

Global Responses to Rural Challenges: Exploring Rural Education in Trinidad and Tobago

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Abstract: Trinidad and Tobago has been unsuccessful in evading global trends of neglect that historically plague the country's rural education. This paper employs theoretical perspectives developed internationally to provide comprehensive insights into rural education challenges in Trinidad and Tobago. This critical review systematically highlights rural controversies by exploring conceptual underpinnings that place rural Trinidad and Tobago in a unique position within a continually evolving global space. The arguments put forward in this literature review analyze the challenges of the country's rural communities and promote rural schools as functional in address rural community challenges while noting the challenges that these very schools are confronted with daily. The paper offers initial steps to tackle the challenges of the schools as a basis to empower them to create an opportunity for meaningful discourse toward addressing not only Trinidad and Tobago's challenges, but also rural challenges globally.

Keywords: Rurality, Rural Education, Community Development. Trinidad and Tobago

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The twin-island nation of Trinidad and Tobago has been unsuccessful in evading global trends of neglect that historically plagued rural education. In his 1946 article entitled "Education in the British West Indies," Dr. Eric Williams, the country's first prime minister, expressed concerns toward the country's colonial practices that often resulted in rural neglect. Williams (1946) regarded the nature of education offered to the then predominantly rural country as tailored to meet the needs of the "intelligentsia" (p. 78), who showed little interest in rural education. Williams (1946, 1968) criticized rural education as being, "dominated by a literary and mathematical bias, while the chief needs of the people, education in agriculture, health, hygiene, sanitation, nutrition, and the general economic and social problems of the community, take subordinate place" (p. 79). He asserted education as a means of empowerment, and his ideology influenced many post-independent initiatives where education became a pioneer for rural development.

However, after 57 years of independence, rural schools and their communities continue to be fraught with challenges attributed to neglect and inequitable opportunities (Campbell, 1996; Rajack-Talley, 2016; United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2017). Trinidad and Tobago's urban communities continue to receive national economic attention while rural areas continue to be disregarded and disadvantaged. The country's rural communities continue to experience increased outmigration, poverty, lack of unemployment opportunities, and lack of facilities and services. Simultaneously, rural schools grapple with historical dilemmas such as conflicting school-community visions for education and challenges in recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers and school administrators.

An analysis of Trinidad and Tobago's rural situation—such as this article—is of integral importance as the country continues to experience issues such as rising crime, underdevelopment, widening of the poor-rich gap, and increased unemployment (Overseas Security Advisory Council [OSAC], 2019; UNICEF, 2017). Considering that in 2018, Trinidad and Tobago's rural population stood at 47% (World Bank Group, 2021a), it is prudent to associate Trinidad and Tobago's national challenges to rural challenges, thereby placing education as the cornerstone in addressing rural development issues that can, in turn, address national challenges.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to provide comprehensive insights into rural problems in Trinidad and Tobago. Although this paper focuses on Trinidad and Tobago's issues, I opt to rely heavily on international research. This global literary reliance is necessary as there is limited literature exploring rural education or community development in Trinidad and Tobago; issues highlighted in this paper are not unique to Trinidad and Tobago but are international in scope; and global practices and demands significantly impact Trinidad and Tobago's education. This format, therefore, provides a potential to place rural Trinidad and Tobago as a representative of casualties of global rural dilemmas and stimulate international discourse regarding intervention strategies. As such, this critical review highlights rural controversies in a systematic way by exploring conceptual underpinnings that place rural Trinidad and Tobago in a unique position within a continually evolving global space. Thus, by describing the country's rural

challenges, rural schools' roles, and rural education challenges, I link rural issues in Trinidad and Tobago to broader global contexts.

To provide a comprehensive analysis of rural education in Trinidad and Tobago, I begin this paper by defining rurality in a Trinidad and Tobago context, followed by highlighting key challenges rural communities endure. I then promote rural schools as functional mediums for addressing rural challenges while noting the key challenges that these schools also face. Finally, I propose initial steps that can be taken to tackle rural school and community challenges in an aim to provide more relevant education geared toward rural development.

