

## At-risk Students at a Junior High School in Rural Jamaica: The Teachers' Best Practices

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**ABSTRACT:** *The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutical phenomenological study was to explore and interpret the central underlying meanings, structures and essence of the lived experiences of teachers dealing successfully with at-risk students at a Junior High school in Jamaica. It sought to understand how teachers perceive their purpose, how teachers view their readiness to teach at-risk students and explored the challenges faced by teachers. The sample of four participants, one principal and three ASTEP teachers, were selected purposefully to take part in the study. The instrument used to collect data for this study was one-on-one structured interview protocol lasting one and a half hours. It consisted of eleven open-ended items which were subjected to a rigorous process of validity and reliability testing. An iterative and inductive cycle of the thematic approach was employed to analyze the data collected using the QDA Minor software. It was found that low teacher expectation of students, lack of sync between the Ministry of Education's policies and teachers' convictions, lack of support from parents and the Ministry of Education, students' disinterest, lack of motivation of students, and students' lack of readiness to learn were the emerging and diverse, chronic challenges teachers faced when dealing with at-risk students. It was also found that when a school-wide attempt was made to employ innovations in putting theory into practice in the classroom, such as building a healthy, productive environment in the ASTEP classroom, students participated more in the learning process. It was recommended that schools include vocation based programmes in the curriculum, to cater to the diverse needs of students using a school-wide approach to employ innovations in putting theory into practice, such as building a healthy, productive environment in the classroom and supporting students' cultural and individual identity in their learning experiences, supported by the creation of healthy relationships, and an inclusive environment which is crucial for student success.*

**KEYWORDS:** *ASTEP, At-risk students, classroom strategy, learning approaches, learning environment*

### 1. BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

The report from the Task Force on Educational Reform (2004) and Vision 2030 National Development Plan identified grave concerns with at-risk students and their non-detection in the Jamaican school system. As a result, policy makers have been forced to focus their efforts on reducing dropout rates and identifying, and supporting students who are susceptible to dropping out of school (National Commission, 1983). This has serious implications for Jamaica's embrace of the 2001 education 'law,' a combination of the American thrust "No child left behind," and our own mantra, "Every child can learn, every child must learn."

Globalization, coupled with political needs, has made the Jamaican education system a high stakes system of standardized testing. School improvement, tied to funding contracts, nationalized benchmarks and a market driven economy, has put a stranglehold on the Jamaican education system. At-risk students who, in the past, were overlooked must now be identified and supported in schools in order to increase the chance of job success. Additionally, students who have dropped out of school and have secured jobs now realize that they, too, need an education and certification in order to have options in a new world which is increasingly demanding that our graduates be technically and vocationally sound. One recurring theme that permeates the literature about students' success is teacher quality; the effective teacher is the single most important factor that affects student success. It is, therefore, important to ascertain the common experiences of teachers who are successfully dealing with at-risk students in our schools. Exploring the lived experiences of these teachers, their meanings, structures and essence will afford us a platform on which to lay our foundation for transformation. The matter is compounded by the fact that at-risk students have no socioeconomic boundaries. However, it is the children of families at the lower socio-economic strata who make up the highest percentage of children that are facing this dilemma. These are usually children of poor, single-parent families in rural areas who, are in danger of leaving school prematurely, without fulfilling their potential (Ormrod, 2010).

Furthermore, an examination of the statistics reveals that males are more likely to drop out of school than their female counterparts. Anderson (2011) believes that the Jamaican education system has failed in its efforts to truly educate all who could benefit from such education. Anderson suggests that the need for academic achievement is as compelling for at-risk individuals as for the non-disabled in the twenty first century. Against this backdrop, Friedman (2005) believes that in order for us to survive in this globally competitive world, all our children, regardless of their background, will need creativity, problem-solving abilities, a passion for learning, a dedicated work ethic and lifelong learning opportunities; they must fulfill their potential. However, students can develop these abilities through instruction, based on best practice teaching strategies. This study will, therefore, explore the experiences of teachers dealing successfully with a group of at-risk students. A positive policy framework is found in the Vision 2030 document on at-risk students in Jamaica. Even with the existence of this policy, many at-risk students remain undetected in the Jamaican education system. As a result, these students receive little or no effective support services, resulting in low levels of academic achievement (Augustine, 2014). While a framework policy is paramount, this must be transferred to the classroom, if each student is to achieve his/her full potential and contribute positively to our workforce development.

The purpose of this study is to describe and interpret the essence of the common lived experiences of teachers dealing successfully with at-risk students at a selected Junior High school in Jamaica. Also, it sought to discover how teachers perceive their purpose and view their readiness to teach at-risk students, and explored the challenges faced by teachers, and how they view the obstacles that they face. This study should also encourage teachers to reflect on their previous and present impressions in dealing with at-risk students and share the best practices they utilize daily. In addition, this study highlighted specific characteristics of the programme (s) implemented by the teachers and the factors motivating them to continue the programmes implemented at their schools to deal successfully with at-risk students. The major significance of this study was that it sought to produce findings from which recommendations can be made to teacher training institutions and principals, for creating contexts that influence effective detection, as well as the effective teaching, of at-risk students in schools. This study was designed to provide a body of literature to which policy makers can refer, and to provide findings on which recommendations concerning improving the delivery of instruction to at-risk students can be based. One central research question was formulated to guide the research process: What were the experiences gained by teachers during the implementation of instructional programmes to deal successfully with at-risk students?

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The purpose of this study was to explore and interpret the central meanings, structures and essence underlying the lived experiences of teachers dealing successfully with at-risk students at a Junior High school in Jamaica. The literature reviewed in this section is geared at helping us understand the phenomenon of at-risk students and the experiences of teachers in dealing with these students. This section is sub-divided into: (a) the characteristics of at-risk students, (b) strategies to engage and retain at-risk students in school, (c) characteristics of programmes geared at helping at-risk students, (d) effective school-based activities to improve the academic performance of at-risk students, (e) the concept of best practices, teachers lived experiences and best practices in the classroom, and (f) a summary.

**Characteristics of at-risk students:** At-risk students typically show certain characteristics.

These are: **A history of academic failure**

Students who drop out may have a history of poor academic achievement going back as far as the third grade (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1995; Garnier, Stein, & Jacobs, 1997). On average, they have less effective reading and study skills, earn lower grades, obtain lower achievement test scores, and are more likely to have repeated a grade level than their classmates who graduate (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Jozefowicz, Arbreton, Eccles, Barber, & Colarossi, 1994; Raber, 1990; Steinberg et al., 1984; Wilkinson & Frazer, 1990).

