

An Intersectional Approach to Exploring Rural Education in Trinidad and Tobago

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Rural communities in Trinidad and Tobago (T & T) are fraught with education challenges that have historically disadvantaged the country's rural citizenry. In his 1946 article, Williams, an educational scholar who went on to become the country's first Prime Minister, expressed grave concern for the country's education system that did little to address the specific needs of the then predominant rural citizenry. Instead, education seemed geared toward urban development and the needs of the more affluent members of society. In his article, Williams highlighted a barrage of factors that contributed to an educational downfall and proposed meaningful education as a prescription to the rural island's development. Today, the country's education still fails to attend to the unique needs of the now less prominent, yet equally significant, rural citizenry. To analyze the complexities that lead to inequitable education opportunities that hinder rural development in T & T is a significant feat as there is no uni-dimensional approach or factor that can justly analyze the underpinnings that affect rural education policies and practices. Thus, in this paper, I choose to embark on an intersectional (Crenshaw, 1988) approach to place current rural education dilemmas in T & T within interconnecting theoretical frameworks.

Intersectionality is a methodological approach that allows persons to examine interlocking factors that lead to injustices, inequities, and oppression. Scholars such as Anthony-Stevens (2018) and Samuels and Ross-Sheriff (2008) employed intersectional approaches to explore linkages in structures and experiences that stimulate marginalization. In so doing, inequities and injustices were not examined from one focal point but instead were viewed as a result of various forces that interlock, thus, shaping a structural embodiment of oppression.

Rural education challenges in T & T are not limited to rural-urban issues but are combinations of several phenomena, such as being part of an island, located in rural areas, dealing with postcolonial factors, and being victims of oppression. Rural struggles are, thus, multi-dimensional, and so too are the theories that contribute to an insight into rural education dilemmas in T & T.

Intersectionality in a Trinidad and Tobago Context

Although numerous theoretical frameworks can be associated with the complexities of rural challenges, in this study, four specific interlocking underpinnings are utilized to create a cohesive epistemological understanding of educational issues that often disadvantage rural communities in T & T. In the proceeding sections, I position rural T & T and the education these areas receive in the island, rural, colonized, and critical frameworks whereby these theoretical underpinnings interplay. This approach thereby proposes a democratic view of how and why education for rural development is a complex and challenging phenomenon that requires equally multifaceted interventions and solutions.

Theories of Rurality

Rural theory is a broad field that combines rural culture and ecology to analyze factors related uniquely to rural areas, such as the economy, education, business development, and sustainability (Gilbert, 1982). Rural communities in T & T are distinct embodiments of social interactions influenced by both internal and external factors. Although located outside of urban hubs, modernization and technology have allowed rural community members to interact daily with and be influenced by urban centers. Yet, rural communities are not urbanized as they still consist of distinct ethos, opportunities, and challenges that are not synonymous with their urban counterparts. The difficulties in describing rurality may be one reason for the disparities in various organizations' definitions and rural areas' characteristics. For example, on the one hand, the Caribbean Development Bank relies on infrastructure development and available social services to categorize rural/urban areas. On the other hand, the World Bank classifies rural areas as all that is not urban—the country's population minus its urban population— (The World Bank Group, 2021). At the same time, T & T's Central Statistical Office characterizes rural communities by three distinct traits: a population density of less than 200 per square kilometer, high use of agricultural land, and remoteness to urban hubs (Rajack-Talley, 2016). These disparities in categorizing rural communities influence how rural schools are perceived, thus, creating a challenge for policymakers to determine areas that may require place-specific curriculum and pedagogies.

Scholars such as Burnett and Danson (2017) and Baldacchino (2015) posited that capitalism and neo-liberal economies could generate uneven development. T & T exemplifies such economies as its drive toward industrialization, and economic progression promotes stimulating industries that produce significant economic returns. This focus supersedes rural communities' low-income localized sectors, such as fishing and farming. The country's bureaucratic development emphasis does not always favor the country's peripheral areas, whose geographical location, low population, and inadequate economic opportunities already create severe challenges to their economic development. With education at the cornerstone of economic development, large-scale industrial development will downplay the significance of education that focuses on non-industrial national revenue. Therefore, in T & T, urban neo-liberal development's driving forces often supersede education objectives and do not value rural communities' strengths.