Rurality in a Trinidad and Tobago Context

Definitions for *rural* are often ambiguous, inconsistent, and vary depending on the purpose and period in which each definition was developed (Stelmach, 2011). Based on international standards, the World Bank's collection of development indicators placed rural areas in Trinidad and Tobago in 2018 at 46.82% (World Bank Group, 2021a). The World Bank derived at this figure by characterizing rural as all that is not urban—the country's population minus urban population (World Bank Group, 2021b). In contradiction, Trinidad and Tobago Central Statistical Office (TTCSO, 2008/2009) places the country's rural composition at 37%. The Central Statistical Office derived at this figure by relying on the following specific characteristics for rural: population density below 200 persons per square kilometer, more than 40 agriculture holders or more than 48 hectares under agriculture cultivation, and remoteness to main urban hubs.

More than the ambiguity in determining geographical characteristics for rural environments are the mundane interpretations of rurality. The notion that rural communities are homogenous, agrarian, and secluded disregards rural communities' diverse structures and influences. Several critiques of such mundane descriptions and characterizations of rural emphasize the disadvantages of these actions that often rob rural communities of their essence and distinct characteristics (Corbett, 2016; Greenough & Nelson, 2015; Nespor, 2008; Suwa, 2007). Corbett (2016) objected to notions of viewing rural communities as disconnected, homogeneous, and close-knit. Anthony-Stevens (2018) also critiqued paltry descriptions of rurality as merely being non-urban areas. Rural areas in Trinidad and Tobago are not necessarily secluded, homogenous, nor are they all agrarian. Instead, rural communities are distinct embodiments of unique characteristics that differ from community to community.

Factors that exist both internal and external to rural areas impact rural communities daily. Technology, mobility, external interactions, and globalization have allowed urban and global cultures and practices to influence previously secluded rural communities significantly (Corbett, 2016). Scholars such as Shields (2017) and Lefebvre (1992) promoted a non-binary (rural/urban) depiction of places that includes internal and external influences. Viewing *rurality* as heterogeneous, fluid, and constantly evolving can lead to a heightened appreciation toward the need for an understanding of rurality that is far from homogeneous or disconnected from non-rural areas. Embracing a complex understanding of rurality, Corbett (2016) described rural spaces as peripheries—existing on the outskirts of urban hubs while interactions with urban places remain vibrant.

Relevant to the context of this paper, rurality is understood through the lens of Corbett (2016), Shields (2017), and Lefebvre (1992). Rural communities in Trinidad and Tobago are complicated cultural representations of people with different experiences, values, and aspirations. Homogeneous and heterogeneous characteristics, and influences from within and outside the communities, significantly impact rural residents' lifestyles and community ethos. Although located considerable distances from urban centers, many of the country's rural residents can relatively access urban centers; thus, "peripheral" may now be a more suitable term to describe the country's rural areas. In many cases, the country's rural communities' interactions with external influences are more direct than urban communities. Unlike urban communities, rural residents frequently interact with external hubs to attain necessary goods and services. Rural residents also communicate with foreign and local tourists daily as they accommodate, bargain, and entertain. Therefore, in this context, rurality is recognized as peripheral locations existing within distinct, fluid, evolving embodiments of diverse cultures, lifestyles, and interactions.

Rural Challenges

Rural communities are undisputedly major contributors to national economies. Not only are rural areas vital resources bearers (Adsit, 2011; Brown & Schafft, 2011), but their natural characteristics attract local and foreign investors to

establish industries that stimulate vital national revenue (Brown & Schafft, 2011). I posit that, in Trinidad and Tobago, rural communities' distinctive ethos significantly contributes to the country's holistic identity that serves as a major tourist attraction. Tourism brochures seldom advertise busy, industrious locations in the country's capital city. Instead, depictions of the country's rural natural characteristics, comprising of beautiful beaches and, flora and fauna serve as reflections of the country's ecological identity. Yet, despite the irrefutable contribution to national stability, rural communities in Trinidad and Tobago continue to face multiple challenges such as disregard for rural development due to the country's bureaucratic and urban-centric development focus, outmigration of their young and skilled local workforce, and high rates of poverty in comparison to urban areas.