**Older age in comparison with classmates:** Because low achievers are more likely to have repeated a grade level, they are often older than their classmates (Raber, 1990; Wilkinson & Frazer, 1990). Some, but not all, research studies find that students who are overage in comparison with classmates are especially prone to dropping out of school (Gottfredson, Fink, & Graham, 1994; Roderick, 1994; Rumberger, 1995). Quite possibly, school becomes less attractive when students find they must attend class with peers they perceive as less physically and socially mature than they are.

**Emotional and behavioral problems:** Potential dropouts tend to have lower self-esteem than their more successful classmates. They also are more apt to create discipline problems in class, use drugs, and engage in criminal activities (Finn, 1991; Garnier et al., 1997; Jozefowicz et al., 1994; Rumberger, 1995; U.S. Dept. of Education, 1992).

**Frequent interaction with low-achieving peers:** Students who drop out tend to associate with low-achieving and, in some cases, antisocial peers (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Hymel, Comfort, Schonert-Reichl, & McDougall, 1996). Such peers may argue that school is not worthwhile and are likely to distract students' attention away from academic pursuits.

**Lack of psychological attachment to school:** Students at-risk for academic failure are less likely to identify with their school or to perceive themselves as a vital part of the school community. For example, they engage in few extracurricular activities and are apt to express dissatisfaction with school in general (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Hymel et al., 1996; Rumberger, 1995).

**Increasing non-involvement with school :** Dropping out is not necessarily an all-or-nothing event. In fact, many high school dropouts show lesser forms of dropping out, many years before they officially leave school. Future dropouts are absent from school more frequently than their peers, even in the early elementary grades (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Finn, 1989). In addition, they are more likely to have been suspended from school and to show a long-term pattern of dropping out, returning to school, and dropping out again (Raber, 1990).

**Strategies to Engage and Retain At-risk Students in School:** Effective and powerful teaching and learning must be supported by a pillar of best practices. These practices must be culturally relevant and timely. The literature on best practices show that regardless of the academic programme, there are certain common features of best practice that must permeate its pedagogical instructions. An excellent programme which incorporates these features in its pedagogical instruction is the 'Change from Within' project. This was implemented in four inner-city schools in Jamaica and adopted a range of strategic actions to address the problem of the underperformance of boys in school. Innovative means of building the students' self-esteem were identified by scholars, a 'Circle of Friends' (CFW), formed with the participating schools which met monthly to share experiences and ideas, identify strategies to improve leadership skills, and promote the importance of partnerships with all stakeholders. The project utilized qualities such as shared vision, commitment, team approach, problem-solving/conflict-resolution skills, openness to learning, and the ability to provide mutual support to manage the stress and challenges experienced with change, by all involved. Consequently, two important factors responsible for the alienation of boys from school and education were identified, and addressed:

- (i) The nature of the early socialization of boys by parents, community and school
- (ii) The 'drill to kill' teaching and learning method that was perceived as having increasingly marginalized boys, as well as girls, from the schooling process.

In addition, active learning and innovative approaches of engaging parents in their children's education were suggested as methods which could produce positive outcomes for at-risk students. Three effective strategies were found to change the desires of boys to conform to a stereotypical male identity and to help them develop a wider world view:

- (i) Introduction of strict rules relating to weapons and violence
- (ii) Effective and easily accessible counselling service to assist in the shedding of the stereotypical masculine identity which prevented boys from being emotional and interdependent
- (iii) The institution of a transparent and inclusive approach where teachers, parents and students were treated with confidence, trust and respect.

"Pullouts" and "flunking" are widely used terms to address the issues faced with at-risk students. However, these strategies are said to be ineffective and cause students more harm than good (Jackson, 1975). Retaining students is seen as retarding students' prior achievement levels and produces a misleading short term effect on normal curve equivalents as students are (usually) older when they take subsequent tests (Jackson, 1975; Shepard and Smith, 1985 & Gottfredson, 1988) as quoted by Lavin and Madden (n.d). Pullouts programmes may prevent at-risk students from falling behind students of their chronological age, and its effect is limited to the early years of schooling and is more obvious in mathematics than in reading (Carter, 1984), as quoted by Lavin and Madden (n.d). Pullouts have been widely criticized for labeling students and disrupting a student's regular instructions, while providing instructions that are at odds with conventional classroom instructions.

**Characteristics of Programmes Geared at helping At-Risk Students:** Lavin and Madden (n.d) examined literature, government and technical reports on every approach geared towards improving the literacy and numeracy skills of students, and achievement at the elementary grades. They suggest the following common criteria in evaluating programmes geared at helping at-risk students: (a) replicability (b) evaluation for at least a semester, having compared findings to a control group or evidence of considerable year-to-year success, and (c) an effect of at least 25% of an individual standard deviation in reading and /or mathematics.

Lavin and Madden (n.d) also suggest that these programmes fit into one of the following categories:

- (a) prevention which focused on preschool, kindergarten and first grade
- (b) classroom change including continuous progress models and other forms of cooperative learning, in addition to continuous Progress Programmes, and
- (c) remediation which was placed into the category of remedial/supplementary tutoring programmes and computer-assisted instruction.

Lavin and Madden suggested three principles of effective programmes for at-risk students. They suggested that they must be:

- (1) Comprehensive, systematic, complete alternative programmes to take the place of traditional methods. That is, carefully planned with a comprehensive approach to instruction including detailed teacher manuals with curriculum materials, lesson guides and other supportive tools/materials.
- (2) Intensive with individual assistance from a professional or individually adapted computer-assisted instruction.
- (3) Frequently assessing students' progress and adapting instructions to individual needs by using results to modify groupings or instructional content.

