Radio Waves and Curriculum Pathways: Jamaican "At Risk" Learners Construct Media

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores radio play as an alternative space for learning language and literacy for Jamaican students labeled as 'at-risk' learners. Through the creation of a make-believe radio station in the classroom, students developed oral language skills as a necessary precursor for social literacy. They connected reading and writing activities and the simulated classroom radio station promoted the development of learners' self-efficacy. The students' use of the learning space as newscasters, hosts, writers and reporters revealed that those who took risks in learning language and literacy in these spaces subverted the label of 'at-risk-learners' and repositioned themselves as risk-takers in constructing literacy. Pedagogies of enjoyment and empowerment emerged in learners' autonomous spaces as radio play was the catalyst for listening to speak, speaking to write and writing to read in the Radio-Active Classroom setting.

Keywords: *radio play, Jamaica, secondary education, at-risk, situated cognition, literacy, education*

Once upon a time ... is such a long time ago that you might just begin to feel that this is the beginning of a story that perhaps no one ever wrote, and no one remembers. But this is no story. My mother explained to me her experience as a girl growing up in a Jamaica village:

> This is about a time before Twitter and Skype and there were not as many books and certainly no Facebook. It was a time when members of a small rural community in Jamaica gathered to listen to the only boom box radio on Back Street. It was a time when we listened to Talk and listened and talked. Many hoped, as they listened: that the letter read on air would be the one they had written; that the greeting sent was the one they were expecting; that the contact made was a long lost relative; and that the advertisement at the commercial break would be their favorite. If it were, that advertisement would have been recited

with eloquence and poise as this would the time to speak, dramatize and imagine that *they* were on the air, somewhere far away! This exciting experience would cease abruptly when my grandmother's voice silenced the radio and the frolickers: "Stop that foolishness and take up your school book and read!

Now imagine that you visited a school in rural Jamaica today and the door to the classroom you are about to enter is labeled ASTEP 101 FM. There is an accompanying logo with the slogan "Stepping out to step ahead." Your eyes fasten on the red warning, "On Air" and you hear a young boy say:

> My producer is giving me the wrap up signal. So, let's take a word from our sponsors. Don't go away. We will be right back. This is ASTEP 101FM -- Stepping out to step ahead.

This is the Radio-Active Classroom in Steppers' Primary and Junior High School in rural Jamaica. What connects these two scenarios across time and space is what I choose to call *radio play*. The two scenarios described above are steeped in simulation and role-play and provided a springboard for this research which addressed the search for literacy pedagogies for learners who are labelled as "at-risk" because they are in Grade 7 but are reading at pre-primer level or not able to read at all. They lack the language and literacy skills required to access secondary curriculum.

Looking back at my mother's experiences, one would perhaps describe her play as rooted in community spirit and community sharing. Some might comment on the social and economic indicators about poverty and rural deprivation and perhaps even backwardness! Looking in, however, would provide us with the insights that these village experiences were in fact steeped in literacy development.

It was a long time ago, just a little after the transistor radio, but it is time worth remembering now because embedded in my mother's colorful childhood story in which I shared vicariously in the opening of this paper were the seeds for course design, pedagogy and technology for curriculum renewal for children who were being left behind because their reading and communication skills were far below age/grade level.

My mother's childhood story awakened my interest in the pedagogy underpinning the innovative Communication Skills/Use of Technology Curriculum that I designed for the Ministry of Education Alternative Secondary Transition Program (ASTEP) (2012) for students who had experienced multiple failures at the National Grade Four Literacy Test.

Today the newly revised Alternative Pathways to Secondary Education (APSE) curriculum (2015) has opened three pathways to secondary education and learners like those in the Radio-Active Classroom of ASTEP 101 FM are stepping out on Secondary Pathway 111(SP111). The Radio-Active Classroom provided the opportunity to step out of the confined space and time of classroom to step ahead of their limitations and inhibitions. But who were these learners on

Secondary Pathway 111? How did the use of radio play support their language and literacy development? What were the pedagogies that enabled these learners along this path designed for students who had experienced multiple failures at literacy achievement? These questions are explored below.

