.

As I observed the four teachers who participated in my research, I frequently reflected on what made Nancy stand out among them. How much of her approach to teaching was due to innate dispositions and how much was due to her training? What are the specific qualities that made Nancy an exceptional teacher? Which of these qualities might be developed and nurtured in new teachers through pre-service teacher education? Answers to these questions are of interest to teacher educators like myself, for whom beginning teachers of the calibre of Nancy epitomise the graduate outcome desired at the end of all teacher preparation programmes. My analysis of Nancy’s teaching showed areas of strength that were influenced by her own natural tendencies as well as some that could be attributed to her training. These included a genuine love of and concern for children; the strong desire to be a teacher; a deep respect for and adherence to the principles of good teaching learned at teachers’ college; a strong personal philosophy of teaching and learning congruent with that of the teacher preparation programme; consistency of approach in the practice of teaching; and a personal strength of character to confront challenges and not compromise her own standards for appropriate practice.

Love of children and desire to teach

Scholars such as Evans (2001) and van Manen (1993) agree that establishing a sound relationship with children is an essential condition that facilitates good teaching. When children know and trust that their teacher by his or her actions genuinely loves and cares about them and is concerned for their well-being and development, they are much more likely to be cooperative, responsive and compliant during class sessions. Children are very capable of discerning the difference between a teacher who is genuine and one who is not. This is consistent with the aspect of being ‘present’ as a teacher, referred to by Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) as being in touch with self. Integration of the personal and professional selves increases ‘teacher strength’. Nancy loved children and took delight in being with them. Hence even without the knowledge of a more experienced teacher who would have come to know of the critical importance of a good teacher–student relationship, she had presence with children because ‘herself’ as a teacher was consistent with ‘herself’ as a person. Having a genuine love for children and the desire to teach are not qualities that are influenced by training but, rather, are innate dispositions (van Manen 1993). Becoming an excellent teacher must begin with having a passion for and being excited by children. The implication for teacher education in this regard points more to the recruitment and selection process of initial teacher preparation programmes than to the training itself. Strategies for determining prospective teacher candidates’ orientation toward children and motivation for wanting to teach should therefore be a critical qualifying component for entering the teaching profession.
Nancy had great respect for her college education. She felt that it had exposed her to principles and practices of child development and learning that were based on empirical research on how children learn best. Nancy felt strongly that teachers should adhere closely to such developmentally appropriate principles and practices in their teaching. The hands-on approach to learning during her college experience deepened Nancy’s understanding of the need for appropriate pedagogy in early childhood education. For example, when being taught in college about establishing learning centres in classrooms, the student teachers engaged in the experience of playing in learning centres as children would. That experience had an enduring effect on the importance Nancy attached to the value of learning centres in early learning environments. Nancy’s belief in, and adherence to, what she was taught at college could justifiably be credited to her initial teacher preparation experience, an expectation that has been subject to much debate within the field of teacher education.

Scholars such as Grossman (1989), Fosnot (1993), Villegas-Reimers and Reimers (2000) and others have argued that traditional teacher education programmes built on expository theory to practice approaches are largely ineffective in positively impacting teacher performance. They believe (as I do) that teacher preparation programmes based on constructivist, reflective approaches do make a difference in the degree of loyalty teacher trainees demonstrate in adhering to the principles and practices of teaching learned during their teacher education experience. Constructivist teacher education approaches systematically challenge student teachers’ beliefs through activity, reflection, and discourse in both course work and field work throughout the teacher preparation programme, as change in personal beliefs and practices must involve a process of deconstruction and perspective transformation (Fosnot 1993, 70).

One fundamental principle of constructivist philosophy in the teacher education context is that student teachers must be taught with the same teaching strategies that they are expected to use with children in classrooms. Nancy’s teacher preparation programme, while not in essence constructivist, applied this principle to practice and the impressions of good teaching that remained with Nancy as a result influenced and sustained her later classroom practices. If we accept that a constructivist teacher education programme is the model most likely to produce teachers who are committed to practising what they learned at college about good teaching, then there are strong implications for transforming predominant practices in our Jamaican teachers’ colleges from traditional to more constructivist, reflective teaching/learning approaches. Some teachers’ colleges in Jamaica have already embarked on this process of transformation, but there is still much ground to be covered before our teacher preparation programmes can be deemed to be truly constructivist in philosophical orientation and practice.

Consistency in practice, personal standards and strength of character

One characteristic of expert teachers is the consistency in teaching behaviour and responding to classroom events (Berliner 1988; Schempp et al. 1998). Nancy demonstrated this consistency in her approach to planning for teaching, managing children’s behaviour and responding to children individually and as a group in various classroom events. Nancy’s efforts to ensure that her children received a rounded education (emphasised in her college education) were sometimes challenged by her own colleagues and even parents. But regardless of the consequences, Nancy was committed to putting children’s interest first, as in the incident with the field trip. She was willing to ‘stand up for something’ (van Manen 1993) when necessary to protect her children’s well-being. According to van Manen (1993), this special quality in a good teacher cannot be taught formally, but derives from an inherent ‘mindfulness’ toward children.

Nancy possessed a certain strength of character and determination to maintain high standards for herself and surmount the many challenges she encountered from day to day. In my opinion,
Nancy’s success as a first-year teacher resulted from a synergistic blend between her college training and her own character dispositions. The implications for teacher training aimed at achieving the best outcomes again point to a process which begins with selection of individuals who have an affinity toward children, followed by training experiences that are constructivist in philosophy and practice. Whilst there can be no guarantee of the quality of individual outcomes from any teacher training process, programmes designed on the constructivist model are more likely to produce teachers with the attitude and commitment to high standards and best practice demonstrated by Nancy.

Conclusion
This article has presented the story of an exceptional Jamaican first-year primary school teacher whose excellence in teaching made a positive difference in the lives of her grade 1 children. The ‘phenomenon of Nancy’ allows us to believe that excellence in teaching by a novice teacher does not have to be regarded as an aberration within the teaching profession, but as a real possibility that is achievable through the careful selection of candidates during the recruitment process as well as by providing quality initial teacher preparation programmes built on constructivist models of teaching and learning. Only when teachers in training are provided with opportunities for self-reflection, and are able to think about and deconstruct their prior inappropriate beliefs about children and teaching and replace these with personal philosophies and practices based on sound theories of child development and learning, will they be likely to demonstrate the characteristics of the excellent teacher that Nancy demonstrated in her practice. It is such teachers who make a real difference in children’s lives.

References


