

**LEADERSHIP READINESS FOR BLENDED INSTRUCTION IN BARBADOS:
A SINGLE-SITE CASE STUDY OF A BARBADIAN SECONDARY SCHOOL
AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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Abstract: *The present study examined the perspectives of 13 Management Team members on the factors which affected leadership readiness for and during the shift to blended instruction in a Barbadian secondary school amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and documents. A single-site case study research design was employed. The conceptual framework was a modified model of Graham et al.'s (2013) and Wong et al.'s (2014) blended learning assessment frameworks. Thematic analysis revealed three themes: Insufficient External Governance, Lack of Leadership Training, and Systemic Barriers to Readiness. The findings contribute novel insights to the literature on leadership preparedness for blended approaches and have practical implications for educational leadership and strategic planning during crisis situations. This study expands understanding of the critical factors impacting leadership readiness for successfully adopting innovative instructional modalities.*

Keywords: *blended instruction, hybrid instruction, leadership readiness, COVID-19, Barbados*

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered unprecedented school closures worldwide in March 2020, catalysing abrupt digital transformations in education systems. Government officials worldwide mandated sudden transitions from traditional in-person instruction to online and blended learning modalities, including emergency remote teaching (Alqabbani et al., 2020; Anderson, 2020; Bleeker & Crowder, 2022; Bordoloi et al., 2021; Mladenova et al., 2020; Modan, 2020). Consequently, reports surfaced across international, regional, and local domains, highlighting institutional unpreparedness for the sudden transition to online and hybrid instruction (HI) during the COVID-19 pandemic (Anoba & Cahapay, 2020; Bleeker & Crowder, 2022; Leacock & Warrican, 2020; Matthewson, 2020; Parker & Alfaro, 2021). Effective e-learning and blended learning experiences necessitate advanced, proper planning, while poor planning poses a significant barrier (Alqabbani et al., 2020). The sudden shift from the familiar in-person instruction to the diverse modes of e-learning allowed no planning time (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020), leaving most schools and their leaders ill-equipped for these transitions (Matthewson, 2020; Taggart et al., 2024). The Caribbean region was no exception (Bleeker & Crowder, 2022; Leacock & Warrican, 2020, Parker & Alfaro, 2021).

In Barbados, the most easterly of the Caribbean islands, online instruction was utilised during the initial stage of the pandemic. However, September 2020 marked the introduction and implementation of blended instruction (BI) in educational institutions, a shift announced merely two weeks prior to the start of the academic year by the Ministry of Education, Technological and Vocational Training (METVT) (Barbados Government Information Services, 2020; KMT, 2020). Given the limited preparation time for Barbadian school leaders to transition to BL, their readiness to competently lead this transition remains largely unknown.

Effective leadership is crucial for achieving a successful BL environment in schools (Porter & Graham, 2016). School management teams play a vital role in leading BL implementation (Acree et al., 2017), and strategic planning is essential for successful organisational change toward the blended approach (Lim et al., 2019). However, little was known about Barbadian school leaders' readiness to lead successful BL transitions in schools amid the pandemic.

This paper investigates leadership readiness for and during the transition to BI in Barbados based on the perspectives of one secondary school's Management Team. The research question guiding this study is: What factors affected the Management Team's readiness to competently lead through and during the transition to HI?

The Blended/Hybrid Approach

The concept of BL has been around for many years. While many definitions have been offered, a common definition is non-existent (Correia, 2016; Dziuban et al., 2018; Hamza-Lup & White, 2015a; Ma'arop & Embi, 2016; Zhonggen, 2015). The lack of a universal definition is of concern to many scholars (Duarte, 2016; Graham, 2013). Nevertheless, some scholarly research and seminal authors have described BL and HL, as well as BI and HI, as synonymous terminologies (Graham, 2009; Hrastinski, 2019; Leidl et al., 2020; Richey, 2013). As such, BI and HI as well as BL and HL are used interchangeably in this study. In this study, BI is defined as an instructional design which mixes face-to-face and online (mediated) learning in educationally meaningful ways (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Richey, 2013). BL is defined as an instructional approach in which traditional classroom methods and online digital methods are integrated in educationally meaningful ways (Anoba & Cahapay, 2020; Graham, 2013).

