PROJECT CREBA

AN ANECDOTAL REPORT OF A TEACHER PREPAREDNESS INITIATIVE AND RESOURCE CENTER IN HAITI
SUMMER 2017

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To everyone, merci.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a summary of an anecdotal report on the launching of a teacher resource center project in Haiti during the summer of 2017. It focuses on a few pertinent activities that occurred from August 7th (project inauguration) to August 14th (resource specialist training) at the District Scolaire de Saint-Marc or DSM (School District of Saint-Marc) in the Bas-Artibonite region of the country. This report also encapsulates participants’ reviews as well as organizers’ reflections, and consequential recommendations for future projects.

“Too many Haitian students newly-enrolled in New York City public schools lack the required foundational skills,” complains one New York City bilingual teacher. “Contrary to the 1960’s when political repressions were rampant, a slew of Haitian students nowadays immigrate with baggage unfilled with linguistic and cognitive skills,” bemoans another teacher of English Language Learners (ELLs). Not limited to these two educators, these observations are echoed within the Haitian community in New York City. Meanwhile, waves of Haitian children keep splashing onto our school doors, more intensively in the wake of the January 2010 catastrophic earthquake in Haiti.

It is commonly believed that teaching practice in Haiti must be upgraded substantially and urgently if we were to save this generation of students. Despite efforts made by the “Ministère de l’Éducation Nationale et de la Formation Professionnelle” (Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training), among other stakeholders, student academic achievement has been in decline as evidenced by the results of the 2017 Baccalauréat (equivalent to High School Regents) exams. Many factors are known to contribute to this troubling dilemma. But teacher quality or the lack thereof has allegedly been a primary cause of the problem,
according to a veteran school administrator in Haiti. This remark is reminiscent to Marzano et al. (2005) in that teachers are the most important resources to students at school. Thus, professional development for teachers is deemed essential in order advance student outcomes.

In New York State (NYS) mathematics is second to English language arts as the most valued barometer to gauge student achievement. Here, the population of English Language Learners (ELLs) has grown exponentially (NYS Language RBERN at NYU/Steinhardt Metro Center, March 2017), and Haitians are part of it. Because ELL test data are not fully disaggregated, it becomes difficult to extrapolate the achievement of Haitians on state standardized tests. Yet overall ELL results on the state tests in 2013, 2014, and 2015 show that respectively only 13.4%, 14.0%, and 14.6% of students statewide scored at or above grade level (NYCDOE, August 2015).

To assist in alleviating this untenable situation in Haiti, a small group of educators in New York decided to create Project CREBA, at the center of which would be professional development for teachers. Because of the primacy of mathematics and the leader’s background in the subject, this first series of PD was planned to begin with mathematics.
Project CREBA was initiated in the summer of 2017 to grapple with a long-standing issue: teacher quality. Part of a larger 3-year plan, the summer events (August 7 to August 14, 2017) had four focal goals: 1) to inform education leaders of the project through a conference, 2) to share the constructivist pedagogy with teachers through three-day math professional development, 3) to recruit prospective resource specialists for capacity building, and 4) to find a space to operationalize the teacher resource center.

**PROJECT GENESIS**

On April 2, 2017, a seminal meeting was held in Nyack, New York between Archangelo Joseph of NYS Language RBERN and Marie Théline Cosméus-Pierre of the Regional Department of Education of Artibonite in Haiti to discuss the feasibility of a hub for instructional resources in Haiti. During that encounter, the foundations to the project were dug. The mission, vison, and a rough action plan were drafted. In the end, CREBA has emerged and remained a permanent acronym for the French name, *Centre de Ressources Éducatives du Bas-Artibonite*. From then onwards, a steady flow of contacts ensued to refine the original plan for the summer CREBA launching. The preparations, including food cargo
shipments to Haiti and PD materials development in New York, became increasingly frantic. Finally, on the weekend of August 5, the organizers took off from New York to Haiti.