**Effective School-based Activities to Improve the Academic Performance of At -Risk Students :** The consequences of at-risk students remaining undetected are high rates of illiteracy, dropping out of school, crime, substance abuse, drug trafficking, unemployment, poverty and suicide (Superville, 1999). Students become at-risk as a result of a complex interplay of physical and neurological forces (USAID, 2005). The school must employ strategies to alleviate the challenges faced by at-risk students. Two suggested strategies are: Pedagogical Practices – Schools must create learning environments in which at-risk students can be fully engaged in productive work. A range of pedagogic or classroom based approaches, centered on teaching and learning, must be adopted in the classroom. This should be done in tandem with the development and strengthening of pre-service, and in-service training curricula to address child-centered learning environments, and the teaching of reading in the integrated curriculum at the primary, and junior high school levels.

Purposeful, sustained Professional Development – In order to bring about dramatic changes in an at-risk student's performance, there must be significant changes in how teachers perceive their role in teaching. Professional development programmes must be sustained, focused, data-driven, personalized, designed to create a learning community, and drive system wide change. Additionally, teachers must be provided with ample opportunities to practice and receive feedback supported by continued coaching to facilitate sustained application of their innovations in the classroom (Deshler & Donald, n.d.). Also, in order to identify and implement strategies to meet students' needs, and enrich their learning experience, teachers need support. Schools must establish child-friendly environments and quality education circles in order to build the capacity and self-efficacy of teachers. Working with at-risk students demand that teachers find ways to make learning relevant to students' lives, which means sufficiently engaging students so that they will choose to invest themselves in the learning process. These strategies must provide ample opportunities for students to learn and practice by applying newly learned skills, and strategies. A rich array of engaging reading materials must also be provided. Failing this, students will become frustrated when they are forced to read materials that are well beyond their skill level, or of little interest to them. Importantly, pedagogical content should be below a student's frustration level, responsive to a wide range of student abilities, cover a broad slate of engaging topics and relevant to students' background (Younger, *et al.*, 2005).

Individual Practices – Teachers must find time and resources to give students individual attention. This practice has the potential to raise students' aspirations and increase their engagement. This is particularly true for those students who have become disenchanted with learning. When students receive individual attention they develop a sense of self-belief and come to realize that they can reconcile academic work with the macho self-image they wish to promote in order to be accepted by their peers (Younger, *et al.*, 2005).

**The Concept of Best Practices :** The basic moves of teaching are supported by a pillar of best practices (Green & Green, 2008). Friedman (2005) believes that in order to survive in a globally competitive world, today's students need creativity, problem-solving abilities, a passion for learning, a dedicated work ethic and lifelong learning opportunities. To Friedman, these abilities can be developed in children by teachers who base their instruction on best practice teaching strategies. Best practice is defined as a continuum of practices, or programmes ranging from *emerging*, to *promising*, to *best practice*, that is the result of a rigorous process of expert review and evaluation. Such a process indicates effectiveness in improving educational outcomes for students, based on predetermined standards of empirical research, their replicability and ability to produce desirable results in a variety of settings, clearly linking positive effects only to the practices being utilized . Therefore, best practice in education encompasses a wide range of individual activities, policies, and programmatic approaches, to achieve positive changes in students' academic performance inherent in the curriculum.

The concept of best practice can be traced back to the Scientific Management era of Taylor (1911). This concept was first borrowed from the professions of Medicine, Law, and Architecture, where it was an everyday phrase used to describe solid, reputable, state-of-the-art work in a field. Best practice standards were exhibited by the awareness of current research and consistently offering clients the full benefits of the latest knowledge, technology, and procedures. However, it is important to note that best practice is not a 'means within an end' approach, but an approach that is dynamic and always evolving. As a result, best practice educators must take ideas seriously, believe in inquiry, subscribe to the possibility of human progress, and use language which label, and respect practice that is at the leading edge of the teaching profession. "Hence, adopted best practices [are accepted] as emblems of serious, thoughtful, informed, responsible, state-of-the-art teaching." (Zemelman, Daniels, Hyde, 2005).

Best practices motivate, engage and prompt students to learn and achieve through a balanced curriculum, enabling students to possess the knowledge, skills and abilities to transfer and connect ideas and concepts across disciplines, successfully measured by standardized tests, and other indicators of student success (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005). Four best practices for teachers include: (i) teaching a balanced curriculum, (ii) teaching an integrated curriculum, (iii) differentiating instruction to meet individual student needs, and (iv) providing active learning opportunities for students to internalize learning (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005). Best practice teaching is, therefore, student-centered, active, experiential, authentic, democratic, collaborative, rigorous, and challenging.

Best practices should be easily identified in the classroom setting that exemplifies such student-centered practices. According to Augustine (2014), in a classroom that utilizes best practice the following can be found:

- Project materials and books are adequate;
- Students are engaged and focused on their work;
- Teachers use collaborative and/or authentic tasks that place students at the center of the learning process;
- Seating arrangements are clustered, varied and functional with multi-instructional areas.
- Classrooms are activity based;
- Teachers are actively engaged with different groups and students are anxious to enlist members from other teams in their various tasks or assignments; and
- There is a joyful feeling of purposeful movement, industrious thinking, and a vital, and vibrant atmosphere, and environment.

**Teachers Lived Experiences and Best Practices in the Classroom :** Studies which shine a spotlight on the lived experiences of teachers dealing successfully with at-risk students are scarce in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean. Researchers such as Brown, Davis, and Tucker (1998); and Evans, Rose, Tucker, and Bailey (2007) in their studies focused only on the preparation and needs of teacher educators. A study aimed at discovering and interpreting the lived experiences of teachers dealing successfully with at-risk students should, therefore, contribute to filling the gaps in the sparse literature on this critical issue, providing empirical evidence which should highlight the existing, effective formal, and nontraditional programmes utilized in teaching students at risk.

To this end, very little is known about the impact of programmes used with at-risk students, such as mentoring those who mentor, the teachers. This is especially the case when a teacher takes on the role of mentor, on top of other responsibilities (Aylon, 2011). Augustine (2014) found that the lived experiences of effective teachers successfully teaching at-risk students, involved developing and maintaining positive relationships with the students, an approach which is foundational in the teaching learning process. Augustine suggested that additional

time must be afforded to provide challenging, nontraditional instruction. These findings bring to the fore the fact that teaching at-risk students cannot be divorced from mentoring, which requires more than just the minimum and demands a great deal of time. In addition, teachers believe that mentoring is hard work and that it challenges collegial relationships. However, teachers have opined that the progress of at-risk students provides motivation for them (Augustine, 2014). In addition, teachers also find it personally rewarding and enlightening when at-risk students make progress.