There are many barriers to the successful transition or implementation of BI. These include, but are not limited to, slow internet connections, old computers (Hamza-Lup & White, 2015b) and staff workload issues (Lim et al., 2019). Prior assessment before the introduction or implementation of new technologies and teaching modalities should be conducted (Adekola et al., 2017; Graham et al., 2013; Porter et al., 2016; Tulyakul, 2020; Wong et al., 2014). Even early evaluations throughout the process will assist in early detection of such barriers and possibly early mitigation of such issues (Hamza-Lup & White, 2015b). Additionally, administrators wanting to launch, nurture, and grow an effective BL initiative should consider all factors, which could potentially enhance or derail implementation success and their ability to lead towards successful transitions (Cavanagh et al., 2016; Tulyakul, 2020).

The Importance of Leadership and Leadership Readiness to a BL Transition

The role of school principals has become more complex over the years (Rupp, 2016). Leithwood et al. (2007) indicated that leadership is the second most important factor in high student achievement, coming second only to teacher instruction. As such, the role of an instructional leader is crucial to leading high academic achievement (Leithwood et al., 2007) as well as essential to the implementation of school wide reform (Rupp, 2016). Tulyakul (2020) defined leadership readiness as school leaders' preparedness and

capacities to implement BL and lead others in its adoption; this was the guiding definition of this study.

A review of the literature has found some crucial elements to the importance of leadership and leadership readiness for the successful implementation of a new hybrid approach. Not only are scholars in agreement that leadership is an essential component to transitioning successfully to a BL environment (Acree et al. 2017), but the literature is also clear that leadership readiness is just as important, as leaders must guide, motivate, and support staff to effectively deliver instruction within the new hybrid teaching modality (Antwi-Boampong et al., 2019; Hilliard, 2015; Spring et al., 2016; Wharton-Beck et al., 2024) Some scholars even purport that leadership is not just important, but that it is the most crucial factor towards the successful transition and implementation of BI (Porter & Graham, 2016).

In addition, a comprehensive review of the literature suggests that school leaders must not only ensure their own preparedness to lead but they must also ensure the preparedness of their schools and teachers. As such, administrators must support faculty (Spring et al., 2016) and they must prepare their staff by providing adequate structures, strategies, policies and scaffolding to allow for and promote institutional and teacher readiness for BI (Antwi-Boampong et al., 2019; Dziuban & Picciano, 2015; Lim et al., 2019; Spring et al., 2016; Tulyakul, 2020; Wharton-Beck et al., 2024). As such, it is clear why Hilliard (2015) indicated that leadership teams at all levels needed to ensure strategic readiness, structural readiness, and support readiness to facilitate and achieve teacher and student readiness, thus underscoring leadership readiness as an important driving force towards the other readiness components of institutional readiness for HI. This is supported by Adekola et al. (2017), whose study revealed the importance of linking high-level strategy, operational delivery and effective communication.

Leadership Challenges related to Transitioning to BL

The literature revealed that leaders are often faced with many challenges when transitioning to the blended approach. Kokare and Strautins (2018) conducted a multi-site case study across 15 schools in Latvia which examined issues related to the implementation of BL, including an analysis of leadership challenges. The study was based on the perspectives of school leaders and revealed that different schools and their administrations experienced different challenges based on varying school contexts. At one school, the main challenge was infrastructurally related. The study revealed that at this school, as more users accessed the internet, connectivity issues ensued. However,

leaders at other schools experienced different challenges, including teacher resistance, financial and resource problems, and resistance from students and parents to the BL changes and routines. Other findings showed that more than half of the participants within the fifteen schools were unfamiliar with the meaning of BL and lacked resources, experience, training, systematic use of BL models, skills in BL implementation and aligning practices. The study also concluded that management, leadership, and pedagogy were crucial and interwoven components required for the introduction and successful implementation of BL in schools.

The Importance of Leadership Training and Professional Development

Leadership training, among other supports, can impact leaders' motivation and ability to adopt BL (Antwi-Boampong et al., 2019; Porter & Graham, 2016; Porter et al., 2016). Acree et al. (2017) conducted a mixed-methods study of six pilot schools in the United States of America (USA) and found varying levels of readiness for BL implementation. While some schools were several years into the BL initiatives, others had only just begun, with several schools showing minimal infrastructure and preparedness to support BL effectively. Participants reported that the training was of high quality and effective.

