

*Unearthing how Jamaican secondary students have made sense of the traditional meanings of academic performance and academic success*

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# Unearthing how Jamaican secondary students have made sense of the traditional meanings of academic performance and academic success

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## ABSTRACT

The Caribbean Examinations Council data from 2011 to 2021 for the Caribbean Secondary Examination Certificate (CSEC) Council (2011–2021) shows many Jamaican secondary students failing to pass the Mathematics and English examinations. Discussions on the failings have focused on adults' views, excluding student's voices. This study sampled twelve 15–16-year-old rural Jamaican secondary students to hear their understanding and interpretation of academic performance and success and how these terms should be defined. A convenience sample and an interpretivist paradigm within a social constructionism framework were applied. Data was collected using photovoice, audio journaling, one-on-one interviews, and focus group discussion; a focus coding technique was used to find themes and present the findings. The data showed participants understood the definitions of the terms but interpreted them as stereotyping labels that adversely impacted many students' performance and post-secondary success. The findings underscore the importance of hearing students' voices to better understand academic outcomes.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Academic performance;  
success; benchmarks;  
stereotyping labels;  
secondary students

## Introduction

The high number of Jamaican secondary students consistently failing to pass their Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) examinations between 2011–2021 (Council, 2011–2021) has concerned stakeholders within the private and public sectors. An analysis of the CSEC examination, which assesses and certifies students' academic achievement after five years of secondary school, shows a consistent pattern of low attainment rates across English Language and Mathematics (Council, 2011–2021). The data shows that one in every three Jamaican students performs below par and fails to pass these subjects.

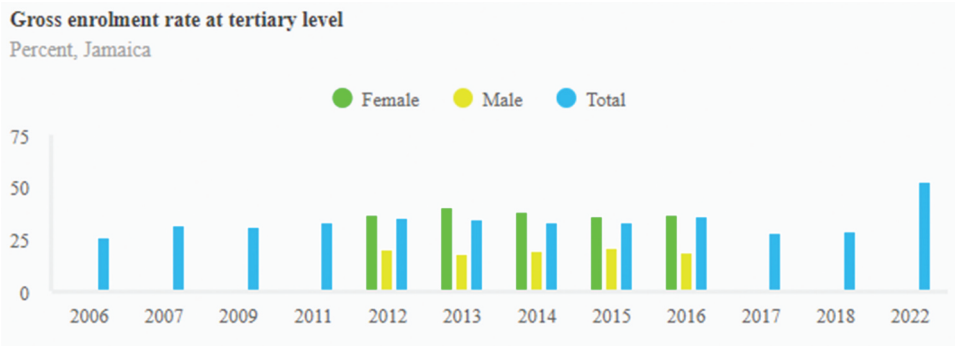
The global academic performance shows a similar trend for Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, noting that one in four or approximately 1.3 million secondary students across 64 countries finish school without proficiency in at least one core subject (OECD, 2016).

The phenomenon of high numbers of pupils not attaining a passing score in at least one of the core subjects results in a high number of students leaving school without the certification (Salmon, 2021) needed to gain entry into the traditional tertiary institutions that are not accepting of other post-secondary examinations including NCTVET and City & Guilds. This affects their aspirations (Al-

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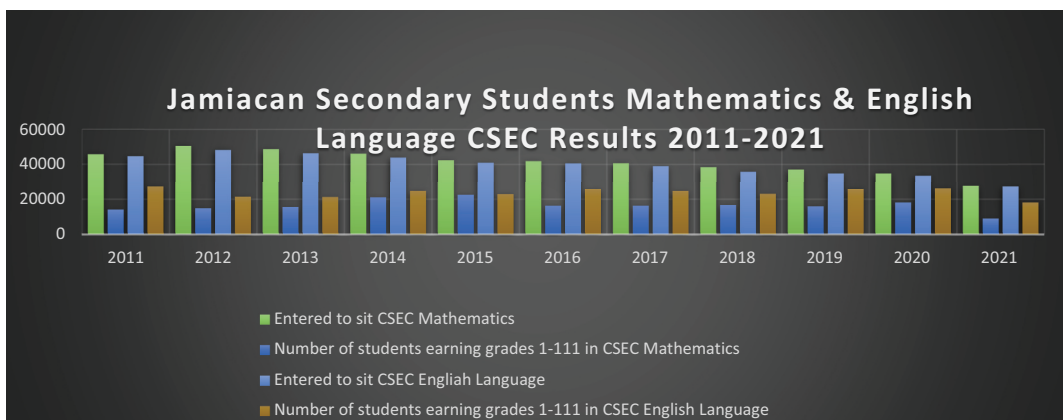
**Figure 1.** Data from the planning institute of Jamaica on the enrolment at tertiary level in Jamaica between 2006–2022.

Zoubi & Younes, 2015) of possibly attending traditional universities or obtaining the best jobs (McIntosh, 2013).

A low tertiary enrolment rate, which, according to (Williams, 2024), amounts to three out of every ten secondary students entering tertiary institutions, results in a workforce with low levels of higher-order skills necessary to facilitate better economic outputs for society (Morris, 2022). The result is a high level of lower-order persons in the labour market, which affects the country's ability to achieve a sustainable economy (PIOJ, 2010). According to the OECD (2021) report, academic failings adversely impact students' ability to attain their goals, limiting their labour market opportunities and chances of leading a productive life.