Culturally responsive education, mentoring and recognition for the importance of relationships in the mentoring process must be encouraged among teachers (Brough, Bermann, & Holt, 2013; Edwards & Edick, 2012; Gay, 2010; Karcher & Nakula, 2010; Rhodes & DeBois, 2006). Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam (2013) found that personal teacher-student relationships are “pivotal in the learning process and represent a humanizing and necessary element of educating at-risk students, amid a sea of negative relationships and school structures precluding, and even denouncing such care” (p. 2). Teachers of at-risk students benefit from embracing their role to build relationships that are emotionally, and academically supportive.

One of the responsibilities of a teacher of at-risk students is to serve as an advocate for the students (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012), in addition to being a servant teacher who focuses on processes and outcomes from the lens of overall programmatic structure, processes, and mentoring emphasis (Augustine, 2014). To many teachers, factors that put students at-risk such as poverty, psychological issues, social issues and lack of parental support, make planning and preparation absolutely critical. The teachers believe that content needs to be related in varying ways to meet the needs of at-risk students in the classroom. Teachers have opined that the cultural values of children must be considered, as their learning is planned for. Teachers suggest constructivism as a key approach in teaching at-risk students as it respects student differences and allows students to use their own prior knowledge and experiences to make connections, and learn. It affords students the opportunity to become active learners by questioning, hypothesizing and drawing conclusions based on their individual learning experiences (Augustine, 2014; Marlowe & Page, 1999).

The experiences garnered from teaching at-risk students are transferred to other aspects of teachers' lives and regular classroom settings. This fact is corroborated by the experiences gained in teaching at-risk students which can increase the teacher's realization of unknown needs that students have, and which would otherwise have remained undiscovered. However, teachers dealing with at-risk students require on-going professional development, a fact teachers usually appreciate (Marlowe & Page, 1999). Teachers consistently provide testimonies of at-risk students learning by demonstrating, when they are given the opportunity, how to be active and imaginative problem solvers (Bassey, 1996). Thus, the diversity produced by at-risk students avail us of the opportunity to enhance the quality of education for all our students, and provide them with a variety of opportunities to develop into productive citizens. Teachers suggest that when teaching at-risk students, the need for understanding and acceptance of differences becomes more important. The challenge though, is to provide them with an effective nontraditional, multicultural education that will foster awareness, respect, and acceptance.

In Jamaica, the challenge for policy-makers and practitioners alike is to become efficient consumers of information and to distinguish between international best practice, and contextualized approaches. It certainly seems unwise, however, to adopt interventions designed for a different setting without fully understanding the theorized mechanism of change, prior to and during implementation. Jamaica is guilty of being more of a consumer of research findings and quick to adopt programmes designed for other jurisdictions with different cultural backgrounds and with different needs. Jamaica's approach of using a little of programme 'C' from here and a little of programme 'D' from there, will not give us the best result in our attempt to provide education for all.

Anderson (2011) believes that the Jamaican educational system has failed in its efforts to truly educate all who could benefit from such education. In terms of academic/educational needs, Anderson found that the need for academic achievement was as compelling for at-risk individuals as for the non-disabled.

### **III. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This section outlines the research perspective and the procedure followed in gathering and analyzing the qualitative data for the study. This section encompasses the following headings: (a) research design, (b) methodology, (c) population, (d) sample and sampling, (e) data collection procedure, (f) instrumentation, (g) data analysis procedures, (h) validity and reliability, and (i) ethical considerations.

**Research Design :** This was a qualitative study designed as a hermeneutical phenomenology to explore and interpret the central underlying meanings, structures and essence of the lived experiences of teachers dealing successfully with at-risk students. In utilizing elements of the qualitative approach, this study began with an assumption, a worldview, a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning teachers ascribed to the social problem of at-risk students (Creswell, 2007). This type of research was appropriate for it sought to empower all stakeholders to share their stories, air their voices, and minimize students' failure to achieve their full potentials. Also, there was a need to interpret the contexts and settings of participants, to help explain teachers' lived experiences, so those observations can be shared among their colleagues.

#### IV. METHODOLOGY

The method of collecting data for this study involved a two-hour interview aimed at understanding and interpreting teachers' perception, as these relate to the meaning of their experiences dealing successfully with at-risk students. The procedural format employed in this study was suggested by Creswell (1998) and included: (a) writing the research questions that explored the meaning of the experience; (b) conducting the interviews; (c) analyzing the data to find the clusters of meanings, and (d) ending with a report that furthers the understanding of the reader regarding the essential structure of the experience.

**Population :** Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2011) state that population is the general term for the larger group, from which a sample is selected, or from which the researcher would like to generalize the results of the study (cited by Griffith, 2012). The population of this research comprised Primary and Junior High School teachers and principals in Clarendon, Jamaica. Of the public schools in Jamaica, 107 are Primary and Junior High Schools, 10 of which are widely distributed mainly in the rural areas of the parish of Clarendon. By law, student attendance is compulsory daily, until age 16 except for parental request. Each school has a student population of approximately 423 and a staff of 32 (1: 13 teacher/student ratio), including one guidance counselor, one principal and one vice principal. The major economic activity in the area of the selected sample was subsistence farming; therefore, the majority of students were from low socio-economic backgrounds.

The school under study was described as under-resourced by the Principal. Student services were primarily provided by the guidance counselors. Of note, there was no Individual Educational Program to assist students who needed such assistance. An Alternative Secondary Transitional Education program (ASTEP), which was an initiative of the Ministry of Education, designed for students who were not certified literate at the Grade Four level and who had failed the Grade Six Achievement Test several times, was being successfully implemented in the school. The sample school has been reaping the benefits from the implementation of specific alternative instructional paths, under the ASTEP programme, which seeks to provide an enhancing teaching learning atmosphere for students.

**Sample and sampling:** A sample is a number of individuals, items, or events selected from a population for a study and represent the larger group from which they were selected (Airasian, et al. (2011). The purposive sampling technique was used to select the principal and the three teachers who taught the ASTEP students. This technique was used as it is a process of selecting a sample that is believed to be representative of the given population, with the characteristics that the study sought to highlight, and interpret. Therefore, the sample had the key attributes that the researcher was investigating. This technique was additionally advantageous, in that it was based on the researchers' knowledge and experience of the group being sampled, and the researchers use of clear criteria to guide the process.