While Acree et al. (2017) agreed that leadership is key in the transition to digital and BL, they found that school principals did not receive adequate professional development and their role in the transition to online modalities, including BL, is often ignored. In fact, these authors indicated that only 9% of federal allocations for educator training programmes go to principals and professional development opportunities for principals are often one-time workshops which are mostly ineffective. Therefore, these authors recommended that school principals receive adequate training on implementing BL, especially considering that the transition to digital and BL represents an evolution in instructional modality, teacher preparation, instruction, and hence, an evolution in the role of principals to lead and implement necessary strategies, structures, and supports to facilitate BL.

Acree et al.'s (2017) findings that school principals received inadequate leadership training, are similar to the results of Wharton-Beck et al.'s (2024) case study which was conducted in the USA. This study investigated K-12 school administrators' preparedness and responsiveness amid the COVID-19 pandemic, including their perceived challenges. Wharton-Beck (2024) found that a slight majority of school leaders were of the view that they did not receive adequate technology training for their specific leadership role.

Acree et al. (2017) purported the importance of a school management team in leading the BL implementation. They suggested high quality training for school leaders, including the principal, in the following areas: defining BL and what it means in one's school, creating a culture which supports BL, adapting teaching and learning to align with BL practices, supporting teachers in a BL environment and addressing the nuts and bolts of implementing and sustaining BL. It is also noteworthy to mention here that Acree et al. (2017) did not only note the importance of leadership and leadership readiness but also implemented an intense training programme for school leaders and then examined their perceptions of the programme and its effect on their preparedness to lead BL implementation and adoption.

Acree et al.'s (2017) findings indicated a feeling of improved leadership readiness among most participants who felt a deepened awareness and understanding, which led to clarified vision for their schools and a better understanding of how to move forward with the BL implementation process. Studies similar to Acree et al. (2017) are needed to advance leadership readiness for BL implementation. This is supported by Rupp (2016), who indicated that the literature does not examine the preparation or training available to K-12 administrators when deciding how to initiate technological change or how to sustain such changes.

Barbour and Ferdig (2012) outlined the leadership activities essential to ensuring teacher readiness for HL, which they considered synonymous with online learning. These activities included: the ability to provide training for teachers to understand K-12 online learning and how it differs from face-to-face learning; knowing how to provide administrative as well as technological support; leading by example and encouraging teachers to take an online class themselves; collecting, analysing, and using data available from online activities; and connecting to other leaders who have participated in online learning experiences. In essence, leadership is the most crucial factor to achieving a successful BL environment on a school scale (Porter & Graham, 2016). Leadership readiness is therefore essential to BL implementation and its sustainability.

Conceptual Framework

The review of the literature revealed that leadership readiness was dependent on and even impacted by various strategies, structures and supports. As such, the conceptual framework for this study incorporated a merger of Wong et al.'s (2014) and Graham et al.'s (2013) BL assessment frameworks, leading to a modified conceptual framework. Wong et al.'s (2014) model highlighted the importance of examining readiness at

different stages throughout the transition period and incorporated staff readiness. Since the present study is about leadership preparedness for and during the transition period, this study modified Wong et al.'s (2014) category of staff readiness to leadership preparedness.

Graham et al.'s (2013) BL assessment framework focuses on three categories for BL assessment: structures, strategies and supports. Structure refers to any technological or policy structures. This includes governance, specification of blended model used, scheduling structures, and evaluation protocols. It also includes investments for establishing and maintaining infrastructural supports such as devices, hardware, software, internet connectivity and all related supports (Duarte, 2016; Graham et al., 2013; Tulyakul, 2020). Strategy refers to any component associated with the overall HL design, including: BL definition, degree of implementation, purpose, establishment of related policies, forms of advocacy such as creating a shared vision, building communication channels, and provision of funding and resources (Duarte, 2016; Graham et al., 2013). Support refers to "the manner in which an institution facilitates the implementation and maintenance of its BL design" (Duarte, 2016, p. 22). This includes any technical and pedagogical support, as well as faculty incentives (Duarte, 2016; Graham et al., 2013). Since the literature is clear that leadership readiness is affected by many factors, including strategy, structure and support (Acree et al., 2017; Adekola et al., 2017; Hilliard, 2015; Kokare & Strautins, 2018), this modified conceptual framework is suitable to underpin this study investigating the factors which affected leadership readiness throughout the transition to HI.

