

Promoting Equity, Inclusion and Building Resiliency in the Caribbean Education System

Sub-Theme-Promoting Equity and Inclusion

Abstract

This paper contains a review of three published articles by the author on various coping mechanisms implemented by Trinidadian (37), Grenadian (44), and Guyanese (12) educators during the pandemic. The two studies reflect the issues of absenteeism, digital divide, accessibility, parental involvement, student motivation and ways in which teachers in rural Guyana were alleviating learning loss. The sampling method used was purposive. The two studies are qualitative in nature with descriptive phenomenology capturing the participants' lived experiences. Semantic and latent coding determined the major themes of the studies. The findings in these studies expand the extant literature on emergency remote education.

Introduction

Researchers have indicated that the effects of the pandemic will be felt for a long time to come. This review of two articles explores the effects at the start of the pandemic based on Trinidadian, Grenadian and Guyanese teachers' views of student attendance, digital divide, student motivation, and the COVID Slide. These studies point to issues in equity and inclusion in the form of the digital divide especially among students and teachers in rural versus urban areas.

The first article is a chapter in a book 'Trinidadian and Grenadian Teachers' Perceptions of Students' Attendance, Motivation, and Engagement during Emergency Remote Teaching.' The researcher attempts to respond to the three questions below.

1. What is students' attendance in Grenada and Trinidad during the early stages of the pandemic?
2. What are teachers' views on students' access to Internet broadband and devices in Trinidad and Grenada?
3. What are teachers' views of students' motivation and engagement?

The second peer-reviewed journal article 'The effects of COVID-19 on Rural School Communities in Guyana- New Directions or old methods retooled' posed the question: "According to Guyanese teachers, what are the mechanisms they are successfully implementing to ensure that students are not experiencing learning loss?" These articles add to the limited extant empirical data on issues of equity that exists within the Caribbean context. They also give voice to those individuals who were affected by the pandemic especially the teachers and students. It allows the teachers to give their opinions of the challenges their students faced daily during the pandemic.

Literature Review

The literature review focuses on the topics surrounding the questions asked of the interviewees. These questions include students' attendance during the pandemic, digital divide, accessibility, parental involvement and student motivation/engagement.

Emergency Remote Teaching and Pandemic Learning Modes

Hodges et al. (2020) coined emergency remote teaching (ERT) as "a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances" (para 10). The researchers used this term to encompass both synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning. Emergency Remote Teaching replaced face-to-face teaching during the pandemic. Nagpal (2020) termed learning during COVID-19 as pandemic learning modes. Pandemic modes consist of all aspects of remote/online learning. This was termed pandemic pedagogy (Hodges et al., 2020; Milman, 2020) and emergency remote learning (Rahiem, 2020).

Students' Attendance and Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT)

It is well-known that the higher the students' attendance the greater their achievement. In fact, Liberman (2020) reported that student absenteeism doubled during the pandemic. In April 2020, according to Liberman, there was 5% absenteeism. However, as of October 2020, this has doubled to 10% absenteeism as reported by Liberman in a survey of educators in the US. Chambers et al. (2020) also found that educators and policy-makers are concerned about students' attendance and, by extension, students' achievement during the pandemic. They stated that attendance predicts students' success. However, during the pandemic huge disparities appeared in the US where Blacks, Latinos, and Native American students were disproportionately

disadvantaged because they could not attend classes due to a lack of access to high speed Internet and devices (Attendance Works, 2020).

Similarly, Sawchuck (2021) indicated that districts in the USA do not have accurate data on the level of student absenteeism during the pandemic. Furthermore, he contended that there is ample research linking absenteeism during the pandemic to “lower academic results, reduced emotional engagement, and a higher likelihood of dropping out of high school” (p.1). After schools were reopened for face-to-face classes, there were still reports of student absenteeism. According to Barnum (2021), for the state of Illinois, there is a decrease in the percentage of attendance for the same period in 2018/2019. For December 2021, the state of Illinois experienced a decrease of 1.4%.