**Data collection procedure:** Prior to data collection, the principal was contacted by letter, soliciting permission to conduct the research in his school; and for confidentiality, the school was coded. A letter, detailing how ethical standards would be maintained was also delivered to the principal. This was followed by additional site visits to remind the selected participants of the dates of interviews, to gather data on the profile of the school and its general setting, and to establish a rapport with participants, in order to expedite the process and ensure that data collection ran smoothly.

**Instrumentation:** The instrument used to collect data for this study was a one and half hour, one-on-one structured interview protocol. It consisted of eleven open-ended items. The principal and three teachers were interviewed using a set of structured questions, in a standard way, across all respondents. One-on-one interview were used to minimize inter-respondent influence and to provide for concentrated amounts of rich data in participants' own words. The main reason for using one-on-one interview was to ascertain respondents' pure attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions, in a way which would not be feasible using other methods

(Gibbs, 1997). The interview sessions were conducted in the conference room of the school, where there were minimal distractions. Appointments were made with each participant, utilizing an interview schedule formulated by the researchers, in consultation with the participants and based on their availability. Each participant was interviewed on a different day during the second term of the school year, 2015/2016.

**Data analysis procedures:** An iterative and inductive cycle of analysis (Smith, 2007) was used to identify emerging themes from the data as they were collected. Following each interview, field notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) were completed on perceptions of the interview data and lived experiences, as expressed through facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice, indicators that were not readily apparent through the transcripts. These reflections included thoughts about experiences from the teachers and principal that the researcher found surprising. These thoughts forced the researcher to return to the teachers and principal for further clarifications. To ensure that the field notes served as a dependable resource during the analysis process, they were structured, typed, and amplified. In reviewing the transcripts and notes, a constant comparative method (Straus & Corbin, 1990) was used for concurrently collecting data and comparing them in order to identify themes, and sorting the data into categories (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). A structured analysis process (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) was used, including reading and re-reading, initial note-taking, developing emergent themes, identifying the themes, searching for connections across emergent themes, and looking for patterns across participants' responses.

The ultimate interpretation of the data was based on the researcher's perception of the participants' feelings and thinking. However, the researchers took great care to eliminate any preconceived ideas, or judgments from his own personal experiences and focus solely on what the participants shared about their lived experiences (Van Manen, 1990).

**Validity and reliability:** Validity is an indicator of the extent to which an instrument measures what it was intended to measure, while reliability is the extent to which an instrument consistently measures what it was designed to measure. Qualitative researchers must provide conclusions that have internal validity. That is, these conclusions must be drawn from the actual data collected, while matched with actual circumstances (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). The instrument created was given to experts in the field of students' academic performance to assess its mechanical soundness. These experts assessed the instrument for face, content, expert and criterion validity. All suggestions for improvement of the instrument were addressed, including those which identified grammatical errors and ambiguity, and which focused on clarifying the phenomenon under study. The instrument was piloted and further corrections were made, based on the pilot test results. To create a deeper understanding of the phenomenon studied and to assist in establishing trustworthiness (Bogdan & Biklin, 2007), the researcher created rich description of events and responses from participants. Also, the potential for inaccuracy in the researcher's criteria and the resulting limits to generalization of results were addressed through an in-depth review of the most recent literature, and best practices from the field. According to Creswell (2007), this approach adds credibility to the research.

**Ethical considerations :** In a qualitative study, ethical considerations are vital to assure the trustworthiness of both the process and the subsequent content (Creswell, 2007). This process should ensure that the human subjects within the study are protected. The following ethical procedures were applied:

1. All data collected during the data collection process were kept confidential, and the school and participants were labeled with letter pseudonyms for anonymity.
2. Care was taken to ensure that no information was cited that would lead to disclosure of individuals or the research site used in the study.
3. Participants in the study were provided with the guidelines and asked to indicate their consent, to ensure they understood their rights throughout the process, including: (a) the purpose of the study; (b) the use of pseudonyms to protect their identity and any link to specific statements in both the raw data, in drafts, and the final report, and (c) voluntary participation, giving each participant the right to not answer any question, or to withdraw at any time from the study, for any reason.

**Presentation of data, Findings, Discussion and Recommendations:** This section presents the analyzed data, with supporting information leading to the major findings, a discussion of the findings and an interpretation of the findings using the literature. Recommendations were made, based on the findings. This section contains the profile of each participant describing the essence of their experiences, demographic data, and challenges in the context of current and emerging trends, which included emerging and diverse chronic challenges, demotivating factors, innovations in putting theory into practice, building healthy, productive teaching learning environments, getting

students responses through structures and strategies, and knowing how to use assessment to ensure that learning has taken place. Also, this section contains information on value added incremental growth and institutional innovations, which include teachers’ unforgettable experiences, factors motivating teachers, changes teachers experienced in pedagogy, the perception of students and philosophy of teaching. These are followed by the findings and discussion, then recommendations.

**Profile of each Participant Describing the Essence of their Experience :** Permission was sought and granted to carry out the study at the school selected. Once the participants agreed to participate in the study, we continued to communicate through email, and conduct site visits to familiarize ourselves with the process, set up appointments and collect data. Three of the participants were teaching at-risk students in the Alternative Secondary Transitional Educational Programme (ASTEP) at the selected Primary and Junior High School - Grades 7, 8, and 9. The other participant was the principal. Considering the voluntary nature of securing the study participants, I was pleased with the diversity brought to the process by the principal’s inclusion. The teachers varied in the number of students they taught, age, years of teaching experience, and sex, as shown in Table 1.1.

**Findings**

**Demographic data :** According to table 1.1 below, teacher B teaches 19 ASTEP students and he has been teaching for over 13 years. He holds a Diploma in Industrial Arts and a Bachelor’s in Primary Teacher Education. His age range is 35-38. Teacher C, a mother of two boys and a Tour Guide for 17 years, teaches 17 ASTEP students. She has been teaching for over 4 years. She holds a Diploma in Primary Teacher Education. Her age range is 42-44. Teacher L teaches 15 ASTEP students and he has been teaching for over 18 years. He holds a Diploma in Secondary Teacher Education and a Bachelor of Science degree, specializing in Geography. His age range is 36-38. He had graduated from an All-Age School, sat the Common Entrance Examination, then progressed to high school where he graduated with A level subjects. Participant H is the principal of the school under study. Thus, he has responsibility for the 268 student population of the school, including the 35 ASTEP students. He has been teaching for over 23 years. He holds a Diploma in Secondary Teacher Education, A Post Graduate Certificate in School Management, and a Bachelor of Science degree, specializing in Geography. His age range is 42-44. Previously to his principalship he was a senior teacher, head of the Science Department at an upgraded high school and convener of the High School Evening Programme.