METHODS

The qualitative, single-site case study design was chosen for this study which sought to investigate Management Team perspectives on leadership readiness for BI in a Barbadian secondary school amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative approach, underpinned by the relativist ontology and an emic epistemology, was the best suited for this study of multiple perspectives to garner detailed, rich, thick descriptions while displaying the complexity of leadership readiness and the factors affecting it (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Brynard et al., 2014; Cohen et al., 2018; Lichtman, 2013). The single-site case study research design allowed for an in-depth examination of this unique, context-bound phenomenon from multiple perspectives of a small sample (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Cohen et al., 2018; Rashid et al., 2019; Simons, 2009; Stake, 1995; Tight, 2010; Yin, 2009).

According to Thomas (2011), when planning a case study, the researcher must make a distinction between the subject and the object of the case. The object of the case study is that which the researcher intends to explain or explore. The subject is what or who the researcher will focus on in order to realise the purpose of the case study. Therefore, in this study, the object was leadership preparedness for HI and the subject of the study was the members of the school's Management Team: the Principal, Deputy Principal, Year Heads, Heads of Departments, the Information Technology Coordinator (ITC) and the Guidance Counsellor. As such, the Management Team is also this case's unit of analysis (Stake, 1995).

According to Cohen et al. (2018), when conducting a qualitative case study, the researcher must set the boundaries of the case and conceptualise the object of the study. This case was bounded by time and place. In terms of time, it took place over an eight-month period from May 2020 to February 2021, inclusive of when schools commenced online teaching and the transition period to HI. The case was also bounded by place, whereby the study was conducted using Zoom as this was one of the virtual spaces used by the school to continue the teaching and learning process. The study was conducted at a co-educational secondary school in Barbados, with a student population of approximately 1,100 and a teaching staff population of approximately 60. From amongst the 60 members of the teaching staff were 18 teachers who were also leaders within the school on the management team. The other two management team members were the Principal and the Deputy Principal. Like all other secondary schools on the island, HI was implemented and commenced September 2020, only two weeks after the official announcement regarding this shift in instructional modality.

The management team population therefore consisted of 20 members. Two sampling techniques were used to select the final sample. Purposive sampling was used to select the senior and expert administrators since they were at the forefront of overseeing and managing the transition and since there was only one of each of these specific leadership roles: one Principal, one Deputy Principal, one ITC and one Guidance Counsellor. Purposive sampling was also used to identify the middle managers to be part of the sample: the Year Head and Head of Department subgroups. However, within the Year Head and Head of Department subgroups, convenience sampling was used to select participants from these two subgroups. The final sample was 13 management team members: five males and eight females. In terms of leadership experience, five participants had been in a leadership role for between one and five years. Four had been leaders for over 15 years. Two participants were in leadership roles for between 11 and 15 years and another two members between the six and ten-year ranges.

The use of multiple evidence sources is essential to case studies (Cohen et al., 2018). As such, this study incorporated four data collection methods: questionnaires, interviews, focus group and documents. Questionnaires were the first instrument used to collect data from the management team participants. The researcher obtained responses from all 13 participants. Afterwards, ten participants were solicited for the interviews, however, only nine comprised the final sample for the interviews as one indicated unavailability. Once completed, the focus group was conducted with three members of the management team, who were not selected for inclusion in the interviews. The researcher obtained three documents from members of the sample. Document 1 was the Term 1 Evaluation report of the transition to the blended environment. Document 2 was a document from the METVT entitled *Teacher Expectations*. Document 3 was a METVT flyer entitled *Digital Transformation Loan*, from the Student Revolving Loan Scheme of the METVT.