Digital Divide

The digital divide has expanded, as more persons have no access to Internet broadband and devices (Thompson, 2020) during the pandemic. This preoccupation with the inequality and inequity in access and use of technology is exacerbated since the pandemic left billions without access to education via no Internet connectivity (Thompson). Hilbert (2016) indicated that the digital inequality is increasing instead of decreasing. According to Thompson:

The digital divide is perpetuating inequalities that already divide countries and communities, the report notes. Children and young people from the poorest households, rural and lower income states are falling even further behind their peers and are left with very little opportunity to ever catch up. (para.10)

Moreover, the pandemic has widened the gap between the haves and have-nots and marginalized the Black Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) in the USA (Early, 2021). This is in consonance with an earlier study in the United States of America where Stelitano et al. (2020) found that students in more affluent areas had more and better access to technology than students in rural areas where poverty is greater.

Closer to home, in Guyana, there has always been an issue of digital divide between the haves and have-nots and between the rural and urban population. According to the report conducted by the IADB, the hinterland areas in Guyana “are characterized by few economic opportunities, poor environmental and health conditions, a lack of adequate infrastructure, and access to mostly rudimentary, low-quality social services” (p.4). Solomon and Clancy (2021) gave anecdotal and empirical evidence of education in Aishalton, an indigenous community in Guyana. They followed one parent as she collected worksheets and information from the teacher. In their example, it was stated that the teacher taught this parent the school work so that she could teach her child.

Accessibility

Issues in absenteeism and digital divide are marked by obvious accessibility to Internet connectivity and devices. In a poll conducted, Mangrum (2020) concluded that more than half of teachers were concerned with students’ access to ERT. Barna (2020) echoed that students who do not have access to Internet, devices, and broadband communication are being left behind in ERT. In a poll conducted by the Trinidadian Ministry of Education, it was reported that “34.1 per cent of primary school teachers and 35.3 per cent of secondary school teachers agreed that their students did not have reliable internet” (McKenzie, 2021, p.1). Furthermore, Bissessar (2021) found that teachers in rural Trinidad and Guyana did not have access to devices. Therefore, the issue of accessibility is both a student and teacher concern.

Parental Involvement during ERT

In their discussion of parental involvement during the pandemic, Bhamani et al. (2020) concluded that Pakistani parents have stepped up to the plate and filled the gaps in teaching and learning for their children. They indicated that when parents helped their children with their school work such collaborations formed bonds. Conversely, Garbe et al. (2020) concluded that parents in the USA struggled with issues such as added responsibilities, their children’s motivation and accessibility to resources. Similarly, O’Connor et al. (2021) found that Irish parents struggled with the added responsibilities. O’Connor et al. stated that mainly mothers completed the survey asking about their involvement in their children’s education during the pandemic. Eighty-four percent of the Irish participants indicated that they had issues with supporting their children with their school work during the pandemic. Their findings included:

Managing attention (74%) and behaviour (56%), managing their child's needs with those of siblings (48%), sticking to a timetable/routine (41%) and completing the work (35%). In fewer instances, difficulties were attributed to their child not understanding the subject content (23%), managing their child's health needs (15%), lack of appropriate interactive resources (15%) no, or poor, internet access (8%) and parents not understanding the subject content (7%). (p.1).

In these three studies, the parents felt overwhelmed and struggled to deal with several learners in the same house and learner motivation. The Pakistani parents struggled with their children vis a vis maintaining schedules. In Trinidad, Mc Kenzie (2021) noted that most "parents felt comfortable supporting their children academically during virtual classes, there were challenges in managing their own work and their children's' schoolwork and keeping a steady schedule for their child" (p. 1).

Students' Motivation/Engagement during ERT

Before the pandemic, Bissessar, Black and Boolaky (2019) conducted a study of online graduate students' self-determination to succeed despite the odds. They concluded that the more motivated, autonomous and competent the student the more successful the student would be in completing his/her study. Gillis (2020) suggested that the lack of access to Internet and devices could lead to demotivated students and have an effect on their attendance. A poll conducted by the Trinidadian Ministry of Education found that "51.9 percent of primary school students and 52.1% of secondary school students – reported difficulty staying focused during remote learning" (Mc Kenzie, 2021, p. 1). Mc Kenzie further stated that most students felt unusually stressed. In a study conducted in India on students' motivation, Mak (2021) concluded that children in India were 10 percent less motivated to learn at home and girls were more motivated than boys to learn at home. Mak also proffered recommendations to parents to motivate their children during the pandemic and found that extrinsic motivators such as TV time, words of encouragement, game/play time helped parents to motivate their children to participate more in ERT.