However, while the global data showed a positive shift with increasing levels of academic performance in secondary education (OECD, 2019), such improvements have not been recognizable in the Jamaican CSEC numeracy and literacy results of its secondary students, as evident in the CSEC data shown in Figure 1 below. This is despite the ongoing discussions and research in Jamaica to address the high numbers of secondary-level academic failings.

The situation is contrary to the ethos upon which the CSEC was introduced of transforming secondary education relevant to the needs of the Caribbean (Griffith, 2009), including Jamaica and their students' equipping many with post-secondary credentials negotiable in the world (Miller, 2013). The study posits that perhaps the gap between the discourse and the resolution to the phenomenon is the predominance of an adult-driven conversation at the expense of students' views in the discourse. This underpins the significance of this study, which aims to contribute to the



**Figure 2.** CSEC results for Jamaican secondary students 2011–2021.

research addressing this limitation by presenting students' perspectives on the subject. The use of this inclusive approach is supported by earlier authors, including Gentilucci (2004), who noted the benefits of students voice as a platform for obtaining a satisfactory theoretical explanation of the problems, particularly as they are seen as having an insider perspective. This study affirms the importance of student voice as an alternate source of opinion from the traditional adult-dominated discussion. It seeks to use this as a medium to present new insights into the phenomenon not yet discussed in the literature. In this regard, the research used a small sample of Jamaican secondary students to (a) explore their views of the socially accepted traditional meanings of academic performance as defined by the mastery of academic subjects demonstrated in standard written tests and scoring high grades, success as defined as post-secondary school entry into tertiary institution and gaining high-paying jobs, and (b) identify their thoughts on the phenomenon and solutions to addressing it.

## Research context

An analysis of the Caribbean Secondary Examination Council's (CSEC) results for Jamaican secondary students in mathematics and English language from 2011 to 2021 shows a trend.

The number of pupils who were entered to sit in both subjects and failed to attain the passing standards in either subject shows a persistent decline over the years, as shown in the [Figure 2](#). These individuals leave school without the requisite certification to matriculate into a tertiary institution or attain high-paying employment. The data shows a trend in the decline post-2014 in the number of students registered to sit the subjects, contributing to the decline in the overall pass rate of the secondary cohort, which affects the number of students able to attain success post-secondary school.

The presence of the phenomenon and the succeeding discussions at the local and international levels have seen the dominance of adult perspectives in identifying possible causes, with conclusions ranging from the lack of learning resources (Livumbaze & Achoka, 2017) to poor socioeconomic status (Browman et al., 2022), and students' inability to relate to definitions of academic performance and success (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Other authors, including Bolshakova et al. (2011), Cook-Sather et al. (2015), and Shafer (2016), have posited that such phenomena could be a result of the failure of the discourse to acknowledge and account for their perspectives. An absence they purport that only inhibits the opportunity to hear from them and identify possible alternate ideas that could help address the situation (Cook-Sather et al., 2015) while perpetuating adverse impact on future labour force and national economic advancement (Jamaica, 2010). This argument finds support in Gentilucci (2004) views, which also underpins this study, in which he noted that 'there can be little doubt that students own interpretation of school practice and processes represents a crucial link in the educational chain to resolve issues within the field' (p. 134).

## Literature review

### *Identifying solutions to the problem within the literature*

Importantly, while projecting reasons behind the failings, the literature has also sought to explore the solutions, from conceptual to policy changes, to resolve the issue of secondary-level failure. One solution advocated is reframing the traditional construct of performance and success, thereby broadening the existing narrow standards (Wijsman et al., 2016). In this regard, altering the traditional global ideas of academic performance as mastery of academic subjects in written standardized tests (Desa, 2017; Entwistle, 1972), scoring high grades (Lenka & Kant, 2012), and success as entry into tertiary institutions and gaining high-paying employment (Kuh et al., 2006) in degree-related fields (Cachia et al., 2018) would also be done. The Jamaican perspective of success reflects a similar historical perception of success as good academic performance that facilitates access to better

educational and job opportunities and social mobility (Jennings et al., 2013), the gateway for a select few (Cook & Jennings, 2016).

The result is that some students feel less confident in their competencies to achieve the measures, thus causing low academic output (Cachia et al., 2018; Kuh et al., 2006; Thomas, 2016) and being assigned stigma as academic failures, which they carry throughout their lives (Ercole, 2009). For Camera (2015), reframing these definitions, which implicitly assert a greater value of some areas of learning over others, for example, mathematics and science versus vocational or practical subjects, is an important step in addressing the issue of high student failure.

Another solution, according to the literature, focused on organizational elements within education and a demand for increased levels of accountability from educational institutions and their administrators to improve student performance (Henry, 2011). One example of institutional accountability is the need for educational institutions to address the ongoing levels of unaccountability in the classroom in the dominant use of the English language in learning and assessment at the expense of local dialects, which many students struggle to use, thus adversely impacting their performance (Dobson & Zuhdi, 2020).

Within the Jamaican context, solutions to addressing the issue have centred around implementing policies and programmes spearheaded by the Ministry of Education & Youth. Some of these government programmes have included the National Mathematics Policy Guidelines in 2013 (Ministry of Education, 2013), the Jamaica Secondary Schools Enhancement Program in 2001, and the Education Systems Transformation Programme in 2010.