**Table 1.1  
Demographic Information for 4 Study Participants**

Participants	Sex	Total # of pupils taught	# of years teaching	Age range	Areas of certification
Teacher 1	M	19	13	35-38	Dip. Industrial Arts, B.Ed. Primary Teacher Education
Teacher 2	F	17	4	42-44	Dip. Primary Teacher Education.
Teacher 3	M	15	18	36-38	Dip. Secondary Teacher Education, B.Ed. Geography.
Principal	M	268	23	42-44	Dip. Secondary Teacher Education, Post Grad. Dip. Certificate in School Management, B.Ed. Geography.

**Presentation of specific data**

**Research Question:** “What were the experiences gained by teachers during the implementation of instructional programmes to deal successfully with at-risk students?” The instrument used to gather data to answer this question was a focus-group interview protocol. The data was analyzed using the thematic qualitative text analysis approach (Kuckartz, 2014).

Based on participants’ responses to the research question, an overarching theme that emerged from the data was *challenges in the context of current and emerging trends*. This theme was evident throughout the categories; such categories as Emerging and diverse chronic challenges, Demotivating factors, and Putting theory into practice. Another, overarching theme that permeated the data was *Incremental growth and systemic innovations* evident through categories such as Teachers’ unforgettable experiences, Motivating factors, and Changes teachers experienced about themselves.

### **Challenges in the Context of Current and Emerging Trends**

**Emerging and diverse chronic challenges:** One of the first challenges faced by teachers dealing with at-risk students, gleaned from the data, was low teacher expectation of students initially. This was seen when teacher # 3 said, "At first I did not subscribe to the Ministry of Education adopted mantra of 'Every child can learn; every child must learn.' However, after meeting these students and starting to teach them using music and other art forms, I realized that they can learn" (February 24, 2015, interview). In the same breath, lack of support from parents and the Ministry of Education, disinterest shown by students, and lack of motivation of students were other challenges that teachers faced dealing with at-risk students. The data also showed a major challenge currently facing the education system which is students' lack of readiness to learn. Teacher # 2 declared that the "majority of the students seem not to retain the concepts that are taught" (February 24, 2015, interview). On the other hand, the participants claimed that another area that was really challenging was the lack of resources that were needed to enhance teaching and learning processes. Teacher # 1 identified indiscipline, lack of interest from students, lack of parental support, and lack of internet access as challenges that inhibit teacher creativity and innovations (February 24, 2015, interview). The Principal stated that reluctance of students to learn, the task of dealing with students with learning and behavioral challenges, and stereotyping are challenges they faced (February 25, 2015, interview). He further stated that many of the students had poorly developed cognitive and psychomotor skills. Thus, the students were extremely slow in grasping concepts presented to them. Many were simply slow learners and some had developmental issues of one kind or another. Teacher # 2 stated that "the ASTEP students require patience and persons who genuinely care for their welfare to help them maximize their potential" (February 24, 2015, interview).

The participants claimed that teaching these students was hard work, and that dealing with at-risk students gave teachers a culture shock, as students engaged in personal talks among themselves that divulged information that are adult content, using terminologies that were unfamiliar to teachers. Teacher # 2 declared "Initially, I experienced a culture shock based on students' slangs and unique expressions" (February 24, 2015, interview). This shows that students' cultural and individual identity must be supported in their learning experiences, and creating an inclusive environment is crucial for students' success. Lack of vocational based programmes to cater to the diversity of students' needs, and poor and under developed literacy and numeracy skills were also key emerging challenges identified that must be addressed.

**Demotivating factors :** Similar emerging and diverse challenges reported above were factors reported to be demotivating teachers dealing with at-risk students. These were lack of support from parents and the Ministry of Education, and demotivated and disinterested students. Teacher # 1 stated, "I do not think that the ministry goes the extra mile to support this ASTEP programme. *The Ministry of education does not provide the resources needed to enhance teacher effectiveness and students success*" (February 24, 2015, interview). Hence, participants reported feeling demotivated, initially, as the majority of students seemed unable to retain the concepts that were taught repetitively. She also highlighted the negative reactions of her colleagues from other schools towards the ASTEP programme, at workshops attended. She said, "When I go to workshops I am disappointed that other teachers are complaining that they were not trained to teach ASTEP students. I was not trained to teach them (ASTEP students) but we have to do research to ascertain best practices and use data to make decisions in the classroom in order to reach them" (February 24, 2015, interview). Therefore, participants propose that if teachers believe in the programme and participate in workshops, the ASTEP programme can be effective.

**Innovations in putting theory into practice:** The responses from participants that prompted this category give support to the three basic moves of teaching put forward by Green and Henriquez-Green (2008) which are applicable at all levels of the education system. These basic moves are (a) building healthy, productive environments, (b) getting students responses through structures and strategies and asking meaningful questions, and (c) knowing how to use assessment to ensure that learning has taken place (Green & Henriquez-Green, 2008) These moves form the sub-headings for this major category.

**Building healthy, productive teaching learning environments :** The Principal pointed out that students' cultural and individual identity must be supported in their learning experiences, and the creation of an inclusive environment is crucial for students' success (February 25, 2015, interview). It was also gleaned from the data that relationship building and students readiness are fundamental to the teaching learning process, and that at-risk students need advocates, acting on their behalf, to seize opportunities that foster their academic achievement. Also, the data point to the fact that sustained relationships with parents require strategy and follow up activities, in order to be effective, and this can be highly rewarding when done right.

**Getting students responses through structures and strategies :** The participants repeatedly mentioned that teaching at-risk students was hard work. On one occasion Teacher # 2 noted that dealing with at-risk students gave teachers a culture shock initially as they engaged in personal talks (February, 24, 2015, interview). However, the use of students' home language was seen as a critical instructional variable for teaching at-risk students. Thus, what teachers initially thought was hard work became effective strategies to gain students' response, and could be transferred to other classes. The strategies teachers learn from teaching at-risk students can be used in other classrooms. Teachers can understand students better by getting involved in their unplanned activities, through games and casual discussions. Through these activities, students divulge valuable information about themselves and the environment in which they live. These strategies will allow students to feel more comfortable in responding to the teachers.

