

Access to education in a time of pan(dem)ic **in Jamaica**

Rural & urban primary schools' experience

MAY 2021

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Summary

This document reports the activities and findings of a project, funded by BERA's small grants fund for research into the impact of Covid-19, that explored students' experiences of accessing education in rural and urban primary (K-6) schools in Jamaica during the pandemic. This research explored the following three questions.

1. To what extent has Covid-19 impacted access to continued education in the primary schools under investigation?
2. How have state interventions facilitated continued education during the Covid-19 crisis?
3. To what extent did the findings of the project's second, qualitative phase converge with those of its first, quantitative phase?

Sequential mixed-methods design was used for data collection and analysis, with participants selected using purposeful sampling. All ethical considerations were engaged with for this research.

A disparity was found between students in rural and urban communities in terms of their ability to access online education, due to various challenges related to technology, including the affordability of data and devices.

1. Introduction

On 10 March 2020, Jamaica confirmed its first imported case of Covid-19, from the UK, and its first death on 18 March. With Covid-19 declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization on 11 March, the Jamaican government immediately mobilised strategies to ensure that the nation was protected from any impending threats posed by the virus. One of these strategies was to close schools and move teaching and learning online, effective from 14 March. This closure was a precautionary measure to ensure the safety of staff, students and the nation. Schools remained closed for the rest of the school year for primary school students. Clearly these closures posed a problem for teaching and learning, but it also exposed other challenges faced by students, particularly those from rural and marginalised communities. With uncertainty surrounding the timeline for resumption of face-to-face classes, the government, as part of its strategy to mitigate the spread of the virus, provided various means to capacitate diverse stakeholders to enable the education of the nation's children while monitoring progress in teaching and learning. However, while the impetus of these actions – safeguarding the continuity of education – was commendable, many of our students are being left behind. The rapid move to online learning posed a challenge of inclusivity for students with limited or no access to online platforms, smart devices or television through which scheduled educational programmes were delivered.

The purpose of this research was to explore students' experiences of continuing to access education in rural and urban primary schools in Jamaica during the pandemic.

2. Research sites

The schools that took part in this research project are located in three counties in Jamaica: Cornwall, Middlesex and Surrey, with two schools (one urban, one rural) within each county.

Table 1.1

An overview of the schools that took part in this research project

Country	Location	School	Student enrollment	Teaching & administrative staff	Classroom structure	School community
Cornwall	Urban	A	462	18	Single-storey building separated by chalkboards.	Farming, mainly female-headed families, a number of parents who dropped out of high school.
	Rural	B	185	9	Single-storey annex housing infant department and six grades housed in a two-storey building.	Fishing and subsistence farming, nuclear and extended family structure.
Middlesex	Urban	C	395	19 teachers, 1 guidance counsellor	Three-storey building housing 14 classrooms; two grades 2–4, three grade 5s, four grade 6s and two special education units.	Female-headed, single-parent households.
	Rural	D	185	8	Single-storey building with three halls divided by a chalkboard to demarcate six classrooms.	Farming community, extended-family households.
Surrey	Urban	E	738	45 members of staff, inclusive of 9 caregivers, a principal and vice principal.	Three buildings: the smaller building houses infants-to-grade-2, the larger building houses grades 3–6, and the other houses a special education unit.	Special education unit caters to students with physical challenges. Extended and single-parent families; few male parents actively participate in child's welfare.
	Rural	F	346	19	Fifteen classrooms, for grades 2–6 and a special education unit.	Majority of parents are unemployed, others are engaged in various other professions including nursing. Several students rely on the Programme of Advancement Through Health and Education.

3. Context

The closure of schools brought with it ‘an unprecedented risk to children’s education’ (Unicef, 2020, p. 1), and threatened to have an even greater impact on marginalised and hard-to-reach children who, the longer they ‘are out of school, the less likely they are to return’ (Unicef, 2020, p. 2). In Jamaica, online learning strategies were implemented to minimise this risk. While ‘online learning offers numerous possibilities to practice educational inclusivity... [and] to reach an unlimited number of students from anywhere, at any time’ (Clow & Kolomitro, 2018, para. 1), not every student has the basic resources required to access online learning. For instance, the World Economic Forum has noted that more than 50 per cent of the world’s population does not have access to the internet (Luxton, 2016).