Despite the efforts of stakeholders, policymakers, and researchers, the low educational output persists. Critics have commented on what they contend is a gap in the current traditional discourse and literature and the need to identify an alternate perspective that broadens the voices into the conversation on the secondary tier academic outputs to include the students (Cook-Sather et al., 2015; Strydom & Loots, 2020), to ascertain their 'insider views of the issue' (Gentilucci, 2004, p. 133).

In adopting the idea of these latter contributors to the discourse, this study sought to explore this gap by investigating students' perceptions to hear their understanding and interpretation of the traditional meanings of academic performance and success. The study sampled Jamaican secondary students to ask about their understanding of the traditional meanings from their lived experiences and how this knowledge had influenced their interpretation of the concepts. In this regard, the study's principal research question focused on how Jamaican secondary students understand and make sense of the traditional definitions of academic performance and success and their beliefs about how these concepts should be defined.

### ***Student voice as a lens in deepening the understanding of academic performance and success***

The study's use of students' voice to unearth a new perspective on the phenomenon is supported by proponents who posit that these are important stakeholders actively shaping issues within education and, therefore, should be heard (Ajjawi et al., 2020). For proponents, their inclusion in educational conversations provides first-hand insight shaped by shared lived experiences gained from their social spaces (Shah, 2019), allowing them to fill gaps within education discourses and identify alternate solutions regarding educational challenges (Al-Zoubi & Younes, 2015).

### **Research approach**

Accepting the view that students have perspectives that ought to be heard asserts that they have developed knowledge around particular concepts. One approach to understanding how individuals have created this knowledge can be identified in the Social Constructionism theory, which asserts that knowledge is a product of the social interactions between individuals in their social spaces around ideas and practices (Schwandt, 2000), thus determining how individuals experience the

world and develop knowledge (Burr, 2015). Thus, students also engage in social interactions, sharing their experiences, observations, and diverse views of reality to shape their knowledge and determine attitudes towards such knowledge.

Some of these social spaces students engage in these social interactions include schools (Ahmed et al., 2018) and their subspaces, such as the curriculum (Camera, 2015), teacher/student relationships (Öqvist & Malmström, 2018), and peer relationships and other spaces, including residential communities (Alam, 2015) and families (Naite, 2021). In these engagements, they explore and share their observations and experiences of socially accepted traditional definitions of academic performance as mastery of core subject content (Anderton et al., 2017), standardized written tests (Cassady & Johnson, 2002), high-grade scores (Narad & Abdullah, 2016), and success as the ability to achieve academic performance (Colarelli et al., 1991). Success is understood as students' ability to enter tertiary institutions (Kuh et al., 2006) and advance into occupations within related degree fields (Cachia et al., 2018). Acknowledging these processes provides a platform to explore how a sample of Jamaican secondary students may have shaped their understanding of the traditional educational concepts of academic performance and success and their own perception of the high numbers of academic failing and low success rates experienced by some of their peers.

## Methods

### *Social constructionism as a theoretical framing*

Social Constructionism provides a platform for understanding how social interactions of individuals, in this instance, secondary students, with others in social environments help shape understanding and interpretations of knowledge (Gergen, 1992; Lynch, 2016). Individuals occupying these social spaces engage in social interactions, sharing ideas, symbols representing their perspectives, and lived experiences, practices, and language (Schwandt, 2000), leading to individuals accurately understand, make sense of, and interpret the multiple experiences and information (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017) to facilitate the development of knowledge (Burr, 2015). Ultimately, clarifying their social realities and perspectives (Schulz, 2016) and their behaviour towards knowledge (Pulla & Carter, 2018). This study applies this theoretical framework to explain Jamaican secondary students' understanding and interpretation of the traditional academic performance and success concepts. In light of this, the study's research questions were:

- (1) How have Jamaican secondary students understood the traditional socially accepted definition terms of academic performance and success?
- (2) How have they made sense of the traditional academic performance and success definitions?
- (3) How do Jamaican secondary students believe the system should define academic performance and success?

A qualitative research design was used in the study. This approach allowed the study's secondary student participants to express their perspectives in their own words (Charmaz, 2017a), guiding the study's methodology.

The need to produce a student-centred study grounded in data that accurately represents the lived experiences of individuals guided the study methodology used. In this regard, Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory was used to provide strategies such as coding, memo-writing, and theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2017b) to interrogate the data to understand, interpret, and clarify participants' diverse realities and perspectives (Schulz, 2016). This study paradigm provided the platform for a research design capable of gathering individuals' lived experiences while ensuring rigour and adherence to ethical principles in areas including recruitment, sampling, and data collection. The data collection was facilitated through the use of four user-friendly research tools,



**Table 1.** Pseudonyms for participants and the research method selected.

Participants	Research Method Engaged
Maize	Audio Journal, One-on-one interview, Focus Group
Ingrid	Audio Journal, One-on-one interview, Focus Group
Kay	Audio Journal, One-on-one interview, Focus Group
Sally	Audio Journal, One-on-one interview, Focus Group
Sue	Audio Journal, One-on-one interview, Focus Group
John	Photovoice, One-on-one interview, Focus Group
Emma	Photovoice, One-on-one interview, Focus Group
Marc	Audio Journal, One-on-one interview, Focus Group
Diana	Audio Journal, One-on-one interview, Focus Group
Felicia	Audio Journal, One-on-one interview, Focus Group
Opal	Audio Journal, One-on-one interview, Focus Group
Paul	Audio Journal, One-on-one interview, Focus Group

which included (a) audio journaling, (b) photovoice, (c) one-on-one interviews, and (d) focus group discussion.