**Knowing how to use assessment to ensure that learning has taken place:** Based on the responses of the participants, the level at which the students were performing when they started teaching them was clearly below their expected level. This was due to the challenges that were reported, initially such as poorly developed cognitive and psychomotor skills, and extreme slowness in grasping concepts presented to them.

Consequently, due to the alternative methods of assessment mentioned by teachers such as journaling, music, and allowing students to read to students in their age group and engage in storytelling, teachers could detect whether learning had taken place, instead of using the traditional pencil and paper. This brought to light the fact that at-risk students can learn despite cognition, socio-emotional and behavioral challenges (Teacher # 2, February, 24, 2015, interview). Teacher 2 went on to declare that creating a student profile is a framework for understanding where students are coming from and how to treat them.

Guidance in problem solving and scaffolding were described as paramount to students' success. Teacher # 2 said, "I find that at-risk students appreciate on-going support and exposure, such as community activities, and taking part in official functions where they can show case their talents. Teachers learn about students' culture, background, and lifestyles through their gestures, slangs and attitudes." As an outcome, teachers find the success of students transitioning from the ASTEP classroom to high school personally rewarding and motivating.

#### **Value Added Incremental Growth and Institutional innovations**

**Teachers' unforgettable experiences:** It has been established in this paper that teachers found learning about students' cultural background and lifestyle to be an invaluable experience which they used to become more effective teachers in dealing successfully with at-risk students. The teachers repeatedly credited their experiencing of their students' success as their source of motivation in the classroom, and not their pay. The teachers believed that seeing their students transitioning from the ASTEP classroom to high school was personally rewarding, motivating and unforgettable to them. Thus, Teacher # 2 asserted that "*The experience that I have in the ASTEP classroom helps to build me as a teacher. It is like a learning process for me daily*" (February 24, 2015, interview). She went on to state that the most lasting and cherished experience is to see students who are so-called 'underachievers' perform well and progress from here (her school) to high school or simply being able to read. She mentioned the great pride and encouragement she felt to see the improvement in the Grade Four Literacy Test at her school from 35% to 73% and Numeracy from 25% to 65% (the target set by the Ministry of Education). This was an indication of the improved capacity-building of the teachers.

Consequently, this successful transition and transformation of the ASTEP students at the end of Grade 9 which saw students being placed into the high school system meant that they could learn and could be prepared to take up their rightful place in society, if they were taught by quality teachers who care about them, and are supported with resources provided by the Ministry of Education through a school-wide approach. Teacher # 2 repeatedly stated that to see the successful transition of students to high school, could only be described as an experience of 'magic' happening between Grades 7 and 9. Teachers had also noticed changes in themselves, such as increased confidence, self-efficacy, and better research skills, and that students had showed marked improvement in reading due to the active roles teachers had started to play in the teaching learning process

**Factors motivating teachers:** One of the motivating factors reported by teachers was the support they gave to and received from each other, and the sharing of ideas among themselves. These teachers obviously formed learning communities and learning circles aimed at helping students. Through these learning communities and learning circles, teachers benefited by sharing best practices in teaching their students. The teachers also explained that they received tremendous support from the principal who allowed them to focus on developing early numeracy and literacy teaching and learning skills in students by using unconventional methods. Teacher # 1 felt

that it was worthwhile to see those students excel because they were usually the ones who struggled, who were labeled, and were likely to fall between the cracks (August 24, 2015, interview). He further expressed how fortunate he felt to be working with these students. He claimed that *"The ASTEP classroom is like watching your baby go from creeping to walking and then that big smile."* Teacher # 1 further pointed out that he could relate to the students as he was a late bloomer, who went to an all age school and pushed himself to achieve. Thus, he enjoyed working with the students, some of whom were late bloomers, but just needed a push. Another teacher compared her experience with the movie "Coach Carter" (in which were exercised strict rules and academic discipline which led to an excellent finish) Thus, the teachers believed that they were best equipped to help the students as they have firsthand knowledge and could relate, based on their own experiential background. The teachers believed that the students placed in the ASTEP programme were not incapable of learning. Many were simply slow learners and some had developmental issues of one kind or another. The ASTEP students required patience and persons to genuinely care for their welfare to help them maximize their potential.

**Changes teachers experienced in pedagogy, perception of students and philosophy of teaching:** Teachers reported experiencing various positive changes within their classes as a result of interacting with their ASTEP students. These changes included becoming more confident in their teaching strategies and methodologies, more effective classroom management and their students becoming better readers, due to the transformational roles teachers have played, being facilitators in the teaching learning process. This was gleaned when teacher # 2 said, *"You must have a plan, as we cannot approach these students as we approach the other students, and we must include music in our plans, so that it can be fruitful"* (August 24, 2015, interview). In addition, teachers had also come to the realization that the ASTEP students were just as smart as the other students in the school and they had other talents such as in the arts, music, and sports. The teachers also learned not to compare students but to accept them for who they were. One participant repeated that that, at first, she did not believe the Ministry of Education's mantra that "Every child can learn, every child must learn," but after meeting these students, and starting to teach them using music, she realized that they could learn. In the same vein, she pointed out that they could not approach the teaching of these students in the traditional way (August 24, 2015, interview). The teachers suggested that one must tweak what he/she learned in training college, in order to effectively reach these students. The teachers repeatedly noted that practitioners must think outside the box, in devising ways of helping such students to become motivated to learn. As a result, teachers improvised by finding different ways to help students learn.