Methodology

The two studies are qualitative intrinsic case study using the interpretivist paradigm compared the views of 37 Trinidadian, 44 Grenadian, and 12 Guyanese teachers. The first study asked the Trinidadian and Guyanese teachers about their views on their students' attendance, engagement and motivation during the start of the COVID 19 pandemic in April and May 2020. The second study asked the 12 Guyanese students about the mechanisms they successfully implemented to ensure that students are not experiencing learning loss.

The sampling methods were purposive since the questionnaire was posted online on two teachers' Facebook pages. The administrators of both Facebook pages gave permission for the questionnaire to be posted online seeking participants. The Guyanese teachers were chosen because they teach in the hinterlands in Guyana. The University of Guyana's personnel granted permission to conduct this study and respondents were assured anonymity and confidentiality. The participants were assured anonymity and confidentiality with results recorded collectively rather than individually. Participants completed the questionnaire via google forms. The researcher was the only person who had access to the google forms.

Trinidadian and Grenadian teachers responded to the following questions:

1. What percentage of your student population has attended the online classes?
2. Do you believe that you are engaging students in the online environment? If yes, give an example, if no why not?
3. Do you believe that your students are motivated to learn via the online learning environment? If yes, give an example, if no why not?

The two male and 10 female Guyanese teachers were asked, "What coping mechanisms did you successfully implement in your classroom to cope with disruption? Give an example of this mechanism."

Data Analysis

Creswell's (2012) six steps to data analysis were adhered to where the researcher became familiar with the data; generated initial codes; searched for themes; reviewed the themes; defined themes; and wrapped up. The researcher used the inductive approach to data analysis was used (Saldaña, 2016). Open coding determined the various themes that recurred. In vivo and descriptive coding were used to determine the themes. The researcher tried to be objective in analysing and coding the data. The researcher left the data for two weeks and re-coded the

data to ensure credibility and dependability of the final themes. She also conducted an intra-class coefficient (ICC) reliability test. According to Cicchetti (1994), the ICC reliability of .804 is a good level based on Shrout and Fleiss's (1979) convention of the third model of ICC (3.1) where the researcher was the only rater of interest to assess the data.

Findings

Attendance

All Trinidadian participants indicated that the attendance is poor. Table 1 shows Trinidadian students' attendance and percentages.

Table 1. *Percentage of Trinidadian students' attendance*

Number of Participants	Percentage of Students' Attendance
10	1-40
5	50
5	80-100
4	60
9	66-79

Ten participants indicated that their students' attendance was 1 to 40 percent. Five participants indicated that their attendance was 50% with five teachers having attendance between 80 and 100%. Four Participants had attendance at 60% and nine participants had attendance from 66 to 79%. Trinidadian Participant 16 stated, "Students are not turning up." Trinidadian Participant 36 indicated that the students' attendance is poor because they are waiting for face-to-face teaching. The Trinidadian participants also indicated that students are simply not logging on.

Two Grenadian Participants indicated that they just send work to their students and do not have classes. Table 2 shows Grenadian students' attendance and percentages.

Table 2. *Percentage of Grenadian students' attendance.*

Number of Participants	Percentage of Students' Attendance
9	0-40
14	41-70
17	71-100

Nine participants indicated that their attendance was between 0 to 40 %. Fourteen participants indicated that their attendance was from 41 to 70%. Seventeen participants indicated that their attendance were from 71 to 100%.

Shared Resources

Trinidadian Participant 31 pointed out the issue of shared resources in one family. She stated, "Most of them don't have their own computer to use and they have to depend on parents and older siblings' devices." Grenadian Participant 13 stated, "Most students don't have proper devices. They are using their parents' phones and additionally there maybe more than one child who has to receive work from that one." Therefore, the issue of shared devices is significant when considering students' attendance.