The questionnaires provided data from all 13 participants on their feelings about their competency to lead the transition to BI, as well as data on factors which would have made them better equipped and or hindered their ability to lead the transition. The interviews garnered data from the Year Heads, Heads of Departments and the Guidance Counsellor, related to their feelings about their leadership readiness, perspectives on the strategies, structures and supports which affected their readiness, and factors which would have better prepared them for leadership in this new environment. The focus group obtained data on all of the above areas, but from the perspectives of three other participants: the Principal, Deputy Principal and the ITC. These three participants were included in the focus group as the questions for the related instrument focused specifically on strategy, structure and support. While the Principal and the Deputy Principal were at the forefront of overseeing and managing the shift and implementation of this new instructional modality, the ITC was also a critical player in its execution. The ITC especially managed and supervised all infrastructural and equipment supports required to ensure readiness for the online component of HI.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2019) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) in six iterative steps. Step one involved familiarising oneself with the data and identifying potential items of interest. Step two entailed generating codes by assigning labels to highlighted items based on the study's conceptual framework. Step three involved grouping codes into initial themes based on central organised ideas. Step four consisted of reviewing initial themes to eliminate overlaps and ensure comprehensive theme development. Step five required defining and naming themes by finalising the central idea

underpinning each theme. Step six involved producing the report by aligning data extracts with final themes. It is important to note that no preconceived codes or themes from theories or literature were used; instead, coding and theme generation were grounded in the participants' voices to align with the inductive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Trustworthiness

The researcher used several data collection methods to triangulate data and hence ensure trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four evaluative criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability were also used.

FINDINGS

Three themes were generated inductively after a long and in-depth reflexive process. The themes are: Insufficient External Governance, Lack of Leadership Training and Systemic Barriers to Readiness.

Theme 1: Insufficient External Governance

Theme 1, Insufficient External Governance, affected leadership readiness. The findings indicated that many participants felt unprepared for the transition to the hybrid environment due to insufficient guidance from the METVT. Focus group participant 1 mentioned, "... we battled with what we were having at our school, but there was ... a lot of uncertainty coming out of the Ministry of Education" Interviewee 1 also noted, "... our Ministry of Education really hasn't given us the kind of support and led from the forefront" Interviewee 4 indicated, "But what were we to do? ... the ministry, as I said, a bit vague [*sic*] ... the guidelines which were vague were very late, it was hard to get information"

Questionnaire responses also indicated the same. Participants indicated feelings of unpreparedness for leadership in this new environment as a result of inadequate guidance from the Ministry. Questionnaire Participant (QP) 2 noted, "No, there is no template to follow The school leaders have tried to create a framework upon which to operate, however, the Ministry of Education hasn't provided much in the way of guidance."

Theme 2: Lack of Leadership Training

Theme 2, a Lack of Leadership Training, showed that this was an issue which affected leadership preparedness to lead competently and confidently towards this new

transition to the blended approach. When participants were asked about their feelings concerning leadership readiness, some indicated that they felt unprepared due to a lack of training to competently fulfil their leadership duties. QPs 1, 10 and 2 noted, respectively, “No, because of a lack of training”; “No, lack of prior leadership training” and “No, training in leadership roles is required.”

Theme 3: Systemic Barriers to Readiness

Systemic Barriers to Readiness was the theme which affected leadership readiness the most, as this theme encompassed several subthemes: Inadequate Structures, Insufficient ITC Personnel and No Boundaries for Non-Working Hours.

Subtheme 1: Inadequate Structures. The findings showed that there were many structural inadequacies: poor Wi-Fi and hence unreliable internet, inability to provide devices, and financial issues. QP 12 noted, “I am concerned about the unreliability of the Wi-Fi.” Focus group participant 1 stated, “The evaluation has shown that the Wi-Fi let us down.” Focus group participant 2 elaborated:

... the lack of infrastructure to provide decent connectivity ... the infrastructure itself was just not there in terms of providing that kind of support needed I think we all understood ... what was expected, but the infrastructure, then that was necessary to deliver [*sic*] on the online content, then posed challenges at the school.

Limited ability to provide devices was another systemic barrier related to inadequate structures. The findings on this inadequacy showed that the system did not facilitate the provision of devices for teachers to do the job required. Interviewee 1 explicitly made mention of this, “... the ITC tried to provide devices for teachers where possible, but the reality is that we don't have that. We don't have, you know, a system in place where we've ensured that teachers have adequate devices” Focus Group Participant 1 noted:

... devices were a problem. You need tools to work with ... but we didn't always get it at the time we needed it and at the pace and the way that we should have gotten it and that created problems for me Problems were created in the delivery of education in the blended environment based largely on that. So that is how it rolled out from the leadership point.