Similarly, in May 2020 the Jamaican education minister stated that approximately 30 per cent of the country’s population has no internet access, and that at least 30,000 students remained unreachable despite efforts to continue teaching and learning (Patterson, 2020). A UN (2020) report highlighted the fact that the ‘most vulnerable learners are also among those who have poor digital skills and the least access to the hardware and connectivity required for distance learning solutions implemented during school closures’ (p. 8), which diminishes their access to education.

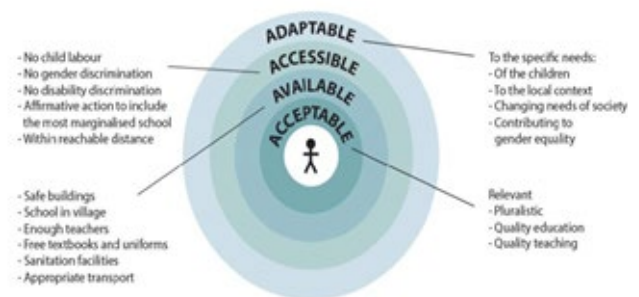
4. Theoretical & conceptual framework

Tomaševski's (2001) theory on access to education advanced a '4-A' framework (see figure 4.1) that highlights a government's obligations to ensure that all children have access to education and that 'the education which is available and accessible is of good quality' (p. 13) while meeting the unique and diverse needs of all. In essence, education should continue to be available, accessible, adaptable and acceptable for all students.

However, students' continued access to education requires an examination of general systems and social exclusion/inclusion theory, as depicted in the conceptual framework in figure 4.2 below. We used general systems theory to determine whether schools as open systems were able to meet their objectives given the context of Jamaica's economy. We used social exclusion/inclusion and inequality theories to understand issues of marginalisation in students' experience of online education and the state's intervention strategies to address them.

Figure 4.1

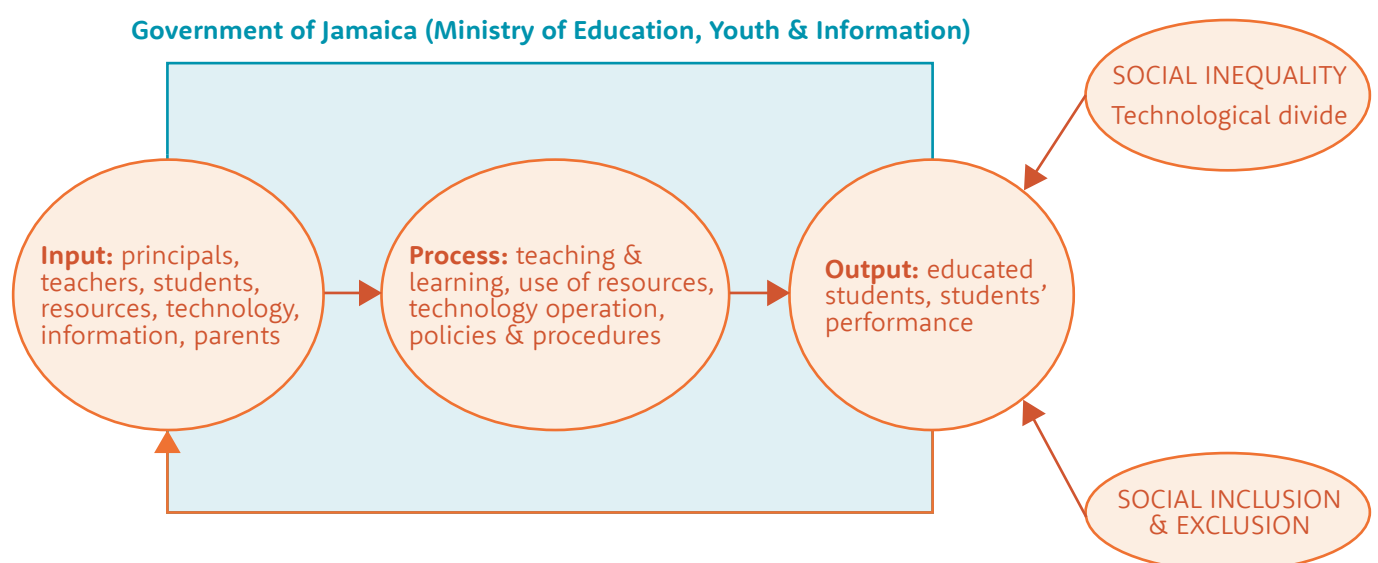
Tomaševski's 4-A scheme, education rights circle diagram



