



Summer 2023 Self-Initiated Leadership-in-Action

Tackling Illiteracy and the Lack of Educational Opportunities in Jamaica: A Six-Weeks Teaching Experience with Jamaica Partners for Purpose and the Kingston Young Men's Christian Association

Abstract

This report documents a transformative six-week volunteer teaching experience that I have conducted in Kingston, Jamaica - aimed at tackling illiteracy and the lack of educational opportunities among youth from underprivileged and violent backgrounds. The collaboration between Jamaica Partners for Purpose (JPP), the Kingston Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and the scholarship provided by the Laidlaw Foundation enabled me to create a unique platform to make a positive impact on the local community. This report highlights the issues faced by the Jamaican society, the strategies implemented throughout the six weeks, and the outcomes achieved during the teaching program, emphasizing the importance of holistic education to empower the Jamaican youth for a brighter future.

Introduction and Project Rationale

Jamaica has developed at a two-speed pace over the past six decades of political independence. On the west coast of the island, the tourism industry has taken over the landscape, making the island an attractive holiday destination. This has heightened the extreme wealth disparity left by the slave trade economy and colonial past of the country. This phenomenon is reflected throughout the rest of the island. The capital of Kingston and its surroundings present a very different reality outside of the island's paradisiac resorts. Indeed, a significant part of the population are deprived of basic literacy skills. According to the 2015 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), Jamaica counts more than 161,000 males and close to 74,000 females who are over the age of 15 lack basic reading and writing skills. This stems from a lack of quality education during early stages. The Jamaica Education Transformation Commission found that the Primary Exit Profile (PEP) exam displayed that 33 per cent of students are not able to read at all. 56 per cent of students cannot write; and 58 per cent of students cannot, or can barely, find information on a given subject. The boys admitted at the YMCA and participating in the program are among the demographic mentioned, while also being from gang-ridden communities. Research has proven that early exposure to trauma and violence has adverse impact on a young person's future development. This phenomenon is translated into lower language, literacy and logical problem-solving skills - all of which hinders their chances of succeeding in school and higher education, and therefore reduces future career prospects. In turn, high rates of unemployment leads to increased poverty, provoking the exacerbation of crime - these factors create a vicious circle that needs to be broken for virtuous social development to take place in Jamaica and produce high-skilled individuals to compete on the global scene.

The focus on young boys for this project is an attempt to reverse the deep-rooted gender discriminations in Jamaica that overwhelmingly affects males, especially from low and middle-income classes. A gender imbalance has been built against men over many decades, which not only affects men but society as a whole, including women and children. Young boys are in some cases victims of violence and abuse, including domestic violence, but might be underreported due to societal perceptions or fears of stigma. Men's health issues and emotional well-being may not receive the same level of attention or support as women's health concerns. This lack of focus can lead to less investment in healthcare services specifically tailored to men's needs. Additionally, Jamaican culture, like many others, often places a premium on traditional notions of masculinity, which includes characteristics like emotional stoicism, power dominance over women, and "being tough" in general, which is ingrained in men at a young age through physical violence. Men who don't conform to these expectations may face discrimination or social stigma.

In the education sector, females benefit from vastly more school places in traditional high schools for girls than boys, which creates a gender imbalance at university favouring females. This leaves a large amount of young males without education degrees and little employment prospects. A high unemployment rate, paired with low education levels, becomes a social recipe to higher crime rates and disproportionate death rates amongst males in Jamaica.

To respond to the growing and urgent demand for quality education amongst Jamaican youth, the government has dedicated a section to address this issue in its *Vision 2030* policy goals. My self-initiated Leadership-in-Action project and the JPP organization are all inscribed in this wave of efforts to provide every child with the necessary tools to develop critical thinking and skills to join the Jamaican workforce.

Jamaica Partners for Purpose is a non-profit organization whose mission is to advance education in Jamaica through volunteer initiatives and events aimed at underprivileged youths. The Young Men's Christian Association, located at 21 Hope Road, Kingston, Jamaica, is a brick and mortar educational establishment, welcoming young boys with behavioural issues who do not fit government schools' system into their Youth Development Program, offering them another chance at education.