Background to the Problem

Children in Jamaican primary schools who have failed to achieve mastery after multiple sittings of the Grade 4 National Literacy Test are unable to access the Grade Six Achievement Test. Without the latter they are unable to gain entry grade 7 in a secondary school of their choice. This is no child's play and sending off these students to "take up a book and read" will not solve their literacy achievement challenges. According to one Jamaican Minister of Education, learners who are speakers of Jamaican Creole are trapped, unable to free themselves or to be freed:

> Too many learners who embark upon the language journey never arrive as they are left behind, caught between two languages, unable to free themselves or we to free them (Whiteman, 2000)

My mother's creative escape to a place in the mind where she could 'continue reading,' perhaps reading the world, is not a Houdini strategy for these learners who repeatedly failed the national literacy test. But it does provide insights for releasing them from the entrapments of teaching approaches that place them at risk.

Based on the Jamaican Ministry of Education Statistics, each year there are approximately 10,000 students crying after the results of national exams: crying because they have failed again; crying for help. But who is crying because the system failed them? The Ministry of Education, Jamaica responded to the cries of these students who cannot be certified literate at the end of grade 4. The Communication Skills / Use of Technology Curriculum which this research focused on was designed exclusively to meet the needs of these learners.

The Radio-Active Classroom:
A New Paradigm from an Old Community Practice

In the first term of work in The Alternative Pathway to Secondary Education for learners at risk, the Radio-Active Classroom (RAC) was shaped by the beliefs and practices that promoted curriculum as conversations, experience and situated social practices (Cornbelth 1990; Knobel.1999). The curriculum was built on the premise that these students who experienced multiple failures in literacy assessment tests were not *deficient* in the abilities to learn but were *different* in their learning styles. Howard Gardner, in his extensive work on multiple intelligences, suggested that everyone has a unique intellectual style and hence approaches problem solving in different ways. This indicated for me, as curriculum designer and writer, that if the approach to curriculum were standardized to a one size-fit-all we would face the serious problem of neglecting some students' right to learn. To accommodate diversity in learners, this

alternative curriculum was intended to empower all learners to actively engage in experiential learning that provided opportunities and options to demonstrate *what* and *how* they learn.

The RAC is a deliberate learner strategy that celebrates the oral foundation (listening and speaking) as the starting points for writing and reading. As a new learner space that is shaped by learners' experiences, it offers real-life authentic activities that introduce, deepen and sustain engagement with the media. The RAC transforms the classroom into a radio newsroom through talk shows, interviews, outside broadcasts and many opportunities that cater to multiple intelligences in building communicative experiences. Year 1 laid the foundation for new attitudes towards self and others and new attitudes towards communication, literacy and learning. The first unit focuses on setting up a radio station in a corner of the classroom. This remains as a centre of interest to support activities that involve communicating "on air" throughout the syllabus as well as the other core subject areas they study.

This research was an investigation into the interpretation and delivery of the school's Communication Skills Curriculum. The study sought to determine how the curriculum experience supported students' construction of literacy. The study focused on the implementation of the Radio Active classroom a term's unit of work in the APSE Curriculum. The purpose of the investigation was to seek answers to the following research questions the findings from which it was anticipated, would provide insights for pedagogies of engagement for the newly revised APSE Curriculum. The research questions were as follows:

(i) How does the RAC support oral language as a necessary precursor for social literacy?
(ii) How is the reading-writing connection for literacy development nurtured in the RAC?
(iii) What role does a simulated classroom radio station play in the development of learners' self -efficacy?

Literature Review

Social Learning and Literacy as Social Practices

Learning communication skills in a Radio-Active Classroom is in tandem with recent trends in language studies that advocate that it is not enough to know what a language looks like and be able to describe and measure it, but one must also know what it means to its users and how it is used by them. Knobel (1999) notes that there are new and emerging concepts and categories for talking about literacy in schools and students need now to learn more than ever before ways of thinking analytically and critically about relationships among discourses, information, social practices and meaning-making as part of accessing worthwhile employment opportunities and becoming effective citizens.

There are two social constructivist learning theories that supported the vision of this innovative learning space. Both are cognitive theories with social benefits: *Situated cognition theory* (Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989)*, a theory

of instruction, supported the learning of literacy in situated or embedded practices as it made use of authentic contextualized activities that drew on students' cultural experiences. Similarly, *cognitive apprenticeship theory* (Collins, Brown and Newman, 1989) provided a guide to task-based learning, project learning and problem posing and solving in groups. The apprenticeship thrust was particularly useful for learners who were immersed in hands-on- activities as they received scaffolding in simulated roles as news- casters, producers, analysts, hosts, interviewers and various roles related to working on radio.