Digital Divide

Accessibility to Students

According to Trinidadian, Grenadian, and Guyanese participants, students' accessibility to devices and the internet seemed to be the most critical issue facing them when it came to teaching remotely. Teachers complained that students had issues in accessibility. In some instances where they had Internet access, they were refusing to access classes.

However, there were instances where there was no access. Trinidadian Participant 8 stated, “Most of my students do not have access to devices and internet.” It must be noted that Participant 8 indicated that she teaches in rural Trinidad, which could also reflect differences between the haves and have-nots in rural and urban households. Trinidadian Participant 12 also stated that the students “have no devices of their own.” This participant indicated that she teaches in South Trinidad, which could also link to lack of access to Internet and devices in rural areas.

Grenadian Participant 1 stated, “Yes but not 100 % due to accessibility of computer or other devices and internet.” Grenadian Participant 12 stated, “A lot of them do not have the necessary facilities and tools needed for such an approach to be effective.” Grenadian Participant 2 stated, “At times, I can sense the interest and students are very attentive, however, I think oftentimes students are distracted and some have connectivity issues, therefore, during class they may not be seen then reappear.” Trinidadian Participant 19 explained, “They are distracted easily when their friends come on and they start to chat. Sometimes family members interrupt them during the session.”

Similarly, Guyanese Participant 2 explained, “Nonattendance by learners was basically because of lack of gadgets and internet access. However, all of our learners were able to collect worksheets most of the time.” She continued, “Children who did not have access to the internet were at a tremendous disadvantage. Approximately 39% of the children were at a disadvantage.” Participant 1 shared:

Students from the Riverine communities X and Y (names withheld) are not in a group what’s app. School boats deliver the newspaper but not all students want to cover the cost of the newspaper. Staff described feelings of helplessness and hopelessness with regards to students that they have not been able to contact.

This emphasizes the fact that students in rural communities do not have access to basic information found in the newspaper because they are unable to afford the cost. Participant 11 opined:

I strongly believe that students were at a disadvantage solely because of not having a device as well as not having internet service. As explained before, most students attending my school are living in poverty. This is the main reason why they are not owners of a device. These students are also living in squatting areas or schemes, which do not have access to the internet service. Form the statistics at my school over 80% of students do not participate in online classes.

Parental Involvement during the Pandemic

Trinidadian Participant 14 mentioned the need for more parental involvement indicating, “Most parents don’t take the time to transfer information.” In this case, it was evident that this was not because of lack of access to technology but lack of parental involvement. On the other hand, Grenadian Participant 24 complained about too much parental involvement. She opined, “There is evidence that some of the assignments submitted by students were done by their parents.” Grenadian Participant 38 stated same, “I believe that the parents are the ones completing activities.” Grenadian Participant 9 explained, “The majority are not being engaged because they don’t have their own devices and parents take the assignments and pass on to the students who have to get them.”

Accessibility to Teachers

There is a dearth of information on teachers’ access to high speed Internet and devices, however, this is a real issue which this researcher has experienced first-hand and the participants in this study indicated that there were issues in access to devices. According to McKenzie (2021), in a poll conducted by the Trinidadian Ministry of Education, “81.5 per cent of secondary school teachers and 71.0 percent of primary school teachers” agreed that they had reliable internet connections (p. 2). Therefore, the issue in access was not only relevant to students but also teachers. Trinidadian Participant 3 (taught in rural Trinidad) explained that she did not think that she was able to engage the students fully because “I don’t do live teaching because I do not have a reliable computer and I don’t have a whiteboard.” This echoes what Steiltano et al. (2020) found, in their RAND study, that teachers in low-income areas will have issues in accessibility to the Internet and devices.

Students’ Motivation or Lack Thereof

Trinidadian Participant 22 explained that some students are “Eager to use the technology but some are not sure how to use it and some don’t have the needed resources. Some just not interested or motivated.” However, she also highlighted the lack of student motivation. Trinidadian Participant 33 stated, “They are lazy and do not work in the school environment and doing so online is the same.” Trinidadian Participant 29 noted,

“The ones that were the same at school are doing the same online. Those who were not showing any interest are still doing it online.”