The purpose of this project and the Summer School at the YMCA is multi-dimensional. It is an attempt to help increase literacy levels, improve self-confidence, and heighten enthusiasm for pursuing education and activities that could lead to successful careers by developing violence prevention actions. One of the two main components of violence prevention is increasing protective factors. To increase protective factors, we will ensure that the program in place provides young people with support, a sense of community and a voice to express themselves. The Summer Program will include ways to involve youth in projects that will benefit communities and create healthier environments for all residents. The other component bolstering violence prevention is reducing risk factors that children are exposed to: by creating a framed, safe space for boys to attend during summer holidays, they will have less opportunities to get involved in criminal activities. In the short term, the project will permit the participating boys to be a part of a community of peers and mentors. In the long term, the project will bridge the gap between exploring the children's academic, entrepreneurial and leadership potential with the lack of resources to do so.

Strategy Implementation

I have been closely working with the two organizations a year prior to commencing the on-site project at the YMCA in Kingston, Jamaica. As an executive member and volunteer teacher at JPP, I have designed the Summer School program that I have taught at the YMCA this summer along with the local staff and teachers. Before commencing the teaching program, extensive planning and collaboration took place. JPP, the YMCA, and a team of dedicated volunteers worked together to understand the unique needs of the community and design a comprehensive curriculum that encompassed core academic subjects and extra-curricular activities developing life skills. During the preparatory phase, I have also volunteered to give reading lessons to students throughout the school year to familiarise myself with them and help them improve their reading skills. The boys that I taught have graduated this summer and enrolled to attend high school. The core of my preparations have been directed towards designing the courses for the summer school held at the YMCA. My goal was to find a short and long term solutions-based response to prevent youth crime while encouraging self-improvement. With this vision, I have imagined a four-fold curriculum that offers holistic education and courses whose content could be exploited by the students after the end of summer school in the hopes of creating a sustainable change amongst this group of boys. The distinctive components of the summer school included: entrepreneurial development, basic computer coding on Scratch, electronics manual practice, traditional Chinese painting, and Arts and Poetry. Additionally, Jamaican personalities have been invited to talk about their fields to inspire students to pursue career paths after the completion of their studies.

A lot of the activities that I had imagined required digital resources. To overcome this obstacle, the preparatory phase was crucial to the project. After completing a rough draft of the summer school program, we had to get hold of the resources that were needed to make the project possible. In

February, I have contacted the Inter-American Development Bank for project funding. While securing financial support was impossible due to the lack of funding set-up for the organization at the time, I was able to obtain a dozen second-hand computers and office furniture to create a computer room at the YMCA on behalf of JPP. Thanks to the IDB's donation, we were able to teach the boys crucial digital skills throughout the year, as well as facilitate reading sessions online for the school year for volunteers living outside of Jamaica.

Weekly Report

Week 1

The first week of summer school was a very experimental period for me. It wasn't a great start at first. I was sick the first day and couldn't make it to the school. I was feeling very guilty and was doubting myself in whether I was trained enough to actually be a good teacher. Throughout the week, I slowly got to know my students, which were incredibly open to having a teacher that did not look like them, and were very patient when communication wasn't always easy on both sides. On Tuesday, I introduced them to Chinese painting. It was a very special moment for me because it was my favourite artistic activity. They were just as enthusiastic about it as I was growing up.



During the rest of the week, we started the entrepreneurship course. They were asked to answer the following question: What problem do I face in my everyday life? This was a way to prompt them to think about what kind of business could be impactful. Issues that came up during class discussions included safety, street violence, road traffic, the lack of healthy fast food, and the very problematic topics for teenage boys - face pimples and the lack of brand name shoes in Jamaica. While all of these answers ranged from having to partner with governmental institutions to only needing some ingredients to make soap and start a business, all the boys were encouraged to come up with a solution to their problem. Lastly, we also started the electronics program, where the boys learned how to read an electric circuit on the board, and familiarised themselves with electronic terms before doing the manual work next week.