Source: Reproduced from Hajrullai & Saliu (2016)

Figure 4.2

Access to education in a time of pandemic: A conceptual framework



5. Research design

The following three research questions guided this study.

1. To what extent has Covid-19 impacted access to continued education in the primary schools under investigation?
2. How has the state's intervention facilitated access to education during the pandemic in those primary schools?
3. To what extent did the findings of the project's second, qualitative phase converge with those of its first, quantitative phase?

5.1 METHODOLOGY

A sequential mixed-method research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) was used to investigate a phenomenon not previously explored: primary students' access to education in a time of pandemic. Quantitative data was collected in phase one and qualitative data in phase two.

Sample

Purposeful sampling was used to identify 150 participants, comprising six principals, 36 teachers and 108 parents. Purposeful sampling was felt to be appropriate given the availability, location, time of year, and access to participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Ethics

The researchers received approval from the ethics committee of the University of the West Indies, Jamaica, after making revisions stipulated by the committee.

6. Data collection & analysis

Data collection was conducted in two phases. In phase 1, a self-developed survey captured demographic information on students' ability to continue education and government intervention strategies during the school closure for the periods March–July and September–November 2020. Questionnaires were administered online in December 2020 and in January 2021 via SurveyMonkey, and face-to-face in January 2021 for some parents who were unable to access the SurveyMonkey platform). Each instrument administered to principals, teachers and parents comprised 33 items.

Data from questionnaires were entered into SPSS for analysis, and descriptive statistics generated. Results from the quantitative phase guided the development of the principals' interviews, and the teachers' and parents' focus group schedules, for phase 2.

In phase 2, interviews and focus groups were conducted online and face-to-face to explore the prominent findings of phase 1 in more depth. The data collected were transcribed, and then coded using NVivo, and major themes formed the basis for analysis and discussion. The findings of both phases were integrated to determine how the results converged or diverged at the final interpretation stage.

7. Findings

On analysing the data, researchers found six major themes, with several sub-themes. Themes for research questions 1 and 2 are presented in tables 7.1 and 7.2.

Table 7.1

Themes arising in relation to research question 1, 'To what extent has Covid-19 impacted access to continued education in selected urban and rural primary schools in Jamaica?'

Name of theme	Number of sources	Frequency of occurrences
Learning kits	7	15
Technology	14	135
Teacher outreach	6	16

7.1 TECHNOLOGY

The survey data showed that during March to July 2020, 62 per cent of parents surveyed indicated that their children had working devices with which to access online classes, with this proportion rising to 80 per cent in the period September to November (see table A.1 in the appendix to this report). However, the majority of the participants we spoke with indicated that they had major challenges with technology. 'Technology' here refers to a combination of devices and services: internet services, television, WhatsApp, Google Classroom and radio. From the focus group discussions it emerged that challenges with technology included the affordability of data and devices, capability to use online platforms, knowledge and experience, and loss of income, among others. One parent explained:

'Parents do not have phone, internet service, or any other device to get the schoolwork at most schools. Data is costly and most parents cannot afford it.'

Parent, school A

Other parents raised challenges concerning the affordability of data, internet connections and online platforms.

'We have no internet at home and so we connected to the neighbour's wifi.'

Parent, school B

'In March they mostly used WhatsApp. We were not all that familiar with the Google Classroom but throughout the training that the teachers did, that was when they started utilising Google with WhatsApp... Google was a bit challenging as... the tablet she had was not compatible with Google Meet, so now she used my tablet and it still was not going through.'