A critical approach to curriculum illuminated some characteristics that were central to this research project. These were the fostering of active, reflective and responsible teachers' roles as well as, a suggestion of the modification of curriculum writers' and change agents' roles. In keeping with the principles of this approach, Szwed (2001) raised a question that challenged the reliance on teaching methods to address students' academic underachievement. He asked if it were possible that teachers are able to teach reading and writing as abstract skills but do not really know what reading and writing are for in the lives and futures of their children. He argued for a shift from the question of instruction back to the social meaning of literacy: the roles these abilities play in social life; the contexts of their performance and the way they are interpreted and tested, not by experts, but by ordinary people in ordinary activities. Breen (2001) agrees that the social context for language learning is a neglected situation.   In viewing curriculum as 'contextualized social practices,' Cornbleth (1990), approaches the study of learning language and literacy in an educational empowerment program as a social practice. This approach to curriculum facilitated the engendering of pedagogies that approach the study of the learning of language and literacy from the lived experiences and familiar everyday settings of learners.

Today, there are new ways of talking about literacy. The focus has shifted from learning to read and write to new literacies that are embedded in social practice. The Radio-Active Classroom was a literacy intervention that was driven by the belief that literacy is more than reading the words on a page. It promoted reading as a social activity and literacy as integral to the social practices- the things we do in everyday life. This focus on use and everyday life gave credence to classroom practice that facilitated and developed reading skills and competencies that equipped learners to carry out functions or get things done through interaction with others in various social settings inspired by radio use. The emphasis on doing and using underscore that the best way to learn to read and to learn literacy is to engage in activities that are purposeful and appealing to real-life experiences.

Media Literacy

The media is there for educators to understand and use, to use more effectively than we have done up to now. Media knowledge as communication is always a form of social practice. (Giroux, 1981) The media is viewed as a social institution which can be employed to empower both children and adult learners to become responsible moral and transformational leaders (Normore and Doscher, 2007). Current trends in literacy education are reinforcing the movement towards

everyday literacies (Knobel, 1999) and embedded literacies that support the view that the best way to learn literacy for "something" is to engage in the "something" first and learn literacy through the activity itself. The Radio-Active Classroom was a platform for this hands-on, minds-on, community-based, collaborative, participatory, performance- based, interactive literacy empowerment program for social practice. In this light media literacy in classroom situated practices moves beyond the traditions of protectionists purposes (Buckingham, 1990) healthy scepticism (Hobbs and Jenson, 2009) and aesthetic appreciation (Considine and Haley, 1999) towards students' radio play in simulated classroom settings as an arena for authentic language learning and use.

Few people still remember the transistor radio, a small portable radio. Its pocket size was very popular in the 1960s and 1970s and undoubtedly changed the way people listened to radio then. They could listen to the radio anywhere. It personalized listening. Re-placing the transistor radio in current teaching and learning contexts is a call for the creation of new learning spaces that celebrate portable and accessible learning experiences. This is a call for transition into student-centered, student-owned and student-managed environments that are emancipatory and *portable* in the sense that they become conduits for real-life learning experiences that foster lifelong learning experiences.

Radio Play and Second Language Pedagogy

My mother's story about that village radio and the merging of child's play with radio were the inspiration for the indigenization of pedagogy for the development of the curriculum project that informed this research. The insights for literacy pedagogy that were rooted in my mother's childhood experiences were the impetus for the indigenization of a research agenda that for decades had been shaped by outsider's knowledge about how literacy how children in Creole-speaking environments where the language of the school room is different from the language of playground (Pollard,1985) and where the latter satisfies their everyday communicative experiences.

Educational responses to building literacy practices for students learning English in a predominantly Jamaican Creole-speaking environment have centered on researchers and practitioners applying various methods: English as a second language (ESL); English as a Foreign Language (EFL); and English as a Second Dialect (ESD). These instructional approaches have nurtured various attitudes and dispositions towards Jamaican Creole-speaking learners who were labelled as deficient in instances where deficit models were implemented to close gaps in language learning and literacy achievement. The classroom radio pedagogy in this research is rooted in a post-method paradigm (Kumaravadivelu, 2001)) that shifts focus to teacher-initiated pedagogies of particularity, place and possibility. This pedagogical shift creates room for a media embedded pedagogy that is shaped by innovation and experiment. The approach is also framed by the particularity of learner self-efficacy and risk taking that is essential for literacy development.

Learners who are constructing literacy must engage in conversations where English the target language is audible and visible (Bryan, 2010) and in which they experience language as performance. This performance is rooted in

everyday literacies and radio play provided the opportunity for performance as role play that promoted immersion and practice which supported the learning of language and literacy in purposeful, meaningful and audience and context – sensitive settings.