Global and urban pre-eminence often generate a barrage of consequences for rural communities that further intensify rural perplexities. Governing bodies often place rural community development needs at metaphorical back burners as globalism, capitalism, and neoliberalism push the country to an urban-centric focus. Such bureaucratic emphases do not favor rural communities as they already experience economic challenges due to their location, small population size, and inadequate economic opportunities. McHenry-Sorber and Schafft (2014) critiqued globalization and industrialization trends that have resulted in rural communities experiencing exacerbated challenges. A March 2012 article in the *Trinidad and Tobago Guardian* reported ongoing rural citizens' protests. The article provided an account of community members' annoyance with what the author dubbed, "the historical neglect of rural areas" (para. 1). The author reinforced conclusions that the country's government emphasizes urban development, thereby leaving rural communities lacking resources. The article highlighted urban infrastructure expansion, such as roads, and continued investment in mercantile building construction in the form of shopping malls, multi-million-dollar apartment complexes, schools, and hospitals.

Outmigration of rural communities' young skilled and high academic-achieving residents is another challenge Trinidad and Tobago's rural communities face. McHenry-Sorber and Schafft (2014) attributed outmigration of the most able and skilled workforce of rural communities—or what Carr and Kefalas (2009) dubbed "brain-drain"—to the world's growing neoliberal focus. Julien (2013) composed an article entitled "Rural-Urban migration in Trinidad—my experience," where she shared her experiences as a rural resident. She placed blame on inadequate opportunities as the major driving factor that forced her to relocate to urban communities to pursue a career, leaving behind connections to family and place.

Poverty is another limiting factor that prevents rural communities from experiencing upward developmental mobility. Rajack-Talley (2016), De Lisle et al. (2012), UNICEF (2017), and Brown and Conrad (2007) expressed concern toward the higher level of underdevelopment, unemployment, and poverty that Trinidad and Tobago rural communities experience in comparison to their urban counterparts. The country's dominant elites, who seldom reside in rural areas, possess material wealth, abundant supplies of desirable qualities of resources, control assets such as properties, and benefit from urban development (Ramdhan, 2010). While the more affluent members of society prosper, UNICEF (2017) depicted that rural communities in Trinidad and Tobago as areas that experience high poverty rates, limited access to running water, and a greater likelihood of traditional household infrastructure such as pit latrines.

The aforementioned situations and characteristics place rural communities in a distinctive position requiring special education requirements that are often unparalleled to urban requirements and specifically geared toward addressing the barrage of challenges rural residents cope with on a daily basis. The growing body of international literature that highlights rural challenges (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Roberts & Downes, 2016; Stelmach, 2011) has done little to curb historical rural neglect. Although researchers such as Rajack-Talley (2016), De Lisle et al. (2012), UNICEF (2017), and Brown and Conrad (2007) highlighted pertinent issues related to rural education and development challenges, the researchers have been unsuccessful in changing the trajectories of continuous rural deprivation.

Rural Schools and their Contribution to Rural Development

A beacon of hope for rural communities lies in relevant education. Like Williams (1946), UNICEF (2017) promoted education as a primary channel for reducing poverty and inequity in Trinidad and Tobago and encouraged the nation to invest in education at all levels to achieve national development. Rural schools must provide education in a centralized rural development manner, thus ensuring the alleviation of challenges that plague communities. The multidimensional functions of rural schools take their roles beyond academic education as they also cater to their communities' social and economic well-being.

Schmitt-Wilson and colleagues (2018), Eppley (2015), and Greenough and Nelson (2015) wrote of diverse rural student compositions, experiences, culture, challenges, opportunities, educational expectations, and life goals. Such diversities are present in rural schools in Trinidad and Tobago. The country's rural communities are located both inland and along coastal regions. Their economic opportunities vary according to location, which heavily influences students' aspirations and general school practices and culture. Regardless of each rural community and school's uniqueness, the ability of rural schools to cater to holistic community development should remain the fundamental objective.

Although the functions of rural schools are vast and diverse in scope, below I highlight four significant functions pertinent to the stability of Trinidad and Tobago's rural communities.