## Research design

### Setting

The study was conducted in a rural government-operated Jamaican secondary school in the North-Eastern section of the island. The institution was selected based on the high number of students entering the institution who received below-average scores in the standardized Primary school exit examination (Inspectorate, 2011, 2017). These circumstances continue throughout most of these students secondary academic lives, with only a small percentage matriculating to sit CSEC (Inspectorate, 2017).

### Population recruitment & sampling

A convenience sampling technique was employed in the study. The School's Dean of Discipline<sup>1</sup> extended a call for volunteers to participate in the study to the school's grade 10 cohort, from which 12 students (all 15 years of age) expressed an interest in participating. As the participants were all under the age of 16, the Dean of Discipline also contacted the parents/guardians of interested pupils with (a) an explanation of the study to seek consent for their child to participate and (b) gain permission to share their contact details with the researcher. All families consented to having their children, who also gave their consent, participate in the study.

Having received the signed consent forms from the 12 parents/guardians and students, each participant took part in a telephone training session, agreed on pseudonyms, selected their research methods (see next section), and was guided through the research questions to ensure they understood. To ensure the authenticity of students' voice in understanding and responses to the research questions, the researcher did not seek to impose preset definitions of terms. Instead, participants were each guided to providing their understanding of each research question and then allowed to provide their responses via audio journal or photovoice that they felt best communicated their thoughts.

Participants using audio journals were informed of the acceptance of the use of Jamaican Creole to provide their responses. See details of their choices per pseudonym in Table 1 below. Additional information was provided for photovoice users on obtaining consent before photographing individuals. In addition, no images of faces or recognizable marks for individuals were allowed. Finally, taking pictures was only permitted in school and home spaces.

## Research methods

Four research methods were used to collect the data on student views, which are explained below.

### **Audio journal**

One of the fastest-growing research methods in social sciences (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 2014; Hyers, 2018), audio journaling is a tool that provides participants with audio recorders that enable them the flexibility to control the data provided while capturing their chosen private and/or sensitive experiences that may have otherwise been difficult to obtain (Crozier & Cassell, 2016). In this study, participants chose to use their personal cellular phones to record, at a convenient time and place, responses to the research questions, using either Jamaican Creole or English over a period of two weeks. The recordings were provided to the researcher, who listened and transcribed verbatim from the audio of the individual responses. Responses in Jamaican Creole were translated into the nearest English to convey ease of understanding of the dialect. Each participant was engaged in a telephone interview with the researcher to (a) ascertain that the voices heard were that of the participant, (b) gain clarity on the responses, and (c) ascertain verbal verification that the responses were their perspectives.

### **Photovoice**

Photovoice is a visual research method where participants use a camera to take pictures of the area of focus that best captures their authentic views on the research topic (Budig et al., 2018). Participants who chose this method participated in a telephone session on the rules of photography, including not taking images of persons without their consent, nor images of minors or those showing features that could identify a person(s). In response to the research question, images were only to be taken within homes and at school. Over two weeks, participants used their phones to take pictures that they believed suitably responded to the research questions provided, which were electronically submitted to the researcher. Following submission, each pupil was asked to select the images they felt best answered the research question. After submitting their photographs and providing consent, each participant was engaged in a one-on-one interview. The interview, conducted over the telephone by the researcher, sought to ascertain the particular response each image communicated about the research question.

### **Focus group discussion**

A face-to-face focus group discussion was conducted with all participants involved. A storyboard created from participants' responses from the photovoice, audio journals, and one-on-one interviews was the centrepiece of the discussion. Participants could view and add to the storyboard, generating further discussions. Having provided their consent for the discussion to be manually recorded by the researcher (this was done to ensure that students would feel comfortable speaking in Jamaican Creole and giving their views), participants then provided their responses to the research questions as presented on the storyboard.

### **Ethical considerations**

The study adhered to the ethical protocols in the research, which uses children as the primary research participants (Abrar & Sidik, 2019) to ensure the integrity and validity of the results (Leung, 2015), as well as to protect them while ensuring that their rights (Kirby, 2020), as outlined in the UN Charter of the Rights of the Child are safeguarded (Dogan, 2012). The preceding ethical considerations included obtaining ethical approval from the University Ethics Committee. Additionally, informed consent was obtained from the secondary school Principal, the parents/guardians, and the participating students. The study also used socially accepted terms and concepts to frame its research questions and ascertain participants' perspectives.

All participants, including the Principal and parents/guardians, were notified of the student's right to withdraw from the study without notification or adverse repercussions. Pseudonyms, to ensure confidentiality, were used to identify the participants and the school. All participants received training in compliance with ethical processes. Additionally, workshops were held with participants to guide them on the ethics of taking photographs and recording individuals without revealing their identities through images or audio. Guidance was also provided on how participants could select from the audio journals and photovoice images the responses that best represent their voice in the study's findings. The participants' responses were stored securely and shredded after the researcher had completed the study.