Parent, school C

Teachers corroborated the prevalence of the use of WhatsApp, and challenges with data. One teacher said:

'I was using WhatsApp. That's the only thing I knew about, but after learning some of the LMS [learning management systems] I tried my best to use the Google Classroom.'

Teacher, school C

'They had what you will call data issue, don't have sufficient money to buy data, to keep up with the system.'

Teacher, school F

7.2 LEARNING KITS & TEACHER OUTREACH

To reach students without online access, schools used other initiatives such as learning kits provided by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Information (MOEYI) and personal efforts made by school staff. One principal noted:

'We try to reach them through learning kits and we have a drop-off and pick-up point on the school compound for each grade. We've... also asked parents, who are without devices, to come and collect the packages. Teachers come in on Fridays, for them to take in the activities... and we marked the activities and return to them.'

Principal, school B

A teacher reiterated this initiative:

'I mostly use textbooks... Because I'm driving past some of the homes, I tell them that I'm on my way and they can meet me at the gate... and collect the books and I mark it for the period September until now.'

Teacher, school D

One parent indicated that,

'...persons who were unable to get internet access could go to the school to pick up booklets.'

Parent, school A)

Table 7.2

Themes arising in relation to research question 2, 'How has the state's intervention facilitated access during the pandemic in selected schools in Jamaica?'

Name of theme	Number of sources	Frequency of occurrences
Counselling sessions	7	11
Devices	3	5
Training	6	7

Participants in our study described several interventions put in place by the government to facilitate continued access to education during the pandemic, including the provision of devices and training for teachers to provide online learning support to students.

7.3 DEVICES

For the period March–July 2021, 93 per cent of the parents did not agree that their children had benefited from devices provided by the government, while for September–November the number of parents that held this view decreased to 73 per cent (see table A.2 in the appendix).

One teacher explained:

'But for the students I think, some students got tablets from the government and yes, the computer that I use presently I got it from the school e-learning. Some years ago, the Ministry gave us.'

Teacher, school B

One parent complained that the terms of agreement associated with devices provided resulted in some students not accessing education online.

'The list that the government send out with the tablets issued is one reason why so many children are without a device, because a lot of things comes with it if it gets destroyed... Be honest, if you the government gives my child money for food at school, how is it that I'm going to be able to pay for a broken tablet? I know of parents who got tablet and don't allow the child to use it just because of the agreements... so they need to redo that term and condition paper.'

Parent, school F

While tablets were provided, one parent speaking about his child's challenge stated,

'he has the device, but the data service runs out.'

Parent, school A

7.4 TRAINING

For the March–July period, 50 per cent of principals disagreed with a statement to the effect that the training they received to prepare them to deliver lessons online to students was adequate. Similarly, for the March–July period the majority of teachers (56 per cent) disagreed with the proposition that they received training that was adequate to prepare them to deliver lessons online to students. On the other hand, for September–November 50 per cent of principals agreed that adequate training to deliver online lessons to students was received (see table A.3 in the appendix). During the interview one principal stated the following.

'They also did Zoom training sessions with us on how we could conduct positive behavioural interventions in the online setting, or what we could possibly do, even though we are distances away.'

Principal, school A

7.5 DO OUR QUALITATIVE FINDINGS CONVERGE WITH OUR QUANTITATIVE RESULTS?

The majority of participants in the research agreed that most students found virtual learning more challenging than face-to-face learning, though this improved slightly in the period September to November after training was received. From the focus group discussions we learned that age factored prominently in the challenges that participants experienced. The principals' discourses revealed that children in grades 1–3 found online learning more challenging than

those in grades 4–6, and that children with special needs such as learning disabilities were also found to struggle more than others. Further analysis allowed us to affirm that both age and experience ultimately affected students' attendance, interest and ability to cope with online learning. According to one principal in one county:

'For grades 5 and 6, it is good... They [parents] try their best, to ensure that the students are online and participating... these children will be doing the primary exit performance exam... But, as we move towards grade[s] 3, 2 and 1, that's where we start having the real issues, with the participation... from the reports that I get, a class that has 29 students will only be reporting maybe about 11 or 12 students online, for a day.'