Consequently, education policies and practices developed to address urban demands are imposed on rural communities under the misguided belief that what works in urban settings will also undoubtedly benefit rural communities. Such divergent practices have created detrimental situations for the country's rural communities as they are disadvantaged by learning opportunities not personalized to meet locals' aspirations, realistic employment opportunities, and community development objectives. This dilemma results in rural communities becoming susceptible to challenges such as outmigration of their young and talented, lack of employment opportunities, increased illegal activities, and loss of cultural ethos. Authors such as Rajack-Talley (2016), De Lisle, Smith, Keller, and Julesa (2012), UNICEF (2017), and Brown and Conrad (2007) voiced similar concerns.

Island Theory

Baldacchino (2006) described the core of island studies as “the constitution of ‘islandness’ and its possible or plausible influence and impact on ecology, human/species behavior and any of the areas handled by the traditional subject uni- or multi- or policy issues” (p. 9). The twin-island state of T & T experiences a barrage of challenges synonymous with islands globally. Often viewed as paradises and romantic getaways, islands, such as Trinidad and Tobago, have become sought-after destinations for tourists. However, their picturesque façade masks the many misfortunes islanders experience. *T & T Vision 2030 National Development Strategy* (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2019) highlighted pertinent challenges affecting the country such as high unemployment rates, rising crime rates, citizens portraying non-progressive values relevant to national development, ineffective public service delivery, environment degradation, and brain drain. Yet, policymakers systemically hide these struggles from tourists’ eyes and often commercialize under-development as authenticity, thus, preserving the island’s necessary tourism revenue.

Rural areas in T & T can be considered as islands within islands—remote spaces within remote lands. Just as T & T’s challenges are conveniently glossed over, so too are the challenges that exist within its rural communities. As such, being a rural islander in T & T is complex. On the one hand, residents may yearn for development similar to urban areas. On the other hand, rural residents may also desire to preserve their communities’ unique culture and natural beauty that exhibit their communities’ authenticity. Rural islanders grapple with wanting modern infrastructure while maintaining their culture, values, and natural attractions. Rural islanders’ understanding of their communities’ integral role in conserving their island’s beauty and history fuels a sense of patriotism and moral obligation to sustain authenticity. An attachment to community means an attachment to island. Unfortunately, the country’s rural communities’ undisputed contribution to their island’s development does not result in these communities receiving equitable development emphasis. Instead, T & T’s rural communities often encounter exacerbated challenges as rural problems are magnified when located on islands. As these communities’ grapple with the existing challenges attributed to being part of an island, the country’s rural communities must also struggle to compete with national standards and requirements in the same way that islands do on a global scale.

The diversities of rural life described in the preceding paragraphs reflect the need for equally diverse and place-relevant education tailored to fit the unique realistic challenges, needs, aspirations, and opportunities of the country’s rural communities. However, unfortunately, the country’s education system is not designed to allow flexibility in school practices. Instead, the erroneous assumptions that promote homogenized education practices guide existing education policies and pedagogies. Until the country’s education policies’ creators and implementors promote versatile pedagogies that cater to its rural communities’ diversity, these communities will continue to experience exacerbated development challenges linked to rural island locations.

Theories of Colonialism

Decolonization is a complex theory that traces Europe's actions to colonize and how countries previously under colonial rule embark on postcolonial actions (Hamadi, 2014). T & T is a product of colonialism. "To decolonize is to excise from consciousness conceptions of belonging that are informed by allegiances to European constructs of liberalism and nationhood" (Smith & Rogers, 2015, p. 65). Theories of colonialism trace Europe's actions to colonize and how countries previously under colonial rule embark on postcolonial actions (Hamadi, 2014). The horrors of colonialism did not end when colonialization itself ended, but instead are still manifested in actions where some people are exploited while placing others in positions of dominance (Hamadi, 2014). Although independence and republicanism set a path toward decolonization, colonial practices persist as Nadarajah and Grydehøj (2016) maintained that the association between sovereignty and decolonization is not a linear and direct process. Tsang et al. (2002) also claimed that colonization had influenced many current Caribbean policies and practices. This is the case for T & T, where education remains highly Eurocentric.