## Data analysis

Since the data collection was carried out using multiple methods, there was a need for a data analysis approach that would enable analysis to represent the voice of the student participants authentically (Grbich, 2012; Taylor & Gibbs, 2010). Charmaz's coding framework (Charmaz, 2006) was applied to reduce the large database, from the research questions, into a manageable story frame (Kawulich, 2004), with memo writing used to actively analyse the data to produce the codes (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019). Data analysis was applied using a line-by-line reading of each participant's response, some of which were provided in Jamaican Creole and translated to standard English from the audio journals, one-on-one interviews, and focus group discussions. The responses were then reported in Jamaican Creole and stated verbatim.

This produced a series of synthesized, manageable data chunks broken into categories and concepts to create initial codes that captured the original ideas of participants' gerund or action-oriented '-ing' words to ensure that the codes closely represented participants' original ideas (Charmaz, 2006). These were then synthesized and explored through an iteration and re-iteration exercise to categorize the data further to discern patterns and themes and create focus codes (Gale et al., 2013). The students' responses to the research questions were grouped around themes. The process allowed for an understanding of their views on the research questions. The following represents a sample of the application of qualitative coding to this study's data and the presentation of themes identified in the data for academic performance and success.

## Results

The results are shown in two parts: first, how participants state they understand the meanings of academic performance and academic success, and the second section looks at how they have made sense of these understandings and their ideas around remedying the situation.

### *Exploring students understanding of academic performance and success*

The participants' responses focused on three key themes: high grades, written tests, and rewards. The data set shows that all participants understanding of academic performance and success aligned with the traditional meanings. Based on their own experiences, observations, and interactions with other individuals in different spaces, these participants have come to understand academic performance as high grades on written tests.

For example, Emma's understanding of academic performance references the attainment of *'the school's average of over 70% on, as Maize referenced, 'end of term examinations that you will write and you will have to score the grade to be a performer.'* In this idea, students assert their understanding and affirm aspects of the traditional definition's benchmark. Additionally, their understanding points to an interpretation of the benchmarks as specific measures that students have to attain to be considered performers and successful. So important is the idea of

measurement that they believe it determines beyond being classified as an academic performer to also being a determinant of reward. As May noted, one gets to be *'placed on the honor roll.'*

For his part, John's understanding also aligns with the benchmarks underpinning the traditional meaning. His understanding focuses on academic performance as written exams. However, he extends his perception to encompass the impact of these tests on students' abilities and subtly concludes that the benchmark's impact produces differing academic performance outcomes.

written exams are on paper are ups and downs for some students; this is represented by the low and high sections of the dirt and stone. Some students are better at physical/practical tests as they may have reading disabilities or other challenges, which is represented by the lower part of the dirt, while the higher part of the dirt and stone heap would be the students who are perfect in reading and therefore may find it easier to do the written examinations. (John's photo voice and one-on-one interview explaining the photo)

In summary, the data shows that these students understand the meaning of academic performance from their lived experiences, which aligns with the socially accepted definition. This is evidenced in their use of similar benchmarks to measure academic performance.

Similarly, participants also stated an understanding of success as the consistent achievement of high academic performance standards, particularly in specific subjects, which leads to entry into university and good job ideas parallel to traditional interpretation. Their understanding is reflected, for example, in Ingrid's audio journal where she asserted that *'a successful student is described by their academic performance'*; Sally, in support of this point, extended the idea, noting that such a student *'is consistent in demonstrating their ability to perform, achieve, and excel.'* In her audio journal, Sue consolidated and broadened the previous understanding and noted that

success was about the ability to always do well but in certain subjects like science and mathematics that gets high recognition and good careers, and not practical subjects that get no recognition and no careers.

Kay supported this argument and showed how success, in her view, is understood as the ability to achieve specific traditional academic performance benchmarks to gain entry into university. She noted that *'studying practical subjects is not worthwhile as these subjects will not get students into university; you will need to have mathematics and science subjects to get into university.'*

The data showed that four participants identified good behaviour as a facet of success, an element not inherent in the traditional definition. The perspective was reflected in participants' responses, such as Ingrid's, where she pointed out that *'good behaviour and the ability to be responsible are also important in being called a successful student; academically, doing well lies in the ability to exhibit good behaviour.'* For Sue, however, good behaviour was not a precursor to success; she noted that *'bad behaving students can be successful; most jobs do not look at behaviour; once you can do your job, the employers are okay.'*

The data showed that participants had formulated knowledge of academic performance and success and that their understanding was similar to socially accepted definitions. Having established that participants understood the traditional meanings around academic performance and success, the next phase was identifying how they had made sense of their understanding.

### ***Exploring how secondary students have made sense of their understanding of traditional definitions***

In their responses, participants interpreted their understanding of the traditional definitions as categorizing students' abilities. These participants construed the terms as stereotyping labels that categorize their academic performance and success. This view was opined by Ingrid, in her audio voice, where she noted that

on the one hand, students who lack behaviour, bad work ethics, study practical subjects are not the students who will get into university or get top-paying jobs. They are not doing mathematics, science the top subjects.