Principal, school A

'parents do not collect the work for their children and parents don't return the books to be marked'.

Principal, school E

Similar sentiments were echoed by other principals.

'And usually what I find is that priority is given to the bigger children. My infants are kind of struggling a bit because the students of grade 5 and grade 6 are given priority in a family with one device which has to be shared across three children.'

Principal, school B

'It has had a detrimental effect, in terms of children not getting the quality education that they should be receiving. It is not the same quality as face-to-face, especially for these young ones.'

Principal, school D

Inference from the data analysis suggests the extent to which parents experienced challenges with managing online learning can be linked to their level of education and the age at which they themselves had children, as one principal explained.

'We still have a large number of parents who did not attain secondary level education. We have a lot of young people who are having children. Educationally, we are not at our best.'

Principal, school B

Age influences maturity and responsibility. This seems to be a concern of one principal, who stated that some parents who themselves have limited educational attainment were unable to assist their children with the school work online, while others showed little interest even in picking up learning kits which were to be collected at the school. Consequently,

8. Discussion & recommendations

Covid-19 presented the education sector with a dilemma that left the state, administrators, teachers and researchers grappling with the question of how best to engage students in an environment that lacks physical contact, while ensuring that no child is left behind. Researchers and policymakers alike have recognised differential engagement rates between different age groups, and our qualitative findings support the observation that certain age groups are more likely than others to navigate online learning and be engaged. This argument is consistent with Koh and Lim's (2012) research, which found that there are a variety of tools used for online learning among younger students, and that younger students performed better when they had parental support and assistance. We found that parents of the older students in grades 4–6 thought they learned more in online courses than did the parents of younger children, in grades 1–3. Parents and teachers also felt that the older children had more interactions with their peers in online classes, and thought that the quality of online classes was very good compared to traditional face-to-face courses. Therefore, the argument holds true that older students are more engaged when utilising online learning than younger students are. One Principal stated,

'younger [students] were less engaged, more distracted.'

Principal, school B

One can further postulate that traditional forms of education can actively engage students in a sustainable way, without the issues associated with lack of internet connectivity and device malfunction. With that in mind, the state decided on a blended or mixed approach for those experiencing difficulties in online learning, by distributing 'learning kits' to schools. These learning kits would be made accessible for pick up, or delivered to the homes of students, with work to be completed on a weekly basis.

Our research offers several recommendations for different stakeholders. The first of these recommendations is that free internet access be

provided for all. This would eliminate the difficulties with meeting the cost of data cited by many parents. The state could seek to attract more support from private sector and international partners to offset the related costs.

Second, while it may not be immediately possible to provide internet access to each household, efforts should be made to ensure that community access points are installed as a short-term measure while strategies are put in place to accommodate home access. This would increase bandwidths and reduce the frequent interruptions to internet service.

Third, pupils would benefit from increased tablet allocations to schools, particularly in rural areas. While the present distribution of devices is commendable, devices that are more sturdy, compatible with Google Classroom and free to students are needed. The current costs that the MOEYI attaches to tablets if damaged deter students' use of those devices

Finally, a blended approach to the delivery of education is recommended in response to the diverse student abilities across Jamaica.

9. Conclusion

In addition to the challenges arising from age differences, findings from our study highlight a disparity between the ability of children in rural and urban communities to access the internet, and online learning in particular. Prior to Covid-19 a blended approach to learning was not widely practiced in Jamaican primary schools. The state should mandate a blended approach to teaching and learning in order to facilitate social equality and inclusive access to education, and to support the ‘no child left behind’ act adopted in the Vision 2030 Jamaica national development plan. This policy should integrate face-to-face instruction, printed, online, video and audio material, virtual simulations and coaching. The policy should also facilitate training for parents and guardians to equip them with the basic pedagogical skills necessary to enable quality home-schooling. The theoretical principle of Tomaševski’s 4-A scheme, which promotes education that is available, accessible, adaptable and acceptable for all students (see figure 4.1), underpins this policy recommendation. The immediate implementation of our proposed policy across all levels of education should facilitate students’ continued access to education during future crises.