Educate Children for Economic Success

Providing sound educational experiences for students is of paramount importance to rural education (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). Rural students in Trinidad and Tobago are more likely to come from poor parents with low academic education and both parents and students often reject higher education (UNICEF, 2017). Hence, preparing children with skills and knowledge to become economically productive relies on a sound knowledge of the available economic opportunities. Schollie and colleagues (2017), along with Hudečková and Husák (2015) asserted that sound knowledge of rural realities influences the quality of education rural schools contribute to and impacts the effectiveness of schools in stimulating economic growth and community survival. Therefore, it is pivotal that rural schools in Trinidad and Tobago work toward producing a skilled workforce that can serve as a channel in relieving many rural challenges that can be linked to poor academic performance and skill levels. In so doing, rural schools will be better prepared to ensure their communities can achieve economic growth and sustainability.

Serve as the Core to Social Interaction

Although crucial to rural community development, the roles of rural schools go beyond economic development. Rural schools in Trinidad and Tobago serve as major social hubs to the communities. Their availability assists in stimulating social linkages that foster unique community ethos. Scholars such as McHenry-Sorber and Schafft (2014) wrote of this critical purpose of rural schools when they noted that rural schools experience the advantage of stimulating strong social bonds that bring together diverse segments of their communities. As such, rural schools function as centers that strengthen civic engagement and identity of communities. Schollie and colleagues (2017) also concluded that schools promote social integration and civic togetherness as they serve as centers for entertainment and social gatherings, which often build community spirit. In tandem with Schollie and colleagues, and Karlberg-Granlund's (2019) recognition, in Trinidad and Tobago, rural schools are often the only public facility available to serve as community centers or host social events and other recreational activities. The Ministry of Education offers the country's school facilities for meetings, fundraising functions, political and religious conventions, seminars, workshops, social events, and sports meetings (Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Education [TTMoE], 2019). Furthermore, schools in Trinidad and Tobago also function as havens during environmental disasters. Adsit (2011) endorsed functions of rural schools as havens when the author identified rural schools as major institutions that bring communities together in times of celebration and tragedy.

Promote Civic Identity

Rural schools in Trinidad and Tobago also function as mediums for enhancing civic identity and community spirit. Schollie et al. (2017) and, Roberts and Downes (2016) described rural schools as critical contributors to rural culture, heritage, and lifestyle sustainability. Through various activities, Trinidad and Tobago's rural schools expose students and community members to knowledge about their heritage and resources. Schools are known for their celebrations that focus on history and culture. Through various school activities, students can gain an appreciation for their unique community culture. They learn to embrace their local resources and lifestyles, and in so doing, instill a sense of local solidarity that students carry with them to adulthood. Schollie et al. (2017) described one rural school's ability to promote community identity and history in its practices. In their report, the authors described how Alberta's rural students were allowed to document their community's history and generate plans for community development, thus, exposing students to a better understanding of their history and their position within their communities.

Create Employment

Rural schools are major community employers (Harmon & Schafft, 2009; Schollie et al., 2017). In Trinidad and Tobago, rural schools create local employment for teaching assistants, on-the-job trainees, support staff, bus and taxi drivers, caterers, and caretakers. These opportunities allow residents to remain within their communities while achieving economic stability. Although rural schools also offer employment for teachers and administrators, unfortunately, these professionals seldom reside in the communities but instead are recruited from urban areas. This scarcity of rural educators that reside in rural communities may be attributed to the high post-secondary requirement for such positions, which, according to Eppley (2009), many rural residents do not possess.

Rural School Challenges

In the preceding sections, I highlighted rural community challenges and promoted rural schools as primary media in addressing these challenges. However, rural challenges continue to exist and, in many cases, escalate (Eppley, 2009). These challenges may lead to a fallacious interpretation that rural schools are largely failing to perform their critical functions. Rural schools are not to blame for their inability to assist in the quest to curtail rural challenges. Instead, rural schools, although willing to work toward school and community success, are often restricted from performing their duties (Eppley, 2009; Schafft, 2016). Like rural communities, rural schools in Trinidad and Tobago grapple with difficulties that hinder their ability to function as mechanisms for rural development. Campbell (1996) described rural communities' experiences of historical and educational challenges. He explained that from the inception of formal public education, rural schools experienced inadequate facilities, un- and underqualified teachers, and low student attendance. Similar challenges still exist today. The following are some hurdles barring rural schools in Trinidad and Tobago from serving rural communities to their full potential.