**CHRONOLOGY-SUMMARY HIGHLIGHTS**

**DAY 1: MONDAY AUGUST 7, 2017-INAUGURATION**

It’s 8:35 am, and more than 60 guests have already arrived for the conference of school leaders at the appointed school district. The invitees include school inspectors, regional department officials, and teacher union representatives, traveling from as far as 100 miles. Following breakfast and the singing of the Haitian national anthem, Mrs. Cosméus-Pierre, project site coordinator and Directrice Adjointe of the Regional School District, declares open the ceremonies with an impassionate welcoming remark.

Then has been introduced the panel, involving Archangelo Joseph (NYS Language BERN), Carlo Damus (IS68/New York City Department of Education), Dr. Marc-Arthur Christophe (Howard University), and Morange Gracien (Regional Department of of Ed. in Haiti). Mr. Joseph shares the mission, vision, and annual goals of Project CREBA. Mr. Damus enlightens the audience about his engagement with his newly-arrived Haitian youngsters (grades 6 and 7),
some of whom lack both cognitive and linguistic abilities. Additionally, the dual-language bilingual teacher enumerates the New York City Schools system’s expectations of parents and students for “College and Career Readiness”. Dr. Christophe underscores weaknesses in Haitian education, especially the parcœurisme (rote learning) and exhorts teachers to adopt a more modern and pedagogically-sound methodology. Mr. Gracien surprisingly decries the inadequacy in Haitian education, particularly the flexibility of the Baccalauréat exams and students’ struggle to meet these “softened” standards. Nonetheless, he expressed his hopes in this project that he described as a “monumental initiative” in the region, while echoing the praises from previous speakers. Then other speeches, questions, answers follow. Finally, the inauguration comes to close followed by a hot lunch of lalo, the vegetable staple of the region.

**DAY 2: TUESDAY AUGUST 8, 2017: TEACHER MATH TRAINING**

It’s 8:10. Approximately 50 teachers, some of whom accompanied by their principals, showed up for the math training, occupying the 8 eight-foot tables.

This huge attendance has dispelled our long-lasting fear of not having sufficient participants.

After breakfast, the participants are engaged in the first activity of the series: Pwa Melanje (Mixed Beans). Using dried beans, markers, and T-chart paper,
participants in grade bands (4&5, 6&7, and 8&9) are tasked to work cooperatively sorting out beans by color, solving the given problem, and displaying the results in a table. By doing so, they will have demonstrated deep understanding of fractions, decimals, percent and ratios. Indeed, prior to whole-class discussion, one team has been overly impressed by the multiple ways to express 12 red beans in 48: as fraction (12/28 or ¼), decimal (0.25), percent (25%) and ratio (12:28). Then, the using other manipulatives (e.g., square tiles) and the same lesson flow, the participants work on other equally captivating activities, such as Kay Ideyal (Dream House) and Kare ak Triyang Adjasan (Adjacent Square and Triangle) involving geometry and algebra.

**DAY 2: WEDNESDAY AUGUST 9, 2017: TEACHER MATH TRAINING**

It’s 10:16. The day begins with Jaden Senmak (Garden in St-Marc), an activity that resonates with the Haitian daily lives of planting and selling corn and tomatoes. The depth of Jaden Senmak resides in the integration of several math constructs as circle, square, and metric system into one problem as well as the cogent reasoning and multiple paths to the answer. Other fascinating problems comprise Jaden Latibonit (Artibonite Garden) and Enskrypsyon Sèk nan Kare (Inscription of Circle into Circle).
DAY 4, THURSDAY, AUGUST 4: TEACHER MATH TRAINING

It’s 9:47 a.m. Ji Mango (Mango Juice), a math drama also known as playlet, has come to mesmerize and persuade participants that language is, indeed, an essential pillar to school mathematics. Ji Mango features two women (Jàn the buyer) and Mari (the seller) transacting on mango prices under the vigilant eyes of the audience. As forewarned, some miscues in the characters’ discourse were quickly noticed and corrected by the excited “spectators.”