Self –Efficacy and Radio Play

Self-efficacy is defined as "the belief and confidence that students have about their capacity to accomplish meaningful tasks and produce a desired result in academic settings" (Brozo and Flynt, 2008, p. 172). Scholars have found that self -efficacy is a good predictor of academic performance. (Zimmerman et al, 1992). Self-efficacy determines how we feel, think, motivate ourselves and behave (Bandura, 1993). Learners' self-efficacy was a critical aspect of this research since the informants had all experienced repeated failures at the Grade 4 literacy test.

While affirming the importance of self-efficacy in predicting behavior, Bilgan (1987) points to its shortcomings and notes that it deemphasizes the role of the environment and modelled behavior. Bilgan posits that self-efficacy is more effective in predicting behavior after exposure to an event than prior to the event. In this current research the focus was on the behavior demonstrated during observation and what was recorded in the journals of practicing teachers. In this light self-efficacy can be attributed to new dispositions and attitudes towards learning. The media is viewed as a social institution that can be employed to empower students to become responsible, moral and transformational leaders (Normore and Doscher, 2007). Radio play is crucial in this empowerment process.

Lave and Wenger (1991) referred to classrooms as communities of practice, and the diversity of students with regards to their abilities, needs, prior knowledge and cultural experiences can significantly influence how learning occurs. It therefore becomes important for teachers to embrace the diversity among their students and to promote dialogue and conversations among them so that the students can develop their cognitive skills as they listen, critically think about the curricular content, and communicate and defend their understandings.

Research Method

This was an exploratory study that used a qualitative research methodology and design and privileged grounded theory to explore radio play and the construction of literacy in situated practices that promoted social learning. This approach was taken because it supported the constructivist approach to literacy development examined in this research. The approach also facilitated giving voice to Jamaican Creole speaking learners who were engaged in constructing literacy while gaining access to curriculum. It was this overarching goal that allowed for the appropriation of a Likert-scaled self-efficacy instrument as a tool for trapping qualitative data in an exploration of the achievement task values and expectancy-related beliefs among adolescents labelled as 'at risk' learners. This study could therefore be regarded as using a quasi- mixed-method design as the Likert-scaled instrument was used in an interview format for this

cohort of students who would not have been able to read the instrument on their own.

Research Context and Participants

Jamaica is a Caribbean island with a population of 2.8 million people. About 45% of the population lives in rural areas and 23% of the population is under age 14. In Jamaica, the academic system is structured so that the primary school cycle lasts 6 years, lower secondary lasts 3 years, and upper secondary lasts 2 years. The research site was a Grade 7 class in Steppers Primary and Junior High School in rural Jamaica, approximately 186 km northwest of Kingston, the capital. The class was in one of the many schools which were identified to pilot test the new Alternative Secondary Transition Education Program (ASTEP), later revised as Alternative Pathways to Secondary Education (ASEP). The classrooms were labelled as ASTEP Centres. Stepper's Primary and Junior High School set up a radio station in their classroom and thereafter referred to their class as ASTEP 101. The class size was characteristic of the ASTEP Centres across the island based on the Ministry of Education allocation.

As part of Module 1 in the Radio-Active Classroom unit of the Communication Skills/Use of Technology curriculum, students set up and designed a make-believe radio station in the classroom, under the supervision of their teacher. In a corner of the classroom, there were a news desk, old microphones and headsets. All materials except for the cassette tape-recorder were made of recycled material. The cassette tape recorder was used for recording and playback of the students' radio scripts. To inject advertisements, students recorded from local radio station content or they created them themselves as part of the simulation. This gave the students the opportunity to play back their recordings and to listen to themselves reading the news, conducting interviews and many other simulations involving speaking 'on air.' While this was a 'make-believe' radio station, students had the opportunity to visit and interact with the staff and radio hosts at News Talk 93 FM, the university radio on the campus of The University of the West Indies located in Kingston.

The participants in this research were 20 Grade 7 students who had failed the Grade 4 Literacy Test at least four times. They comprised the class which was transformed to ASTEP 101 in the Radio-Active Classroom described in the introductory section of this paper. The class comprised 14 boys and 6 girls. These students' literacy abilities were far below grade level. They were often referred to a 'remedial' or simply as 'astep,' a term which was fast-becoming associated with negative stereotypes for low-performing students.

Teachers and adults in the Radio-Active Classroom included the cooperating teacher who had no training as literacy educator and two student teachers placed by the university for a practicum. One of the student teachers was a trained teacher while the other was a novice teacher on her first practicum experience. The student teachers were paired to practice peer /team teaching as it was felt that the novice teacher would gain from working with more experienced teachers.