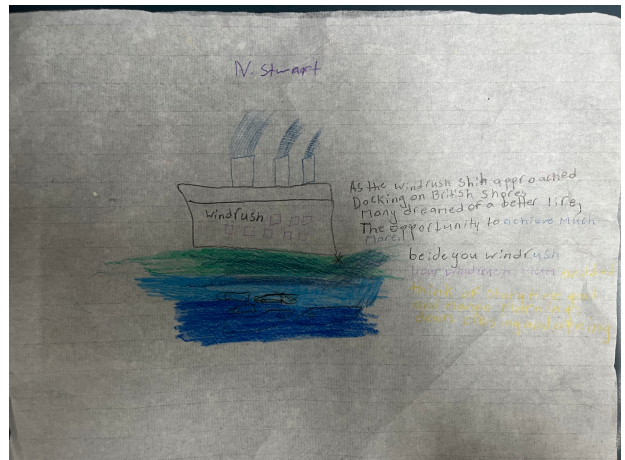
Week 2

I met with the tennis teacher, Mr. Evans, on Monday. He said that the boys had potential in playing sports, but were lacking discipline during the lessons. Indeed, that was a challenge that all the teachers face when giving class to the students. I thought that the students benefitting from a male teacher with stronger authority was necessary to summer school. While I was trying my best to maintain the traditional teacher/student distance with the boys, my appearance, language, and personality made it impossible for me to be seen as a "normal" teacher. From this week onwards, I realized that I couldn't maintain that role, and instead, I chose to become a leader instead of just a course instructor. This change meant that I also participated in everything I told them to do, and work alongside them instead of giving lessons on the board. By doing this, I have gotten to have deeper conversations with each student, making me understand their background further.



A preacher, Mr Clarke, was invited as a guest speaker on Tuesday. Having been brought up in a similar background and being an example of success today, he has given a motivational speech for the boys to focus in their education and stay away from harmful distractions. Looking back, this was a very effective intervention as the boys who received an individual motivational speech were more consistently present in terms of attendance. The rest of the week, the boys were focused on developing their business ideas. They had to come up with a logo, a name and a slogan. It was an eye-opening activity for them because they could visualise their idea for the first time, and it made them realize that creating a business isn't an unattainable fantasy, but a very realistic action plan.

We also used the rest of the arts material to create new productions around the themes of Poetry and Art. I introduced them to my favourite French poet, Guillaume Apollinaire, who is the pioneer of calligrams. They had to choose their favourite poem and create their calligram. Among the productions, we could find traces of Shakespeare, Louise Bennett Coverley, and a Windrush-inspired piece. I was extremely proud of them, because some of the boys have reading difficulties and it was very challenging for them to understand the poems. This activity came with a lot of "I can't do this", "I don't understand", or "I don't like poetry", but the boys were very happy with what they were able to achieve by themselves at the end of the session.



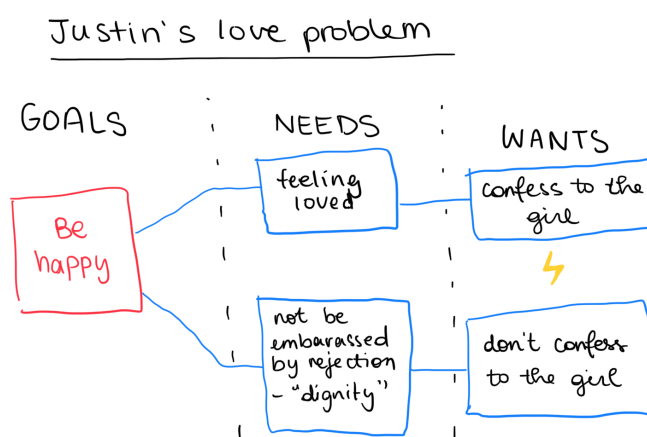
We also made progress in the electronics class - and the boys were able to handle the welding of their sound amplifier. It was exciting to see all the material and the amazing things we could make out of electronic boards and solder.

On the last day, Tishauna and Peter-Ann joined the summer school to hold a gratitude circle. This activity was extremely touching yet saddening to assist. We were sitting in a circle, students and teachers, and were given the task to say one nice thing about someone else in the circle. The boys were not able to do that, because I thought they did not feel comfortable to say nice things about the other boys. However, since the prompt of giving someone else a compliment wasn't working, we asked the boys to say a nice thing about themselves. It was equally hard for them. I believe this stems from a lack of affectionate family environments, which drive the boys to be emotionally unavailable to give and receive compliments. It made me realize how important educating the parents, and respecting kids as equal human beings as adults is crucial for an individual's personal growth. I think that feminism, in this case, should be concentrated in uplifting boys and men with words of affirmation and emotional support - instead of antagonising men against women and create a gender war like we can witness in the West.



Week 3

We started the first day of class this week with some TOC training (Theory of Constraints). It is a method to resolve conflicts and find solutions when we are stuck on a seemingly unresolvable issue. I asked the boys what was troubling them - and we decided to solve a student's dilemma as a class. His problem was that he wanted to confess his love to a girl, but didn't know if he should. We drew a cloud diagram on the board and listed all the assumptions that the boy had about the situation: "maybe she doesn't like me", "maybe she likes someone else" were amongst his concerns. After concluding that he might be feeling this way because he doesn't have enough confidence, the student decided that he will resolved his internal conflict when the time is right. This session taught the class how to easily visualise conflicts that might be confusing when they are in the middle of it. I asked them to think about the diagram every time they are fighting with each other, and it has helped them (and myself) a lot during classes where their focus was needed.