Urban-Focused Curriculum

Most challenging is the conflict within rural schools as they grapple with the need to conform to mandated curricula, policies, and pedagogies that rarely consider rural development (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Schafft, 2016). Instead, these directives may focus on general national development visions that are controversially urban-centric. In a 225-page 2017-2022 report on a draft education policy from Trinidad and Tobago's Ministry of Education (TTMoE, 2021), the word *rural* appears three times. In examining the document, I have been unsuccessful in finding any focus on developing specific rural education and community needs. Scholars such as Corbett (2016) and Roberts and Downes (2016) argued against similar curricular development approaches. They maintained that a lack of rural focus in national educational initiatives and policies fuels growing rural challenges as these standards-based, urban-centric policies and proposed pedagogies usually do not consider the realities of rural communities.

I do not intend to imply, via arguments highlighted throughout this paper, that national and global priorities are not significant to rural schools and rural community development. I am cognizant that rural community members need to prepare for the inevitable impacts of national and global influences. However, I challenge the centralized urban, national, and global focus that bombards rural schools allowing little space for place-based emphasis. Schafft (2016) used the United States of America's No Child Left behind Elementary and Secondary Act (2001) as an example of such a policy. His argument that global markets' emphasis influences performance-based accountability that undermines local community needs and interests is concurrent with my philosophy. More critique toward urban-centered education came from Rao and Ye (2016). The scholars attributed an urban-centered education system to a rural education downfall in China. Reo and Ye criticized the government's replacement of a traditional education system that equally valued urban and rural needs with a new urban-centric system. This reform, Reo and Ye postulated, led to a destruction of traditional values and practices and not only counteracted rural development but exacerbated existing rural problems.

Conflicting Education Visions

Schafft and Biddle's (2013) research findings are synonymous with another rural education challenge faced in Trinidad and Tobago. The researchers' findings revealed that rural schools' visions and rural communities' visions sometimes contradict. The authors found that many schools' mission and vision statements in rural America reflected apparent influence and conformity to national and district visions rather than those of the schools' communities. This controversial situation often led rural community members to believe that their education system—and by extension their destinies—were decided by persons in urban communities that do not understand or care about their needs. McHenry-Sober & Schafft (2015) also wrote of the concerns of rural community members that realistic community

goals make school irrelevant as they believe that their schools were not preparing students for realistic opportunities. When rural schools in Trinidad and Tobago experience conflicts, communities and their schools begin to function as separate entities rather than operate collectively toward common goals. As a result, rural schools lose their power as valuable community resources. This notion does not imply that rural community members do not value academic education. In a research aimed at examining the educational preferences and attitudes of parents toward a constrained curriculum within the context of rural communities, experiences, and values; Richards (2009) concluded that participating parents wanted schools to focus on high academic standards, but at the same time, they also wanted their schools to broaden their children's choices.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention

A third major challenge Trinidad and Tobago's rural schools experience lies in sourcing and retaining high-quality teaching and administrative staff. Rural school educators and leaders seldom reside within the communities they are assigned to teach and often reside in urban areas (Azano & Stewart, 2015). This limitation frequently results in the recruitment of educators who possess little or no knowledge of the lived realities of community members. Azano and Stewart (2015) further contend that this dire situation can foster exclusion as educators may not understand the realities of rural life. A lack of teachers and administrators' understanding of the unique sense of place, people, history, problems, and potential that are the essence of rural communities often works to the detriment of rural schools. Researchers voiced concern toward the lack of knowledge about the community that many rural educators and administrators possess, and promoted the need for meaningful place-based teacher education as an effective intervention strategy (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Schafft, 2016; Schollie et al., 2017; Stelmach, 2011).

Many factors also contribute to rural schools' inability to recruit and retain effective educators and administrators. One key reason for this challenge is the high levels of competence necessary for rural teachers to function effectively. In a 2019 study, Karlberg-Granlund examined challenges rural teachers and principals face. The author concluded that rural teaching entailed multi-grade and place-based instructions, which require special competence in leadership and management skills. Multi-grade, multi-level, and multi-subject teaching, lack of educational assistants, greater workload due to fewer staff members, and fewer opportunities to specialize in a field all serve as disincentives to teachers when accepting appointments in rural schools.