**Figure 3.** Pile of sand depicting students fluctuating emotions towards written tests.

This set of students are not expected to become successful. They are painted as not being 'bright,' always failing important subjects and getting low grades; they are badly performing students. [Focus Group Discussion]

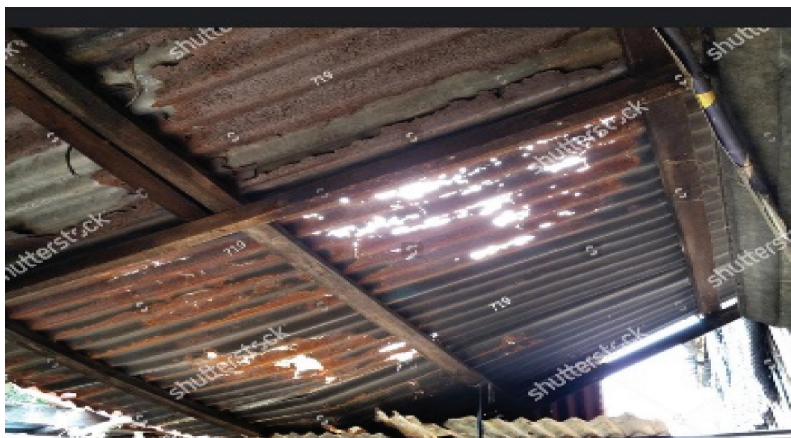
In his photovoice, John explained his interpretation of the definitions using [Figure 3](#) as suggesting that academic performance and success are not about that category of students *'those non-academic students who, like a leaky roof, cannot retain knowledge and end up doing poorly in examinations, receiving low scores and being classified as underperforming and unsuccessful.'* The set of students, as Opal stated, are *'mostly found in the lower tier of the grade level.'*

The participants' interpretation of the definitions underpinning academic performance and success as stereotyping labels extended into the focus group discussion. This concept is consistent with the literature linked to the stereotypical grouping of students informally known as 'bright' (those who consistently achieved academic performance and were expected to succeed academically). In contrast, those who failed to achieve this were labelled as 'the not bright' pupils who consistently failed to achieve high academic performance standards and, therefore, had little to no expectation of becoming academically successful. Participants expressed sentiments regarding the 'labels' in the focus group discussion.

You know weh mi come fi understand and interpret di words dem weh teacha use bout academic performance and success? To how mi see dem, dem is like a tag round pickney neck weh teacha put deh and everybody fallow; di tag can stay wid you fi life if you nuh have help or strong enough fi get rid a it and a nuh everybody strong or have support suh it just like stay like a leash around dem neck fi life, dat wicked star. (Taken from participants' conversations in the Focus Group discussion)

[Translated by the researcher: do you know what I have come to understand and interpret the words teachers use: academic performance and success? Based on how I see it, these words are like a tag around the necks of children/students that teachers have put there, and everyone else follows and considers students in this way. The tags/words follow you for life; if you have help or you are strong enough, you can remove the tag placed there by teachers. However, not everyone has supported or is strong enough, so the tags stay with these persons throughout their lives, which is unfortunate.]

For participants, these common understandings of the concepts as stereotyping labels have impacted students positively and negatively depending on the assigned label. Sally expounded on this idea in her audio journal, where she argued that



**Figure 4.** Representation of the definition of a poor academically performing student.

children can feel some stereotype caused by the label . . . . Those labeled as underperformers and unsuccessful will feel unworthy, not favoured, and demotivated. Those labeled as performers will feel motivated and perform well and even better. Students absorb the labels and internalize them, making them real.

Felicia, in her audio journal, in her contribution stated that

pupils with negative labels of underperformers lack self-esteem and feel embarrassed and stressed; they feel like their level is not as important as those at the top. They are not catered to like teachers do not show up to their class; they are not motivated.

Interestingly, participants referred to what they considered to be coping mechanisms that students negatively labelled as used. Emma, in her photovoice, as depicted in [Figure 4](#), uses an image to reflect these strategies, which she annotated that

some students see the words as a stereotyping label and decide to be laid-back; they tell themselves that they cannot get high scores and do not like math or many other subjects they find hard to pass, and they don't care how teachers see them. They see the labels as saying they are dunce and behave negatively; some hide themselves and their abilities. Because of these labels, these students continued to do badly in school; some were hurt and feel useless and not interested in trying to achieve high grades or anything. Another set sees the words and feel bad but try to push above the labels and make something of themselves. Sadly, many of these children were never successful and would lose hope and pull back; some would continue trying. (Emma's photo voice and one-on-one interview explaining the photo)

Additionally, the impact can be about missed opportunities that those students labelled as poor academic performers and unsuccessful may endure. As John, using photovoice, expressed in [Figure 5](#)

represents those in class labeled academic performers. Some students planned to become lawyers and teachers, and the mask has a zipper. Its opening means that students had a vast array of opportunities to become what they possibly wanted; however, labeled . . . this student loses an opportunity to achieve . . . the student's future is impacted negatively from the lost opportunities, so they may end up not achieving their goals.

Participants stated that the negative psychological impact of being classified as a low academic performer and potentially unsuccessful student causes low self-esteem in their peers, resulting in a cycle of poor academic success. However, some participants argued that these students should not allow labels to deter them from their goals. Instead, they should rely on the support and the hope inspired by persons in their environment to offset the negativity. The argument is very prominent in the response of Kay, who offered an alternate perspective in her audio journals, where she suggested that





**Figure 5.** A flowering shrub an interpretation of academic performance.

ignoring the negative labels shows that they can become successful. This can be because of your parents giving you positive vibes, building your self-esteem, even strangers.

Interestingly, four of the 12 respondents had contrasting interpretations of the traditional definitions from their peers. These students perceived the terms and their definitions not as stereotyping labels but as *'terms that are present to push students from their comfort zones to the next level as they learn the necessary skills needed to do well in society.'* (Focus Group discussion).