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Appendix

Table A.1

Participants' views on students having access to working devices,* by participants' role, date of survey and location (rural or urban)

	Principals (n=6)				Teachers (n=36)				Parents (n=108)			
	Mar–Jul 2020		Sept–Nov 2020		Mar–Jul 2020		Sept–Nov 2020		Mar–Jul 2020		Sept–Nov 2020	
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
Strongly disagree				1	2		3		5	1	2	3
				17%	6%		9%		5%	1%	2%	3%
Disagree		2			4	3		1	10	7	4	5
		33%			13%	9%		3%	11%	7%	4%	5%
Neutral					2	2	3	2	5	4	2	4
					6%	6%	9%	6%	5%	4%	2%	4%
Agree	3	1	2	2	5	9	7	9	19	16	24	22
	50%	17%	33%	33%	16%	28%	21%	27%	20%	17%	24%	22%
Strongly agree			1		3	2	4	4	13	14	21	15
			17%		9%	6%	12%	12%	14%	15%	21%	15%

*Note: the statements to which participants were asked to respond varied slightly between principals, teachers and parents.

Principals: 'My teachers had access to working devices (laptops, tablets) to deliver online classes'.

Teachers: 'I had access to working devices (laptops, tablets) to deliver online classes to students'.

Parents: 'My child(ren) had working devices (laptops, tablets) to access online classes'.

Table A.2

Participants' views on students benefiting from devices provided by the government,* by participants' role, date of survey and location

	Principals (n=6)				Teachers (n=36)				Parents (n=108)			
	Mar–Jul 2020		Sept–Nov 2020		Mar–Jul 2020		Sept–Nov 2020		Mar–Jul 2020		Sept–Nov 2020	
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
Strongly disagree	3	1			8	7	2	1	35	16	26	18
	50%	17%			26%	23%	6%	3%	39%	18%	26%	18%
Disagree		1		1	5	6	2	2	13	19	8	21
		17%		17%	16%	19%	6%	6%	15%	21%	8%	21%
Neutral						3	2	4	1	2	2	1
						10%	6%	12%	1%	2%	2%	1%
Agree		1	3	2	1		7	8	1	2	6	5
		17%	50%	33%	3%		21%	24%	1%	2%	6%	5%
Strongly agree					1		4	1	1		11	3
					3%		12%	3%	1%		11%	3%

*Note: the statements to which participants were asked to respond varied slightly between principals/teachers and parents.

Principals and teachers: 'Students without devices were able to benefit from tablets provided by the government'.

Parents: 'My child(ren) was given a device to access online learning which was provided by the school on behalf of the government'.

Table A.3

Participants' views on the adequacy of training provided to deliver online learning,* by participants' role, date of survey and location (rural or urban)

	Principals (n=6)				Teachers (n=36)				Parents (n=108)			
	Mar–Jul 2020		Sept–Nov 2020		Mar–Jul 2020		Sept–Nov 2020		Mar–Jul 2020		Sept–Nov 2020	
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
Strongly disagree		1		1	4	6	2	2	3		2	1
		17%		17%	13%	19%	6%	6%	3%		2%	1%
Disagree	1	1		1	4	4	2	2	4	3	1	4
	17%	17%		17%	13%	13%	6%	6%	4%	3%	1%	4%
Neutral	1			1	3	3	4	5	7	3	3	1
	17%			17%	9%	9%	13%	16%	7%	3%	3%	1%
Agree	1	1	3		4	3	5	4	20	22	19	21
	17%	17%	50%		13%	9%	16%	13%	21%	23%	19%	21%
Strongly agree					1		3	3	19	14	28	22
					3%		9%	9%	20%	15%	28%	22%

*Note: the statements to which participants were asked to respond varied slightly between principals, teachers and parents.

Principal: 'Training provided by the state was adequate to prepare us to deliver lessons to students online'.

Teacher: 'Training provided by the state was adequate to prepare me to deliver lessons to students online'.

Parent: 'My child(ren) benefitted from adequate online classes by the teachers'.



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