

COPING MECHANISMS OF TWO GRENADIAN SCHOOL TEACHERS DURING THE PANDEMIC

SUB-THEME: METHODOLOGIES AND STRATEGIES IN THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

This qualitative case study encompasses responses from two female Grenadian school teachers on the coping mechanisms implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. The sampling method was purposive since Grenadian teachers from the Facebook (Metta) page-Heart2Heart-Grenada Teachers Connection were asked to participate in the study. Two participants responded to six open-ended questions. Since there were only two participants, coding the data was unnecessary. However, significant themes were identified, such as; access to resources (devices and training); parental involvement (lack of and too much); students' coping with online classes; teaching strategies implemented; advice to teachers; and lessons learned. The responses exemplify improved digital literacy for both students and teachers; and the use of more technology in the curriculum, such as gamification and visuals. The learning losses were inherent in the need for more parental involvement; teachers struggled to capture students' attention online, students missed the physical environment, and assessments online may not have reflected students' true performance. Therefore, there have been losses and gains as these teachers gradually transition from emergency remote education to face-to-face teaching and learning. It remains to be seen how teachers will integrate the new learning gains into a hybrid/blended model of teaching in order to bridge the learning losses encountered during the pandemic. The limitation of this study is the small number of participants, which cannot be generalized to larger populations. However, a further study including more participants could prove beneficial.

Introduction

As the next normal is being experienced, educators find ways to blend their increased digital literacy in their face-to-face classes. Indeed, the aftermath of the pandemic has left teachers with new ways of engaging students. They have become more technologically savvy, and, post-pandemic, they are capitalizing on these newfound strengths. However, before this could be done, efforts were made to stymie the digital divide by giving teachers and students laptops. This was especially needed since the Grenadian Ministry of Education reported that 63% of students could not access emergency remote classes at the closure of schools due to a lack of



devices and access to the Internet (KIX, 2021). Moreover, De Chaisemartin (2020) explained that, at the seminal stages of the pandemic, OECS “Member States were confronted with the stark reality that not all communities have access to affordable internet and not all students have access to suitable devices” (p.1). She furthered that Ministries of Education in the Eastern Caribbean attempted to provide laptops for the most vulnerable in the community. De Chaisemartin also indicated:

Given that an estimated 30% of children lack electronic devices and access to online learning, the program will support Member States to procure and distribute devices to at least 12,000 vulnerable primary students across Dominica, Grenada, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. (p. 2)

With the aforementioned in mind, this study aimed to determine what has been done and is being done in Grenadian classrooms to cope with the pandemic. Therefore, the research question is, What have Grenadian teachers done to cope with the pandemic in the past two years?

Relevance

The findings of this study reveal what two participants have been doing since the pandemic and their thoughts about the effects of the pandemic on their teaching. This study is significant because the findings corroborate data collected at the pandemic's start from Grenada, Trinidad, and Guyana (Bissessar, 2021).

Literature Review

Mitigating Learning Loss

Devices for Students

Students in the US were given laptops during the pandemic so they would not be left behind. They saw the laptops as a lifeline (Collins, 2020). Wake County in California also implemented a program to have one device for every student for two years (Klein, 2021). Similarly, as mentioned before, devices were given to the most vulnerable students in the Eastern Caribbean. A GPE grant of \$70,000US allowed Grenada to provide access to devices and the Internet to the most vulnerable and marginalized populations (<https://www.globalpartnership.org/where-we-work/grenada>).



Devices for Teachers

Thanks to a United Nations fund, teachers were given laptops in Ukraine, which helped them reach their students. Additionally, training was provided by the European Union so that they could become more digitally proficient (UNICEF Ukraine, 2021). Likewise, in Greece, training seminars were conducted to ensure teachers were equipped to integrate and utilize synchronous and asynchronous modalities (Samioti, 2021). In Grenada, the GPE grant was used to ensure that teachers were trained in technology and that their digital literacy improved (<https://www.globalpartnership.org/where-we-work/grenada>). Additionally, laptops were provided to teachers. In Guyana, teachers were allowed the option of rent-to-own laptops to ensure that they had access to a synchronous teaching device (Bissessar, 2022). Furthermore, an entire unit was formed specifically geared towards training in digital literacy and instructional design to allow for a seamless transition from face-to-face to emergency remote teaching.