The teachers experienced capacity-building and developed self-efficacy through their interactions with the ASTEP students they taught. Participant 2 said, *"The experience that I have in the ASTEP classroom helps to build me as a teacher. It is like a learning process for me daily in the classroom. I have learnt to understand teens, their slangs, and gestures on a wider basis"*. She further commented that though the students' reading levels were below average, she, too had learnt a lot from them (February 24, 2016, interview). Learning about students' socio-cultural background helped to keep teachers in close touch with what went on in students' homes, and the education system. Teachers were also helped to be more rounded by attending various workshops in seeking to acquire strategies needed to help students learn to their full potentials. (August 24, 2015, interview). The experience teachers garnered in dealing with these ASTEP students helped teachers to develop tolerance in dealing with students who had impaired intellectual ability/learning disability. In addition, the teachers reported experiencing a paradigm shift, which was occasioned by the realization that beyond the gender issues, boys are different from girls biologically (referring to neurological difference in brain structure). Boys are born with a biological disadvantage, but they have the capacity to learn. Teacher # 1 opined that, *"I have developed a level of patience that I never thought I possessed. I have also become more innovative as a teacher in my effort to get students to learn at whatever cost. I have also developed competency in employing differentiated instructional techniques"* (February 24, 2016, interview).

## V. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of teachers during the implementation of instructional programmes to deal successfully with at-risk students at a Primary school in rural Clarendon. Based on participants' responses to the research question, the following findings were identified:

1. It was found that low teacher expectation of students, lack of sync between the Ministry of Education policies and teachers' convictions, lack of support from parents and the Ministry of Education, students' disinterest, lack of motivation of students, and students' lack of readiness to learn, were emerging and diverse chronic challenges teachers faced when dealing with at-risk students.
2. Lack of resources, students' indiscipline, and lack of internet access were seen as challenges that inhibited teacher creativity, and innovations.

3. The reluctance of students to learn, the task of dealing with students with learning and behavioral challenges, and stereotyping were challenges teachers faced dealing with students who appeared to have poorly developed cognitive and psychomotor skills, and who were slow in grasping concepts presented to them. Teachers indicated that teaching at-risk students was hard work, but that it was rewarding to see them succeed.
5. Poor and under developed literacy and numeracy skills are also key emerging challenges teachers face when dealing with at-risk students. Teachers face chronic and emerging factors such as being highly demotivated due to negative reactions from colleagues towards the ASTEP program.
6. It was found that when a school-wide attempt was made to employ innovations in putting theory into practice at the school understudy, such as a building healthy, productive environment in the ASTEP classroom, students participated more in the learning process.
7. Relationship building and students' readiness were found to be of fundamental benefit to the teaching/learning process in the ASTEP classroom, and at-risk students needed teachers to advocate on their behalf to seize opportunities that foster their academic achievement. In addition, sustained relationship building with parents were found to be useful, but required planned strategies and follow up activities in order to be effective in advancing students' achievement.
8. In the quest to get at-risk students to participate in the instructional process, students' home language was found to be a useful instructional variable. The strategies teachers learn from teaching at-risk students' can be transferred into other classroom settings to benefit other students. Teachers can understand students better by getting involved in their unplanned activities through games and casual discussions where students divulge valuable information about themselves and the environment in which they live.
9. It was also found that creating a student profile is a framework for understanding where students are coming from and how to treat them.
10. Knowing how to use assessment techniques to ascertain the extent to which learning has taken place is critical in teaching at-risk students. Alternative methods of assessment such as journaling, allowing students to read to their peers and storytelling, could be used to detect whether learning has taken place. At-risk students can learn despite cognition, socio-emotional and behavioral challenges.
11. It was also found that guidance in problem solving and scaffolding are paramount to the success of at-risk students. Additionally, at-risk students appreciate on-going support and exposure such as community activities, and the opportunity to take part in planned official functions where they can showcase their talents, as it is found to be rewarding. Teachers learnt about students' culture, background and lifestyles through their gestures, slangs, and attitudes.
12. As an outcome, teachers find the success of students transitioning from the ASTEP classroom to high school personally rewarding and motivating.
13. Value added, incremental growth and institutional innovations resulted from the successful teaching of ASTEP students.
14. Teachers had many unforgettable experiences working with at-risk students. Teachers found learning about students' cultural backgrounds and lifestyles through their gestures, slangs, and attitudes to be an invaluable experience. Teachers found that experiencing the success of students in their transitioning from the ASTEP classroom to high school was personally rewarding, motivating, filled them with pride and was unforgettable.
15. Teachers have witnessed improved capacity-building and were strengthened by the experience gained in preparation of ASTEP students to take up their rightful place in society. Teachers have noticed changes in themselves, such as becoming more confident, becoming better researchers and utilizers of best practices, in addition to being able to help students to become better readers, as a result of the active roles teachers have started to play in the teaching learning process.
16. In addition, teachers experienced other various changes in themselves as a result of interacting with ASTEP students. These changes include learning not to compare students, developing competency and innovations in differential instructions (planning lessons for students' needs) and the ability to improvise by finding different ways to help students learn. Teachers obtained insights from students' interactions between their peers on how to best teach them and developed tolerance in dealing with students who have impaired intellectual ability. Thus, teachers claimed to experience a paradigm shift which was occasioned by the realization that beyond the gender issues, by virtue of variation, boys are different from girls biologically. Teachers believe that boys are born with a biological disadvantage, but that they have the capacity to learn.
17. The support teachers received from each other and the sharing of ideas among themselves served as motivating factors. The tremendous support from the principal allowed teachers to focus on developing

early numeracy and literacy skills in students using unconventional methods. The successful transition of students to high school was described as ‘magic’ happening between Grades 7 - Grade 9. Thus, the teachers believed that they were best equipped to help the students, as they had firsthand knowledge and experience relating them. Students placed in the ASTEP programme were found to be capable of learning. Many were described by teachers as simply slow learners having developmental issues. Teachers believed that the ASTEP students require patience and persons to genuinely care for their welfare to help them maximize their potential.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Include vocational based programmes to the curriculum to cater to the diverse needs of students.
2. School-wide attempts must be made to employ innovations in putting theory into practice, such as building a healthy, productive environment in the classroom.
3. Students’ cultural and individual identities must be supported in their learning experiences, along with the creation of an inclusive environment which is crucial for students’ success.
4. Relationship building and students readiness to learn must be used as a fundamental platform to the teaching/learning process in the classroom. At-risk students need teachers to advocate on their behalf, to seize opportunities that foster their academic achievement. In addition, sustained relationship building with parents must be developed through carefully planned strategies with activities aimed at advancing students’ academic performance.
5. Provide teachers with adequate resources, reduce class size and sustain purposeful, in-house professional development where they can develop learning circles/learning communities and share best practices with colleagues.
7. Utilize students’ cultural and individual identity in supporting their learning experiences, along with the creation of an inclusive environment with high expectations for students’ success.

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