The tennis lesson this week was also very special. We were able to secure a time slot on a real tennis court at St Andrews High School for Girls in Half-Way-Tree, right next to the YMCA. The boys were able to appreciate this opportunity after two weeks of training in the small space at the YMCA. It was a very hot day and we all played against each other, and I got beat by a student during a 1v1 - very humbling experience.

Their business ideas were getting more real each week. We started to work on the pitches that were going to be presented during the open day. Each of them were either "sole traders", "partners", or a "company" - which were terms that they learned in the first two weeks. They were asked to come up with the details of how much they needed and where the money will be invested. Suddenly, it seemed like the boys realized how big the opportunity will be next week, and gained a sense of responsibility almost instantly. This made me realize that the boys are all very mature, and need to be entrusted with responsibilities, even though we as adults are reluctant to that idea, so that side of them can be shown.

A breakthrough was also made on Scratch Programming. After showing them all the amazing things coding could do, like create games and interactive stories, the boys were challenged to use the software to draw a triangle. This activity called for their maths and geometry knowledge, so they could write the correct commands. It was a success and the boys wanted to stay longer after class to continue exploring Scratch.

Reflecting on the past week, I feel very proud of how much we have been able to complete in three weeks. The boys are consistently coming to summer school, and excited to learn new things. With only one week left, I regret that we could only run the program during July. The boys have improved so much in terms of attitude towards me and towards learning, and I wish I could've stayed longer to witness more of their growth. I truly feel like the boys were able to confide in me, and it is very emotional that we are already preparing for the final week. I am not ready to leave Jamaica in less than two weeks, and I feel like the incredible people I have met here make it so much harder for me to say goodbye.

Week 4

The last week of summer school came very quickly. I had a feeling that we were just getting into a good rhythm, and the boys were behaving so much better than during the first week. On Monday, we started to prepare for the last day of summer school - the open day. We wanted to showcase all the projects that the students had completed during the summer and reward them for their efforts by giving them an opportunity to further their business ideas developed during the entrepreneurship sessions. We were able to invite Mr. Jeffrey Azan as part of the jury that was going to determine the prizes for each business pitch.. He is regarded as the best public speaker in Jamaica, certified by Toastmasters, and owns a very prominent national company "Azan Superstores" . He is an alumni of the YMCA, which made his presence even more special to the boys, as they could project themselves as successful businessmen like Mr. Azan.

Before the final day, the group that came up with the soap for pimples, "Sunfresh Soap", had the chance to make their soap. They had come up with a formula containing shea butter and aloe vera, so we invited a specialist to make the soap with the boys at the YMCA. Everyone was very involved in the project and each stage was fascinating - I did not know that aloe vera turned purple when it was oxidised for example. It was refreshing to see all the boys participating in the soap-making process, because it is not a chance they get to have everyday.

I felt extremely proud on the last day as I saw each group, or each "sole trader" go in front of the class and give their speech in front of everyone. Nandre presented his business idea "Pink Taxi for Women" after I told him that sometimes it is scary to be a woman and taxi public transport. Rovaldo won the award with his pimple face wash that we all helped to make. It was incredible to see an idea turn into reality in the course of a summer. Mr. Azan gave some great insight on how to be a good businessman - or how to be resilient. The last day was deeply emotional for me as I had to say goodbye to the people I was working with everyday, and the boys that I have seen transform thanks to the project that I was designing throughout the year. I'm very proud of all the

efforts I have put in, and feel like I have impacted the boys in a meaningful way. Today, some students believe that they are capable of creating a business, have a career, and are able to see further down the line - which is an immense step forward for boys that couldn't even fathom this idea a few weeks prior.



One of the most fulfilling aspects of my role was witnessing the children's joy and pride in their accomplishments. Their faces lit up with excitement when they mastered a new concept or completed a challenging task. It was immensely gratifying to see their enthusiasm for learning flourish and their self-belief strengthen.

One of the things that I appreciated the most was the way each day started with a moment of devotion. Even for a non-religious person, I think that taking time in the morning to give thanks, be grateful and mindful is a great habit that schools around the world should adopt. I think that a lot of school systems, especially in China, focus too much on academics and dedicate too little time to mindfulness, and being at peace mentally and spiritually. Working in Jamaica, a relatively religious country, made me realize that we don't make enough time to appreciate what life has given us, because we are too focused on negativity instead of being grateful for what we have. Incorporating religion in the curriculum is often a very controversial debate, but from my

experience working this summer, I think it is a necessity, especially in making students remember that they are all equal in God's eyes, as it prevents them from acting violently towards each other. It is a reminder for the day that we should all love each other, even when someone tries to challenge you.