After lunch, time is running out. We have no choice but to prioritize the rest of the activities. In the process, Depo ak Tiraj Bankè (Bank Deposits & Withdrawals) and Poligon Òtonôme (Coordinated Poligon) have been unfortunately left behind. As to the culminating group presentation, solely team has the opportunity to perform. It’s a well-received comedy featuring CREBA members from New York visiting the same teacher who would conduct, in all three occasions, the same mathematics lesson. Now, it’s 3:45 pm. We accelerate the signing of the certificates of participation while listening to the show. After receiving their prize, in standing ovations the trainees manifest their gratitude, jubilantly singing “CREBA M AP DI W MÈSI” (CREBA, I’m saying thanks to you). The 3-day math training has ended, and the celebration of accomplishments begun over vanilla cake and refreshments.
DAY 5: RESOURCE SPECIALIST TRAINING

It’s yet to be 10:00. Sixteen conspicuously outstanding participants have been invited to the Resource Specialists’ Meeting. While eating breakfast, we review the CREBA mission, vision, action plan, organizational structure, and protocols. Half an hour later, the newly-annointed specialists are engaged in Siyifikasyon π (The Meaning of π), one of the skipped activities during the previous 3-day math series. Upon tracing circles and correctly gluing their beans, they marvel at being able to count about 3 times as many beans on the circumference as on the diameter, validating the formula \( C = 3.14d \) or \( C = \pi d \). We reflect on the experience and discuss issues regarding CREBA organizational structure. Before closing, we select Alix Leclerc and Clémide Fredérique to become Resource Specialist Leaders, pending further guidance.

DATA COLLECTIONS /

PARTICIPANTS’ EVALUATIONS

Returning to New York after one week of experimentation in Haiti, we can stand back and take stock. Our data were captured and collated from our real-time observations, post-session debriefings, and participants’ oral and feedback.

Qualitative Data. The school leaders’ body language and utterances were encouraging, suggesting that they would
have submitted positively written reviews. Likewise, the teachers verbally affirmed that the math sessions had already a positive impact on their views on pedagogy, and consequently they will strive to begin to apply the strategies they had learned.

In particular, teachers concurred that all the activities were relevant. However, they were most captivated by *Pwa Melanje* (Mixed Beans), *Jaden Senmak* (Saint-Marc Garden), *Ji Mango* (Mango Juice), and *Enskripsyon Sèk nan Kare* (Circle Inscribed in Square). These performance-based tasks have persuaded them to modify their practice from rote learning to a more student-centered approach. On the other hand, they were less impressed by *Pwason Bèmid* (Bermuda Fish) and *Konpetisyon ant de Makèt Pwason* (Fish Market Competition).

**Quantitative Data.** The table below reflects our quantitative data collected through a written survey at the close of the three-day math sessions for teachers (n = 65).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Written Survey / General Evaluation on 3-Day Math Training</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Survey Statements</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. The summer event was a success</td>
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<td>2. The math PD has contributed to my professional development.</td>
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<td>3. I will be able to implement the acquired strategies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. I have already known these techniques and applied them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. I have already known these techniques, but never got to apply them</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. The presenters was well prepared.</td>
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<td>7. The presenters were knowledgeable.</td>
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As shown in the table above, 100% of trainees agreed that the math PD series has contributed to their professional growth, the strategies were replicable, and the presenters were knowledgeable. Almost all (97.95%) acknowledged the success of the events and the preparedness of the organizers. However, 26.5% responded that they knew beforehand these strategies, and applied them. Meanwhile, a smaller percentage (10.5%) replied negatively, while 63% were doubtful. Fourteen percent stated that they were familiar with these math techniques but never got the chance to apply them, whereas 26.5% disagreed, and 59.2% remained neutral.

**DISCUSSIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS**

Analyses of the qualitative and quantitative data (though sparse) suggest that the summer events were worthwhile. Both the conference of school leaders and the teacher training sessions were well-attended and given positive reviews. School decision makers had committed themselves to support gradually Project CREBA with more cogent decisions on school improvement. Equally, practitioners had promised to bolster their teaching methods from the typical teacher lectures to a more constructivist approach, discouraging the ubiquitous “parcouerisme” (rote student learning). The methodical preparations foretold that our summer initiative would be productive, but we had never anticipated such a widespread jubilation, prompting us to ponder: “Why participants reacted the way they did?"

One could begin by guessing that leaders were primarily appreciative because project organizers took pains to fly 1,500 miles on behalf of teacher preparedness in Haiti. On their part, teachers might see the workshops as some rare opportunity to acquire some higher-education material which could otherwise get at university. Besides, professional development
is episodic in Haiti. Also, their enthusiasm could be partly explained by the use of manipulatives, even at the upper-grade levels. These hands-on activities, part of Organic-way Mathematics under study, are grounded in constructivism of Jean Piaget and Lev. Vygotsky compelling to have learners work cooperatively to construct their solution strategies. Most importantly, practitioners may have realize that the problems do resonate with Haitian daily lives while using inexpensive manipulatives, rendering the lessons culturally-relevant and easily replicable.

Conversely, the lack of passion for a few activities, i.e., *Pwason Bëmid* (Bermuda Fish), may stem from the fact that respondents could not relate Bermuda and time ran out on the last day of the math series. In addition, statements #4 and #5 (from the data table) are compound sentences and possibly confusing. Thus, one may wonder whether respondents had based their answers on one independent clause, while overlooking the other, or whether truly relied on both clauses of the compound sentence. For these responses were unanticipated.

**LIMITATIONS / DRAWBACKS**

In the midst of warm accolades, some uncomfortable hiccups were noted. Too often we would use English words such as teacher instead of *pwofesè* and know instead of *konnen*. New York math glossary translates round up into *awondi*, whereas participants would use the term *majore* throughout the workshops. Indeed, *majore* seems a cognate to both major (English) and majeur (French). Moreover, we were unable to convince some participants to be consistent and to express “three thousand” as “$3.000” in Haitian, instead of “3,000” in English. Only 49 final evaluation sheets were collected, whereas 61 participants had signed in earlier. Last but not least, intermittent power failures contribute to 25% of our math activities not being done.
RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of this summer experience, we came up with the following recommendations to improve our current project and future endeavors. New York educators should interact more frequently with their counterparts in Haiti in order to exchange pedagogical insights and student profiles. New York educators should research on the math vocabulary that newly-enrolled Haitian students bring into the classrooms. Prospective presenters should be aware of the local context in order to develop and conduct culturally-responsive activities. This include the typical Haitian class size, ranging from 30 to 100. Lastly, be humble!

CONCLUSIONS

By all accounts, the launching of Project CREBA in the summer of 2017 in Haiti was a success beyond expectations. The initiative was conceived and financed by a small group of educators to bolster student achievement through teacher preparedness. Professional development cooperative learning, and whole-class discussion was decided to be a sensible opener. This summer initiative was the dawn of a 3-year renewable Project CREBA en route to becoming a hub for instructional resources in Haiti. To bring school leaders on board, an inaugurating conference was held on the first day, followed by teacher and resource specialist training on subsequent days. The participants ostensibly expressed gratitude and their support. However, in the midst of jubilations some drawbacks had emerged, and room for improvement was identified. Lessons learned from these shortcomings will inform future plans. As part of our goals, a seemingly convenient space was found to house Project CREBA. Now, to reach the next level, a non-profit organization, United Educators for Global Children, is being incorporated within the State of New York through which Project CREBA in Haiti can be further supported.
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