Gaining Access and Ethical Measures. In this curriculum activity I had access at four levels: curriculum designer and writer; trainer of trainers for curriculum implementation and university practicum advisor for the two student teachers who piloted the curriculum as part of their fulfillment for the practicum component of the Bachelor of Education and as Researcher. All ethical considerations regarding school student as well as practicum and cooperating teacher's approval were formalized through written requests and subsequent assent forms from teachers, parents and students. I had access to this classroom for three months of classroom observation and student interviews.

Instruments. The exploratory nature of this qualitative research which sought answers to a curriculum innovation about which very little is known necessitated the use of data collection instruments that would glean insider's knowledge that would enlighten the subjects under investigation as well as the field of research. Two instruments were designed for this exploration. The Radio-Active Classroom Observation Guide was designed to unearth the dynamics of the social apprenticeship in language and literacy development. The Guide served to direct attention on the ways in which participants constructed literacy, the development of oral and writing language skills and the integration of these skills in the development of media literacy through radio play. Participants were observed in different roles as they performed as newscasters, hosts, guests, audio technicians, character's voice in scripts for advertisements sports and weather reporters and others radio personalities and workers. The Radio Active Classroom Roles and Self-Efficacy Guide was a self-study instrument that allowed participants to talk about the roles that they performed and how the tasks they did helped them to be a better learner/person or to feel better about themselves.

I was motivated to design this instrument based on the feedback from other cohorts of students piloting the curriculum as well as from the entries about learners' feedback on how students felt about their classroom experiences in the evaluations of lessons by university practicing teachers pilot testing the curriculum. The instrument was an adaptation of Eccles and Wingfield (1995) two-fold self-efficacy for course content and self -efficacy for action beliefs. The three major components of task value, interest, importance and utility, were used to generate nine self- efficacy statements. This instrument was administered towards the middle of the intervention. There were three statements for each component. Each statement was preceded with the expression "I am confident" (explained as I feel good about myself) to which the student added the task and the value from a five point scale (1) no time at all, (2) a few times, (3) sometimes, (4) most of the time, and (5) every time. These responses were in the language expressed by their peers in conversations about their experiences in the Radio-Active classroom.

Data analysis. The data collected were analyzed using grounded theory method that allowed me to interact with the data and reflect on the research questions which framed them. I also examined the simulated radio talk/talking on radio as a distinct discourse from interviews for data collection. Classroom observations were coded for radio play settings such as: radio audience, outside broadcast. The radio audience was often referred to as 'radio-land.' Students in

the classroom pretended to be listening to radio and they called-in with their comments and questions to the radio studio. An outside broadcast was a simulated event where a studio-based host connected listeners with a broadcaster who was at an event outside the studio. Radio play, as a construction of literacy indicator. including a variety of situated social practices: hosting, introducing, interviewing, turn-taking, negotiating, appealing, and other language-in-use notions. All these communicative skills were demonstrated in 'playing' the host of various simulated radio programs, or in the role of interviewer and interviewee in a simulated talk show who took turns speaking as they asked or responded to questions. Students also played the role of mangers, merchandisers and advertisers negotiating and advertising business in a program called The Market Place. Thus, the participants engaged in many different opportunities for developing communicative skills in radio- based speech contexts.

Results

How does the Radio-Active Classroom support oral language as a necessary precursor for social literacy? Consider this example from the *Boys' Talk*, a weekly simulated radio program on ASTEP 101 FM:

> Host: Hello caller! We are getting a feedback. Please turn your radio off. I am appealing to our listeners to turn your radios off as soon as you get connected. This is Dwyane your host for Boy's Talk… Talk your talk and walk the walk. Yes caller. Welcome back.

> Caller: Good morn... Good afternoon sir. First let me congratulate you on the wonderful show you have.

The host, Dwayne, handled this negotiation between two audiences well, addressing the caller to make a request, then shifting to his radio audience to make an appeal, and then establishing the context and purpose for the exchange. Finally, shifted back to this caller to indicate that the caller was back on air. This speech act was both imaginative and realistic and demonstrated an understanding the world of radio. Dwayne made appropriate linguistic choices to sustain a meaningful exchange, and this exchange was typical of the various talk shows that the students simulated.