Parental Involvement or Lack Thereof

During the pandemic, parental involvement has become critical to their children's success. They are now expected to motivate, coach, support, and teach their children. Research shows mixed findings on parental involvement. For example, in Malaysia, Pek et al. (2020) concluded that the parents in their study wanted to avoid becoming involved in their children's education at home during the pandemic. Furthermore, Treviño et al. (2021) administered the COVID-19 Impact on Parental Engagement Study (ICIPES) in 23 countries to 4,658 participants. They found that families with higher socioeconomic status provided more support to their children. Bissessar (2021) determined that Grenadian teachers reported too much or too little parental involvement, with some parents not concerned about their children's assignments. In some cases, it is evident that some parents did the assignments for the students.

Students' Ability to Cope with Online Classes

Human Connections

Overall, the pandemic has demonstrated how much value human connections have. Not being able to shake hands and engage in physical contact made it more valuable. In their autoethnographic study, Gao and Sai (2020) found that social isolation was a critical issue during the pandemic. The researchers felt socially and professionally isolated. Ferlazzo (2022) mentioned that albeit teachers attempted to humanize the online environment, students still needed that human physical contact. He advocated, "Tech is not the future of personalized learning. Human contact and attention are" (p. 1). He saw emergency remote teaching as highlighting the importance of the student/teacher dyad and the importance of human contact and caring. In fact, within the online environment, students feel valued and appreciated when their facilitators respond promptly. Nevertheless, the Internet abounds with studies on the



importance of human contact and socialization during COVID-19 and the mental health issues associated with lack of socialization.

Teaching Strategies

During the pandemic, educators had to adopt new technologies to engage their students quickly. Ferlazzo (2022) shared that the pandemic has reinforced and promoted the use of games and “scaffolding strategies to maximize the chances of student success” (p, 1). Nieto-Escamez et al. (2021) concluded that students found integrating games into the curriculum engaging, interactive, and fun. The students/participants reported that using games helped them feel less isolated and more connected to their peers. Congruently, Rincón-Flores et al. (2022) found that gamification fostered and increased motivation when used as a pedagogical technique.

Methodology

This qualitative descriptive phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of two female teachers in Grenada. Permission was granted to the researcher to post a google forms link to a questionnaire on the Facebook (Metta) page-Heart2Heart-Grenada Teachers Connection on the 17th of February 2022. By the 27th of March 2022, only two participants had responded. The sampling method was purposive since Grenadian teachers from the Facebook (Metta) page-Heart2Heart-Grenada Teachers Connection were asked to participate in the study.

The participants responded to demographic information and the following questions. (a) It has been almost two years now that we are in a pandemic. Could you describe what has been done and is being done in the classrooms to cope with remote emergency education? (b) Please describe how you are coping with the changes from the start to now. What mechanisms have you successfully implemented to help with remote teaching? (c) Please indicate how you believe your students are coping with the changes from face-to-face to emergency remote education. How would you describe it from the start of the pandemic to now? (d) What teaching and/or technological strategies have you successfully implemented in the emergency remote classroom? (e) Give two pieces of advice to your peers in other Caribbean and Latin American countries on how to cope with the transition from face-to-face to emergency remote education. (f) What three important lessons have you learned about teaching and learning during the pandemic? Since there were only two participants, not much data analysis was needed. Themes and sub-themes were easily and readily identified.



Results

Access to Resources

Devices

Participant 1 indicated that devices were given to students and teachers so synchronous sessions could occur online. She stated, "Students have been given tablets and teachers' computers to assist with online learning, which takes place in Zoom classes, etc."

Training

Whilst Participant 1 was concerned about access to devices, Participant 2 was interested in learning how to use the devices and teaching her students how to use the devices. Participant 2 explained, "Teaching the students how to use their gadgets for education/ getting some training myself." Participant 2 continued, "At the beginning, it was difficult to take the opportunity of any available training. I am now capable of handling remote learning."