This experience also made me realize the importance of being able to interact with your target population when planning a social development/policy-making project. It was a reminder that behind every decision that an organization/country takes, we are impacting real people and changing the course of their lives. It has made me more sensible to the materials that we are taught at university, because learning about theories and concepts is not enough to grasp the actual impact that these decisions have.

I was deeply touched by the relationships I developed with the children. Each interaction, whether it was a heartfelt conversation or a playful moment, allowed me to connect with them on a personal level. Being able to provide guidance, support, and encouragement to these young individuals was a privilege that I will cherish forever.

Working with Jamaica Partners with Purpose and the Kingston YMCA has also taught me the importance of community involvement and the power of education in transforming lives. The organization's commitment to empowering children and providing them with opportunities for growth is truly what I wish to pursue in my career. It was, and still is, an honor to be a part of this mission and contribute to the children's educational journey.

Acknowledgements

I am dedicating the last part of my report to the wonderful connections that I have made throughout the experience. Not only have they been incredible work colleagues, but they have also been a part of the core memory that this summer has been for me - as my friends and family. The success of the project is the result of the immense effort that everyone has put in towards our shared vision for the Jamaican youth.

I would firstly like to acknowledge Hilbert Robinson, who has been my first point of contact at JPP and the person who has taken me under his responsibility since the beginning. I couldn't thank him enough for guiding me throughout this whole journey, and for opening my perspective to new ways of thinking. I have first met him in London in November, and his warmth felt like I had known him since forever already. To me, he embodies a father figure and a great leader, because he has not once told me what to do. Instead, he always encouraged me to think of what is best, using my own judgement. I thank him for the trust he has invested in me when I was just a stranger to him, and for helping me discover all the things I was capable of doing by myself, even when it was hard to keep up at times. He has been my mentor during the preparatory period and the person I would go to every time I encountered a challenge. He has taught me a valuable lesson that has stuck with me ever since: the answers to seemingly unresolvable problems are always hidden within our own minds, and just need to be drawn out of the misleading assumptions we may have about the issue. By introducing me to this thinking method, Hilbert has enabled me to work through my own issues and equipped me with the tools I needed to create the content of the summer school project. In a way, he has given me the possibility to make myself free. His vision is what my project's message attempts to convey and pass on. The rationale of this project was to offer children opportunities to think for themselves and gain confidence about all the things they could achieve. As Jamaica progresses socially to become an independent and resilient nation, Hilbert laid the bricks for our generation to enable it.

Oberlene is the person who has introduced me to Hilbert. After working with her on her project about domestic violence in Manchester, Jamaica under the Rotary's supervision, I wanted to pursue a similar project. She is an inspiring yet unconventional woman, and her support has been invaluable. She has welcomed me in her house in Kingston and made me discover the traditional food and religious practices in Jamaica. I have learned so much from her, whether it is about life, womanhood, or even health and spirituality and look up to her as an incredible role model.

Teresa has also been a core element in the success of the summer school. While she was only able to work from abroad, her presence has been felt on the ground everyday. She has continuously been a great leader and supporter at JPP, and her warmth makes changing the world for the better a bit less scary.

Tishauna, who volunteers at JPP and works in social development, is my role model and represents the goals I would like to achieve in my career: making essential social impact, influencing important issues in Jamaica, and leading in everything she is involved in. She has shown me the behind-the-scenes of being a successful leader, and her confidence, wittiness, and charm makes her an incredible woman, friend and teammate. I'm deeply grateful to have met her.

Debrah, the computer teacher at the YMCA, has shown me the ropes of teaching and handling the boys. She was there to supervise me on the field, and was always here in case something unexpected happened. She is also a great friend that I have made along the way, who has taught me a lot about Jamaican culture.

Denesha and her husband Mister Cole are also two people I am grateful to have met this summer. They have been extremely welcoming, and I thank them for always being there to help me get around, and cook me breakfast. Apart from being a great cook and tiktok dancer, Denesha is also a businesswoman with whom I had great discussions. She has taught me a lot about exploring different things and looking at life positively. Denesha is truly a ray of sunshine in everyone's life.

I would like to close this acknowledgment section by giving thanks to the Laidlaw Foundation and the University of Hong Kong for the financial and academic support that enabled me to conduct this project.