These participants used the benchmark of written test definition as their rationale, contending that learning how to communicate in the formal language was important for students as this was the workplace language. Diana, a proponent of the idea, explained this in her audio voice, *'the idea of written tests is fundamental and not stereotyping as when getting a job, an employer may ask you to do a written examination in the interview. Most job interviews have a writing test, so students must learn how to do these in school'*.

In summarizing, it is evident that a significant number of participants, based on their observation of the practice of the definitions in their social environments and engagements, had come to perceive the traditional definitions as forms of stereotyping labels that categorized students, which stood in contrast to the socially accepted interpretations. For participants, these stereotyping terms had resulted in emotional and other negative impacts, particularly for those of their peers adversely labelled as poor academic performers and unsuccessful. In the end, they were hopeful that some of these individuals would rise above the impact and provide solutions that could eliminate stereotyping of students and build greater levels of alignment to engender better academic performance outputs and success.

### Identifying alternate shaping for academic performance and success

The final section looks at three solutions positioned by the students' belief of how academic performance and success ought to be constructed: (a) retaining the traditional framing of the concepts, (b) revisiting the concepts to broaden their scope, and (c) reframing the concepts that are explored below.

### Retaining the traditional construct

For some students, the traditional definitions are acceptable in the current construct and shape how they perceive ideas of performance and success. In his audio journal, Paul noted, *'academically performing students are those who are scoring above average; they get the highest grade and are always maintaining a high grade.'* These participants extend their support of the socially accepted views of traditional meanings as voiced by Maize, who contended that *'no matter how well you do in areas like sports if you don't have academic average, you are not be considered as an academic performer.'* A similar traditional alignment could be found in how they believed success should be constructed, arguing, as Sally asserted, that

an academically successful student gets good grades, leaves school, and can get a good job because they have the subjects needed. A student who does not get the grades and don't have the right subjects like maths won't get a good job, so they are not successful as they will have to take low-paying jobs.

### Revisiting the traditional construct

However, a group of participants posited another idea regarding academic performance and success. Although supportive of the traditional meanings, they argued that the traditional meanings should also emphasize and acknowledge that students' academic efforts (although not achieving the benchmarks) should be considered. The view, shared by others, is noted by Kay, in her audio journal, who argued that *'academic performance is not only for those in school who are getting the A's, anyone who is trying in school is an academic performer.'* These respondents were strident in their belief that academic performance ought to engage ideas of 'trying' and 'putting their best effort' and greater levels of appreciation for students involvement in extra-curricular activities. The views are reflected in the opinion of Emma, in her photo voice, [Figures 6 and 7](#) in which she suggested that

are those who are willing to do their best; their performance may not put them at the top, but their effort should be recognized and appreciated as good academic performance based on their abilities. If only we could just see students for their abilities instead of only seeing and celebrating those who are always getting As and belittling others who are trying, as Emma tried to convey in [Figure 7](#).

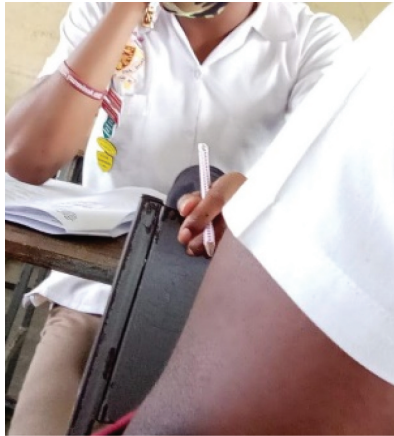
### Reframing the traditional construct

The final idea emphasized a total reconstruction of the concepts to separate the word academic from performance and success, broadening the meaning beyond scholastic achievement. The idea is captured in Maize's audio journal, in which she said, *'performer is a better word as a performer could be anybody; the academic performer is only about school subjects.'* For her part, Kay, in her audio journal, suggested that *'removing the word "academic" from performance and success makes the words much broader and could be thought of as including extra-curricular, sports, practical and other subjects.'* Most



**Figure 6.** A zipper about to be closed represents an interpretation of the impact of the concepts interpreted as stereotyping labels on students opportunities.





**Figure 7.** Students in classroom.

participants in the focus group discussion had an alternate framing for success from the traditional construct; from them, academic success should focus *'not on grades and high paying jobs, but a recognition of students' effort and their ability and the outcome of these efforts being celebrated as academic success regardless of what it is. An academically successful student can use knowledge from the classroom to solve everyday problems; it is not really about going to university or getting high-paying jobs but getting their own goals by being self-motivated and responsible.'*

The data shows three different approaches to how the traditional meanings could be reframed to engender greater levels of alignment to ideas around performance and success that could incorporate the performance abilities of all students.

## Discussion

This study explored how a sample of Jamaican secondary students understood and interpreted the traditional meanings of academic performance and success and their views on how these concepts should be shaped. Identifying the sample participants' perceptions was important to determine how they understood the traditional meanings and their views on the phenomenon. The data shows that participants, influenced by the practice, observations, and experiences with these traditional terms in different spaces (including schools and renewed emphasis on alternate pathways to academic performance and success, including technical and vocational training as promoted by the Ministry of Education, communities, and families), had understood, made sense of, and shaped the traditional meanings of academic performance and success.