Using First and Second Media Technology

The Guyanese teachers working in the hinterland reverted to simple methods of meeting their students' needs.

- They left drop boxes were left at the guard booth for drop off and pick up. (Participant 1)
- They used community bulletin boards to get the message to parents and students. (Participant 2)
- They had radio stations that broadcast sessions and the students listen to them. (Participant 4)
- Hard copy of worksheets was also distributed to students for those without a device and internet services. (Participant 11)

Participant 10 explained, “I print worksheets and take them to the parents.” In this way, he is going the extra mile to ensure that his students are not at a disadvantage. These responses underscore the importance of finding ways to reach the students and stymie learning loss.

Discussion

Both studies set out to show the effects of the pandemic on Trinidadian, Grenadian, and Guyanese teachers. The literature shows that the issues experienced are not specific to the Caribbean but are global issues faced in developed and developing countries. The gap between the haves and have-nots has widened and the marginalized students are most disadvantaged. The issue of students' attendance and access to devices should be examined further by the Ministry of Education so that this obvious deficit could be filled if there were a need to return to a state of quarantine. Teachers should also be equipped with the available devices and Internet connectivity to ensure that they meet their students' needs. There is a definite need for digital literacy classes for both teachers and students. However, in order to bridge the digital divide, there is need to furnish as many educators and students as possible with access to Internet connectivity and devices. This will improve teachers' practices and allow them to be more prepared in the event of another occurrence of the pandemic. The lessons learned from the Guyanese teachers in the hinterland areas could be implemented in urban areas to mitigate learning loss. Therefore, teachers' practices should encompass a blended approach to teaching. Post-pandemic, it is recommended that teachers merge their learning gains vis a vis technology to mitigate the learning loss experienced during the pandemic.

Despite the pandemic, Guyanese teachers in the hinterland found innovative and creative ways to get their students to perform. The participants' responses indicated that rural Guyanese teachers are doing the best they can with what they have, fitting the description of teachers as heroes (Solomon & Clancy, 2021). Therefore, it would be beneficial for the Guyana Ministry of Education to conduct a SWOT analysis of what occurred during the pandemic in the hinterland. The article on the Guyanese teachers could be used as a yardstick for future research into the challenges faced in the hinterland. It could also support the need for more robust infrastructure that caters to the needs of the growing rural Guyanese populace.

These studies are limited in that they cannot be generalized to larger populations. The respondents could have also been guilty of social desirability. The responses from the participants could have been seen through a halo effect by the researcher. There is the issue of insider/outsider bias since the researcher belongs to the two Facebook- Meta- groups. The researcher also knows the Guyanese participants. A mixed methodology study would have allowed for complementarity of data and would have yielded richer data. An ethnographic study within the hinterland regions of Guyana could also be considered for future research.

Conclusions

Emergency remote teaching and pandemic learning modes/pandemic pedagogy/ERL are the present face of education at all levels until the pandemic is controlled. With this continued emphasis on ERT, there is a need to find ways to meet the unreachable and to motivate the demotivated so that the digital canyon will not widen and start to contract with no child or teacher left behind. The first study set out to determine Trinidadian and Grenadian teachers' perceptions of their students' attendance, motivation and engagement. Conclusions were discussed, however, more questions were raised as to the types of student engagement, the level and types of parental involvement, as well as issues in teacher accessibility to Internet and a device. Not only issues in teacher access but also issues in access between rural and urban Trinidad.

The second study examined the mechanisms that were implemented to mitigate learning loss in rural school communities in Guyana. The findings indicate that teachers are resorting to first- and second-generation

media to reach as many students as possible. The lack of internet access, devices, access to printers and any form of social media have created a socialization rift. However, COVID-19 has forced rural communities to unite towards ensuring that education persists despite the odds. Therefore, in finding ways to fill the deficits and mitigate learning loss, these teachers were able to reframe the narrative from a deficit theorizing to one of gains.

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