On one occasion, Akeem hosted the show and had three guests in the studio. The exchange among the guests demonstrated an acute awareness of the importance of taking turns in a discussion:

> Host: Welcome everybody to this special show that is dedicated to the boys at Steppers Primary and Junior High who are in the studio today. Your classmates are all listening to you and your teacher who dropped in our studio today (class erupts in laughter as teacher rushes into the station)

Akeem's opening remarks established the situational as well as the physical context for the exchange. His discourse suggested that he was "on air" miles away and clearly not in a corner of the classroom. This was the typical of the negotiated spaces for talking which were characteristic of ASTEP 101. The boys who were in the studio sent greetings to their classmates who were left behind at school. The teacher was just in time to share with "radio –land" according to the host, the plans the school had for Boys' Day which was to be held in their school the following week.   These opportunities for speaking were spontaneous and authentic.

In another case, in a simulated Outside Broadcast on Teacher's Day, students demonstrated knowledge of connecting ASTEP 101 FM Studio audience which comprised the host of "To Our Teachers with Love' and two invited guests with an Outside Broadcast host who was on site at a school which had a Teachers' Day Celebration:

> Studio Host: On this special day…teachers across Jamaica need to know how much we love and appreciate them. With me in the studio… There are two students with me who will read their poems. Later we will join the Outside Broadcast crew who are having a wonderful time out there at the Jamaica College Teachers' Day Celebration. (After the readings …) We now join Dervan Malcom at Jamaica College …. Shick…! Schick! Schick! (mimicking sound waves) We seem to be having some technical difficulties beyond our control (classroom outburst of laughter)

The host mentioned Dervan Malcolm, the name of a popular radio personality in Jamaica. This provided an indication that students listen to real radio and are applying real-world knowledge in their classroom. This excerpt also demonstrated "knowingness" of how radio talk works. Students were in their classroom, but they were transported to the media world in in-studio outside broadcast communications. Radio was the platform for negotiating speech acts such as rendering tributes and sending greetings within a special social context of national Teachers' Day Celebrations.

How was the reading-writing connection nurtured in the Radio-Active Classroom? Students were encouraged to make connections between reading and writing through listening and speaking activities. The students were encouraged to think then talk. Most of what the learners had to say was written out in advance, and what they wrote was always read as news, sports and weather reports. This was a powerful instructional goal that built learner self- efficacy and facilitated student construction of the literacy experience as they wrote and produced the news, sports and weather reports, wrote questions for interviews, created advertisements among other radio-based tasks and activities.

The reading-writing connection was a powerful instructional thrust for the classroom. Once students began to make the connections in *reading to write* and *writing to read* they developed an understanding of the purposeful and meaning-making nature of writing and reading and how much they are connected to real-

life learning and real -life experiences. The News Room was a new collaborative writing experience.

These students were engaged in a process that is best described as a "talk-about-it-write it-read it" type engagement in the News Room. This embraced a process approach to writing that gave repeated and continuous writing in contextualized or situated practices and affirmed the belief that scaffolding leads to getting it right. The students in the News Room wrote in roles. Writing in roles challenged the popular approach to literacy as a technical skill and promoted literacy as social practice in the radio-active classroom.