The debate regarding what a highly qualified teacher for rural schools should look like has been a central topic among scholars (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Edmondson & Butler, 2010; Eppley, 2009; Harmon & Schafft, 2009; Reid et al., 2010). Rural educators who reside outside the community, especially from urban environments, may possess conflicting ideas of their purpose as educators. Educators may perceive rural communities as backward, hence viewing their professional function as to educate children to get them out of their mostly undereducated community (McHenry-Sorber & Schafft, 2014). This misguided perception of duties often results in teachers paying more attention to academically achieving students and less to students who possess non-academic knowledge and skills. These teachers spend all their time and resources preparing students whose academic achievements often lead them to reside and work outside of the community. Consequently, these teachers pay less attention to lower academically performing students who will eventually remain and make up the bulk of the community's future adult population. Accordingly, Schafft (2016) and Corbett (2016) highly criticized education biases where education is geared mainly toward academic achievement that prepare students for urban opportunities. These researchers investigated rural outmigration, which drains rural communities of their achieving and skilled members. Yet, some teachers are reluctant to devote equitable time and resources to all students regardless of their strengths, weaknesses, or ambitions as the need to drive students to reaching national standards supersedes individual aspirations, needs, and competences.

Key Steps Toward Addressing School Challenges

Albeit I opted to comprehensively analyze and position rural education challenges in Trinidad and Tobago in relation to global trends, rural challenges are not inevitable and can be addressed. Rural communities and their schools have the capability to redefine education to foster rural development. Through fostering strong meaningful school-community partnerships, rural schools and communities can work toward transforming current inequitable education practices and promote meaningful place relevant education for its rural students (Bauch, 2001; Karlberg-Granlund, 2019). Parental and community involvement do not necessarily imply a strong school-community relationship as parents congregating at the gate does not necessarily constitute a school-community relationship (Karlberg-Granlund, 2019). For rural communities in Trinidad and Tobago to experience relationships that can potentially lead to an

empowerment of rural community members, strong functional school-community ties must exist. When these strong meaningful relationships are fostered, strategic planning grounded on sound collaboration can inevitably become a focus.

Downes (2016) concurred with this assumption when he described the capability of rural school-community collaboration in reorienting, rethinking and revitalizing rural areas away from metropolitan focus and toward meeting rural regions and communities' needs. Okitsu and Edwards (2017) also emphasized this sentiment when they proposed that when community members are included in school management, school's responsiveness to local priorities improves. This paper, thus, creates an opportunity for meaningful discourse toward examining Trinidad and Tobago's rural challenges and stimulating discussions regarding the potential of meaningful school-community partnerships as a means of promoting education that is place relevant, and most meaningful to rural communities. These efforts, alongside global recognition and intervention to promote rural development through more meaningful education provisions, can provide opportunities to addressing global rural challenges including Trinidad and Tobago's (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Corbett, 2016; Eppley, 2015; Schafft, 2016).

Conclusion

Much has changed since Williams' (1968) publication and many of his recommendation for education improvement have materialized. Kindergarten schooling is now widely available to children 3-5 years old, secondary education is now afforded to all children, and professional teacher-training is mandatory for all primary school teachers. However, many historical shortcomings that directly affect the quality of rural education still exists. Williams' vision that, "The rural [secondary] school should consciously abandon the conventions of academic secondary education and devote itself single-mindedly to the service of the rural people" (p. 49), is yet to be realized. A mandatory highly academic curriculum continues to dominate secondary education and education tailored to meet specific rural community demands are seemingly non-existent. In its Vision 2030-The National Development Strategy of Trinidad and Tobago 2016-2030, the government acknowledged its shortcomings in providing equitable economic opportunities for citizens of all regions within the country. Acknowledging one's inadequacies is a step toward promoting transformation; however, Trinidad and Tobago still has much to transform if the country intends to offer purposeful education, and by extension, economic opportunities for its rural residents.

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