Like many Caribbean countries, T & T has an extensive history under colonial rule. The arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1498 marked the country's induction into colonialism. The seizure of Trinidad by the British in 1797 led to increased integration into the capitalist world-system as the country's sugar and cocoa plantations played integral roles in Britain's industrialized progression. Eighty percent of T & T's population are descendants of African slaves and East Indian indentured workers—products of colonialism. Although gaining independence in 1962 and becoming a Republic nation in 1976, colonial practices still highly influence current policies and governance. These colonial influences are very prominent in the country's education system, which, in many ways, mirrors Britain's education system. T & T's high percentage of religious schools, high-stakes exams, and high concentration on the 3Rs are synonymous with Britain's policies and practices. These systems often disadvantage rural students as an education system built on colonial ideologies of segregation and inequity can negatively impact the most vulnerable and marginalized members of society. Mandated highly colonialized education systems dominate and further disadvantage already challenged rural communities. High accountability and high-stakes testing supersede community needs, thus promoting dominating urban requirements over rural development. Therefore, colonization must be considered a significant contributing factor to T & T's rural education issues.

Critical Theory

Critical theory, as defined by Fuchs (2015), is "an approach that studies society in a dialectical way by analyzing political economy, domination, exploitation, and ideologies" (p. 1). Various facets of T & T's education system emulate factors of domination and inequity. A critical approach to analyzing issues allows for examining how social influences and historical discrimination practices are embedded in societal norms.

Globalization, mobilization, and technology have brought T & T closer to the rest of the world. At the same time, these structures have also created casualties, widening the gap between those in

positions to compete and those who are not. T & T's need to compete with global demands has resulted in wealth, race, religion, and social class advantage playing significant roles in providing educational opportunities. The country's education system often allows for domination of one geographical area over another, more typically distal communities that seldom comprise many who are wealthy or people of the 0.6% White citizenry. Rural schools grapple with challenges such as limited finances, inadequate teacher retention, and limited parenteral involvement. To further intensify problems for rural residents, rural schools are mandated to provide an urban-centric education that, in many ways, borders on irrelevancy to students. Rural students in T & T are often required to pursue subjects such as biology, physics, accounts, chemistry, history, literature, and foreign languages. Their competence in these subjects indicates the success of their five-year schooling. However, these subjects do little to prepare most students for future aspirations that do not involve a tertiary education. While these subjects do hold learning value, they are limiting for those students in rural communities who opt to seek employment over pursuing a tertiary education following graduation and therefore find it difficult to follow their aspirations. As a result, these students must find a means of attaining meaningful employable skills as much of what they learned at school has limited value to their future livelihood. This may result in some ex-students relocating to urban centers in search of employable skills and eventually remaining and contributing to the development of urban centers instead of their local communities. Other low-academic achieving youth remain in their community without the skills necessary for local employment.

In tandem with critical ideologies, rural community members and educators must understand their disadvantage and use this understanding as a catalyst to envision just and equitable systems. They must understand the power they possess in transforming systems that place them in oppressive situations. They must acknowledge that social structures should not hinder their development. Their disadvantage due to social status and location is not definite and irreparable but is transformable. They must dream of better futures and use these dreams as stimulants in demanding exposure to envisioned systems. Systems, which accommodate dominant groups, will remain embedded in the country's education unless marginalized groups use their power to transform the status quo.

Conclusion

Factors that stimulate rural education challenges are multi-dimensional, non-linear, and complex. Readers of this paper will notice that frequent arguments' overlay and often blurs the distinction between factors across and within theoretical frameworks. There is, thus, a need for equally versatile curriculums and pedagogies that cater to equally versatile rural characteristics and opportunities. With rural development at the forefront of rural education objectives, rural communities can experience economic development. Then, to the rural islander's eye, rural will no longer be considered a place to leave to gain opportunities. At the same time, to the urban islander's eye, rural locations will no longer be considered a place simply to visit or retire. Instead, rural areas will be considered places of equal opportunity where urban and rural residents can choose to settle and raise a family with the comfort of knowing that their locale does not deprive them of chances of a better future.

Theories of colonialism, rurality, island studies, and critical theory have yielded opportunities for studies attributed to marginalized groups. In so doing, historically dominant practices can be examined through the lens of persons who understand power, difference, and inequity. Analyzing forces that contribute to rural education challenges in T & T is a complicated venture, but as Corbett (2016) supported, a key objective of rural education research and education must be to assist rural communities in understanding and taking proactive action in alleviating their challenges. This paper provided a fitting theoretical view of rural dilemmas and will be highly influential as I embark on my doctoral study, whereby I analyze the perceptions of rural educators, students, and other community members toward the role rural schools play in their community's economic development.

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