The data affirmed the theoretical and conceptual framing of the study through Social Constructionism theory and the role of environments in shaping knowledge, providing insight into environments that have shaped students understanding to reflect similar key ideas to the general socially accepted definitions of the terms. This is evident in similarities between what students perceive as underpinning academic performance and success and what appears in the literature of high-grade scores (Narad & Abdullah, 2016), written tests (Cassady & Johnson, 2002), subject mastery (Anderton et al., 2017), and success in gaining entry into a tertiary institution and attaining a high-paying job (Cachia et al., 2018). The findings show that students understand traditional meanings and how society expects them to grasp them.

Another finding from the data shows how students have made sense of this understanding of the meanings, interpreting them as stereotyping labels, which they believe could explain the high numbers of their peers failing to attain the standards associated with these meanings. Their

explanation contrasts the socially accepted interpretations of the terms and demonstrates their critical analysis and perspectives of the traditional meanings based on their lived experiences. From their experiences, participants have perceived the meanings, and subsequently, the terms academic performance and success as labels that separate students into two boxes. One 'box' labels those attaining the standards as academically performing who are expected to become successful, the 'bright group.' The classifications promote self-confidence and motivation to excel in these pupils. The other 'box' labels its pupils, who are not attaining the academic standards, as poor academic performers with low expectations of success, considered 'not bright,' a classification that serves to adversely stereotype students' identities, demotivate and devalue their abilities and aspirations, thereby excluding them from possibilities of improvement.

Interestingly, some participants were not averse to the 'label' and believed they were a motivating tool for their peers who were not necessarily high performers, allowing them to stretch to their potential. On the other hand, other participants argued that the 'labels' had contributed to high academic failings and low success rates. For these latter participants, this situation could only be rectified by removing the word 'academic' from performance and success, thereby broadening their perceptions beyond specific subject mastery, high-grade scores from standardized tests, high-paying jobs, and tertiary attendance inside and outside school.

These interpretations presented by these students are significant in two aspects. First, their perspectives contribute to knowledge by providing novel alternate perspectives that contrast socially accepted ideas within education. The inherent implications suggest that students are indeed astute thinkers aware of their environment and willing to contribute to its development, influencing a collaborative environment within schools to create opportunities for their own successful performance and advancement. Additionally, the findings show that those who are the beneficiaries of education, based on their own experiences and observations, perceive the function of education as sorting and separating students based on intellect, undervaluing some while empowering others, creating an inequitable framing of education. Second, their views corroborated the ideas within the social constructionism theory, demonstrating the role of social space and the engagements within influential viewpoints.

The study contributed to knowledge by validating photovoice and audio journaling as user-friendly and engaging research tools for children-centred research aimed at projecting their voice and offering children-oriented solutions for research. This finding is consistent with previous research referencing the appropriateness of these methods for these age-level participants and as a medium of accessing voices that are not as comfortable with methods that require writing. The methods enabled participants to voice their views using a language they were comfortable communicating [for students who chose audio journaling] and determine what images, without interference from others, they felt best represented their voice [for students who chose photovoice].

## Conclusion

This study explored the views of a small sample of Jamaican secondary students' perceptions of the traditional meanings of academic performance and success. The paper has identified that participants have understood the traditional meanings in the manner expected by society. Although understanding the meanings as socially expected, the findings showed that these students have gone on to make sense of their understandings in a manner that contrasts the socially accepted perspective. The study found that participants perceived the terms as stereotyping labels that categorize them into value-centric groups based on their competencies. The result of this exploration suggests that some students have, as a result of the interpretations ascribed to the terms, have not been able to align with these traditional terms, adversely impacting their ability to achieve the benchmarks, thus affecting their performance in school and success postsecondary school. Overall, the study has contributed to knowledge through the alternate interpretation of the traditional perception of the meaning of academic performance

and success as stereotyping labels, moving away from the socially accepted explanations from the perspective of the sampled secondary student cohort. Additionally, analysing students' views has expanded the ideas with the existing literature on Social Constructionism and the role of social spaces in shaping knowledge. Finally, the study enriched our understanding of the value of photovoice and audio journaling as practical research methods and an enabling tool to project the disenfranchised voices of students, providing an opportunity to unearth perspectives not seen in the literature.

Although appropriate research designs and methods were used, the study had limitations. The use of a convenience sampling technique created an opportunity for biased results. In addition, the study's findings should be treated cautiously due to the sample size, which can be somewhat mitigated because of the variety and richness of the raw data. The aim was to ensure that participants could choose a research medium they felt most comfortable using to project their voices as they responded to the research questions.

These findings provided insight for possible future research into the views of urban Jamaican secondary students since this study used a rural cohort and acknowledges that pupils are not a homogeneous group and are impacted in different ways by their environments. It would be interesting to find out how urban students perceive these traditional terms and compare the responses. Additionally, a future study could assess the views of students deemed academic performers and successful, particularly as this sample had a heterogeneous cohort that has and continues to experience poor academic performance and success.

The study suggests several courses of action for the future, such as involving and listening to students on education matters, as they are not mere receivers. Instead, they are critical stakeholders who can assist in shaping important ideas in education, thus enabling them to take ownership of these ideas.

## Note

1. A Dean of Discipline within the context of Jamaican Schools, among other things, provide intervention for students' disciplinary issues; develop appropriate programs to promote positive behaviour; monitor, develop and implement student behavioural contracts; keep a log of students' attendance and truancy issues; communicate disciplinary concerns to parents and staff; and to ensure the overall safety of the school premises (moey.gov.jm/high-school)

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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