Parental Involvement

Lack of

Participant 1 explained, "I have been coping well. However, I sometimes feel despondent when parents are not assisting their children as they should."

Too Much

Participant 2 shared, "Grades and assignments do not reflect students' true performance. Their parents are the ones taught because they do the work, not the students."

Students' Ability to Cope with Online Classes

Participant 1 opined, "Most of them were not coping well. They missed the physical presence of their teacher to help them understand new concepts. In my case, we are returning to the face-to-face classroom and gradually getting back into some form of normalcy." Participant 2 shared, "At the beginning, they were shocked and overwhelmed, now I think they can cope much better. However, they are easily distracted." Both sets of students and teachers are returning to the next normal and some semblance of normalcy.

Teaching Strategies Implemented

Participant 1 shared that she used "Zoom classes, which involves showing videos, playing online games, and virtual field trips." Participant 2 indicated that she used "Gamification and a lot of visual and interactive activities." This suggests that teachers emphasized synchronous learning activities and tried to ensure they could engage their students as much as possible.



Advice to Teachers on Successful Transition

Participant 1 recommended, 'Have a positive attitude towards change, take care of yourself, enhance modern technology, and embrace all opportunities to succeed.' Participant 2 advised, "Educate yourself on using technology in teaching/research because there is quite a lot of information out there/ be the change (be willing to change your approach to teaching)."

Lessons Learned during the Pandemic

Participant 1 stated that the three lessons learned during the pandemic were, "Never take anything in life for granted. Change can come in a split second. Learn to adapt in an adverse situation." Participant 2 shared:

Students in the online class may be paying attention to you while they are chatting with each other. Please do not take things for granted; many students do not know how to use their tablets for educational purposes.

Both participants felt that nothing should be taken for granted.

Discussions

The limited findings in this study corroborate the extant literature, which indicates that students in Grenada, other OECS islands, and developed countries were given devices to use during the pandemic (Collins, 2021; De Chaisemartin, 2021; Klein, 2021). In Grenada, devices were also given to teachers, reflected by the participants' responses in this study. Indeed, training was also conducted for educators in Ukraine, Greece, Guyana, and Grenada. The participants' responses reflect that training was conducted to prepare teachers to teach synchronously and asynchronously. Parental involvement in this study also reflects conclusions drawn by other researchers who reported a lack of or too much parental involvement (Bissessar, 2021; Pek et al., 2021; Treviño et al., 2021). In considering the humanization of the emergency remote environment, Ferlazzo (2022) noted that students missed human contact with no substitute for that connection. However, students reported that using gamification as an instructional delivery tool enhanced students motivation and decreased their feelings of isolation (Nieto-Escamez et al., 202; Rincón-Flores et al., 2022). The participants in this study noted that students missed the human connection and felt overwhelmed with emergency remote education.

Overall, the participants exemplify positive attitudes toward the changes experienced during the pandemic. They embraced the learning curves and professional gains, providing optimistic advice to educators. The most poignant was being a change agent and exercising that agency through seeking, learning, and implementing new knowledge. Moreover, this upbeat attitude resonated in their descriptions of lessons learned.



Conclusions

The findings in this study determined that the two Grenadian teachers did their utmost to cope with the challenges experienced during the pandemic. They attended training sessions and attempted to engage and motivate their students using interactive technologies and gamification. They conducted research and ensured that they improved their digital literacy skills. It remains to be seen how this two-year shift to emergency remote education has affected their instructional delivery, what tools they will add to their face-to-face pedagogical repertoire, and what tools they will eliminate. The findings in this study cannot be generalized to a larger population. However, they are similar to conclusions drawn in an earlier study by Bissessar (2021) on Grenadian teachers' views on what is happening in the classroom at the start of the pandemic. Two of the participants in this study participated in the previous study, and there is a level of confidence in their words that was not there at the inception. Their phrasing suggests mastery and the ability to cope with whatever comes their way. More studies within the Caribbean are needed with a broader cross-section of participants. Furthermore, studies that are mixed methodology could be beneficial.



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