The News Headline activity, shown in Figure 1, demonstrated the connection between reading –and writing and further revealed how the reading-writing connection, which was essential in the process of news and weather report preparation, was developed within an oral context. The writer of this script prepared it to be read by the newscaster. The group had a keen sense of the audience, purpose and context of this headline. For example, the student made a change from the word "us" to the word "children" in the editing process. Other revisions suggest that learners refined the script for reading on air.
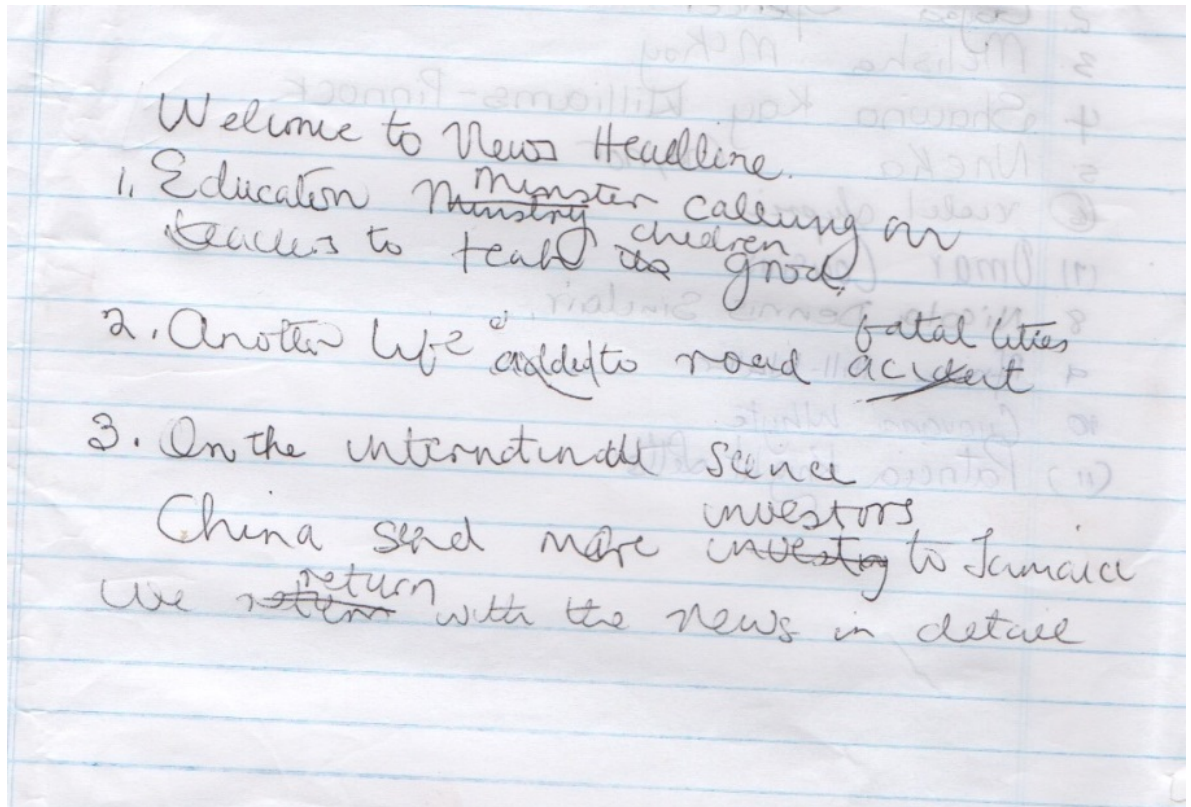

Figure 1
A sample of a script produced in the newsroom

What role does a simulated classroom radio station play in the development of learners' self- efficacy? This group of students had plenty of prior experience with failure in classroom teaching and learning contexts. The evaluations and reflections of the cooperating teacher prior to the intervention of the university teachers on practicum teaching experience revealed the composite profile of a nonchalant failure-proofed "group of students who under-achieve and misbehave." Boys were described as "not motivated to read and learn," "disruptive," "struggling," "low self-esteem" and "discouraged." Girls were described as "those who keep [the cooperating teacher] going" because they were more respectful. Practicum teachers who piloted the curriculum were armed with this profile at the beginning of their teaching assignment but soon found that this profile of the learners gleaned from the cooperating teacher was not in tandem with the emerging profile of students they taught. However, their views of these students after 6- 8 weeks of encounter were different. They described the learners as a "bold," "confident" and "curious" group of boys who "took charge" of gender-sensitive radio-talk shows such as *Boys' Talk* and *Sports Watch*.

The practicum teachers' documentation of the learners' responses to the lessons, class participation and radio play were supported by the sentiments expressed by students themselves in their responses to the items on the Radio Roles and Self- Efficacy Guide which was used to solicit students' views of the role the radio station played in the re-construction of their beliefs about themselves. The following figure reflects the sentiments expressed by participants about the role the simulated radio station played in building their confidence, developing their literacy skills and reshaping the views about how young adolescents construct literacy as social practices embedded in authentic experiences. The students' display of high interest was corroborated by the sentiments they expressed about feeling confident and good about themselves on these occasions: "talking on air"; writing the news, a report, advertisement; and getting the chance to read reports on topics they choose to interview people about.

The students ranked as important the confidence gained when they participated in programs about youths and things they can relate to; the program helped them to improve listening, speaking, reading and writing skills; and the confidence they felt when they involved the rest of the school. The responses they gave also indicated the utility of the simulated radio- station: It helped them to practice things they can do in real radio; helped them to do perform better in their school work; and to be a better person.

Discussion

The participants in this research had experienced repeated failures at the Grade 4 Literacy Test, gaining little value from activities like reading a storybook. Prior to this intervention, students might never have imagined themselves being featured on the radio or listening to radio to engage in radio play. Radio play provided students with the opportunity to use and develop various communicative skills, including interviewing, investigating, problem posing and solving, and explaining. Their field trip to IRIE FM Radio further boosted their confidence and provided real experiences that enhanced what they did through radio play.

These students who were described as "at-risk" were given this profile based on their performance on the Grade 4 Literacy Test which ranked learners as Mastery, Near Mastery, Non-Mastery and At-Risk. These "At-Risk" students took risks when participating in this program. They were not afraid to engage in role-play and to attempt to use the target language appropriate for these roles with confidence. These students were speakers of Jamaican Creole. They were reading at the Pre- Primer level (below grade 1) or not able to read at all. Throughout the intervention, the students' performance indicated that they were the real risk-takers learning literacy in a creative and authentic learning space that brought out the best in them rather than engaging them in activities that placed them at risk and further cemented their failure.

The Radio-Active Classroom was a space of memory and imagination for learners. One space was memory-based. This was where children could activate their knowledge about how radio talks work. The second space was the imaginative world of ASTEP FM that was as real as the one they toured on one of their field trips. Through interaction students increased their vocabulary as they listened to or read authentic linguistic material. They developed listening and speaking skills through radio-based tasks, such as reading the news, hosting a program, and sharing views.

There were three key language-in-use concepts that nurtured the teaching of language as communication, including awareness and sense of audience, establishing a purpose for listening, speaking, writing and reading and building real life contexts for language use and learning. The audience, purpose and context in the Radio-Active Classroom were stimulated by simulated and real experiences of radio. Radio-talk generated opportunities for students to speak in roles thus nurturing the dispositions to construct knowledge and literacy within real-life social contexts.

As Rivers' (1987) suggests, classroom evidence-based research supports the idea that in communicative contexts, children exploit the elasticity of language, to make the little they know go a long way. The give-and-take of message exchanges enabled learners to retrieve and interrelate what they had experienced. Interaction was essential for sustainability and learners depended on each other for support with the various styles of interaction in the radio- active classroom.

The learners always referred to their classroom as the ASTEP FM or "the radio station." This transformation of classroom into a radio station was sustained in two ways: the physical layout and the infusion of the Radio-Active Classroom as a pedagogical strategy across all subject areas. These were students who were functioning at the pre-primer level in terms of their reading abilities. But they were excellent readers of the world of radio. They manipulated the concepts and experiences related to the world of radio: on air, commercial break, host, studio audience, radio audience and outside broadcast and switched roles and functions in true-to-life simulations.

Conclusion

This research has reminded us that learning through play can be appropriate for various classroom settings. The participants in this research have demonstrated that the 'at- risk- label that was given to them in the assessment of their literacy abilities was not in keeping with their cognitive abilities as it is evident that the strategies they were exposed to prior to the intervention placed them at risk. In this research, the learners demonstrated that when learners are engaged in the construction of literacy in real-life purposeful and meaningful contexts that mirror their everyday lives the motivation to read, write and use language as the tool for achieving their communicative goals is sustainable. Students are motivated to learn through role-play.

Two constructivist learning theories supported the vision of the Radio-Active Classroom: situated cognition theory (Brown, Collins and Duguid,1989) suggests the value of promoting authentic contextualized activities that drew on students' cultural experiences. Cognitive apprenticeship theory provided a guide to the designed tasked-based learning, project learning and problem posing and solving in media career-oriented settings. Extensive classroom observations and interactive class interviews revealed that the construction of language and literacy were rooted in transactional and social learning. The students' experiences within and manipulation of these radio-active spaces as newscasters, hosts, writers and reporters revealed that transition to new curriculum learning spaces necessitated the charting of new courses in the lived realities of learners who took risks in learning language and literacy in these spaces that subverted the label of 'at –risk' learners. Pedagogies of enjoyment and empowerment emerged in learners' autonomous spaces as speech events were the catalysts for listening to speak, speaking to write, and writing to read. These findings in alternative radio active classroom spaces have implications for curriculum renewal processes that provide alternative pathways for learners. Such pathways are driven by alternative pedagogy that is fuelled by learners' interest, the importance of the tasks they are engaged in to their own lives and the utility or skills gained in lifelong learning experiences.

The Radio-Active Classroom has expanded to reach real audiences throughout Jamaica. It is now more than a center of interest in the corners of Jamaican classrooms where the new APSE Curriculum is being implemented. The responses of the students to radio play has led to the implementation of the Radio-Active Classroom as an interactive radio program on News Talk 93FM Radio, the university radio on the campus of The University of the West Indies, Jamaica. This creative learning space helps both teachers and students who are engaged in the construction of literacy as a purposeful, meaningful activity closely knitted to our everyday experiences. ASTEP 101 blazed the trail through radio play and opened the pathway for the Radio Active Classroom as a real classroom space for alternative pathways to secondary school education in Jamaica.

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