The school leaders' inability to provide sufficient devices was underpinned by the fact that at the systemic level, the employer seemed to be of the view that teachers ought to purchase their own devices to deliver instruction. Focus group Participant 1 stated:

I must say I was very taken aback by this ministry policy ... telling teachers go somewhere and get a loan ... that is how I feel If you gone [*sic*] on a blended, online environment and a teacher is to work with a device, you can't tell the teacher go and get a loan. You don't know teachers' pockets and they've got their own children to support and such like ... because for me telling some person to go and get a loan to buy a device is like, I doing [*sic*] your work, and you telling [*sic*] me that you got [*sic*] to support yourself in terms of travelling allowance. Employers give workers travelling allowance, so that they can travel to do their work. The device is like that.

Documents 2 and 3, provided by one of the interviewees, illustrated the employer's position that they expected teachers to have access to devices and if teachers did not have devices, they could access a loan from a loan fund provided by the employer. Document 2 stated, "As school commences in this online environment there are some expectations required of you as teacher." This was followed by a list of expectations. Expectation four noted, "You should have working laptops or desktops to engage with your students". Document 3 indicated that the teachers could borrow up to \$6000 BBD to purchase equipment for online teaching, at an interest rate of 5.5%.

Financial issues were another structural issue due to the mechanism of how finances were distributed. Focus group participant 1 noted:

... at that time devices were a problem, the Internet access. We were operating in an environment in which the costs of these things, it wasn't always voted in the estimates ... I remember one day, the ITC sent me a requisition for routers ... and I literally had to call them ... and said, "Look, one of these costs \$60 or \$70" and [they were] holding up the whole process by saying that the invoice ain't [*sic*] come through. It can't be no [*sic*] invoice now. I have to get cash. Find cash somewhere to buy these things because something that costs \$60 is holding up the delivery of education across the system I was working with constraints with my hands tied depending on ... to deliver, and that is where the trouble came

Another structural inadequacy had to do with physical structures or classrooms. The classroom designations for the specific blended model implemented at the school were

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due to several reasons: the need to social distance, in-person classes needing the internet for particular activities, and also teachers on campus needing a classroom or area with Wi-Fi to use Google Meet to engage a class of students who were off-campus, and which had been timetabled for online class. These many requirements within the school's blended model added to the issue of limited availability of classrooms and workspaces with adequate Wi-Fi accessibility. Interviewee 2 noted:

... so, it was a case where at best you may have about five or six rooms that had a strong connection and so there was [*sic*] lots of competition for areas where you can have an effective classroom environment because you will [*sic*] be getting feedback from other teachers, the children would be saying 'Oh ma'am, but we can't hear.' You know, other people talking in the background, and so on, so the institution did struggle quite a bit ...

Document 1, the Evaluation Report, also evidenced the issue of limited availability of classrooms and workspaces with adequate Wi-Fi accessibility, "The rooms which were originally set aside as the areas where online teaching was to occur became classrooms." Finally, focus group participant 3 elaborated further on the issue:

I would say that the buildings themselves, the physical buildings, that in itself is a challenge because given the protocols and requirements to have students sit a certain distance away from each other, it meant that having rooms for classes, for full classes really became a challenge.

Subtheme 2: Insufficient ITC Personnel.

Insufficient ITC Personnel was another systemic barrier since only one ITC was assigned to each school. Interviewee 7 noted:

There was a technical man who spent every day, while still teaching his full timetable and while still preparing memos and the like for electronic distribution and while still heading a department, [who] had to be running through the school trying to find Wi-Fi hotspots for teachers to teach while we were running behind him with our open laptops hoping to get a good Internet signal.

Interviewee 1 shared similar sentiments:

He is one man, who also has a timetable ... I think that it is irresponsible for our government to just have one technical person per school and some not at all ... I fully believe that if he is ITC, he just needs to be ITC.

Interviewee 8's account gave further details on this systemic barrier, "... you have over 70-something teachers or over 60 teachers and over 1100 students, there's no way that one person could do everything that needs to be done."

Subtheme 3: No Boundaries for Non-Working Hours.

This finding surrounded the imbalance of working and non-working hours. Several participants noted that there was no workday and no boundaries between working and non-working hours. Focus group participant 3 noted:

... we get a lot of requests, demands from the Ministry, which we often have to respond to sometimes well after hours and in very short notice ... With this environment there's no workday. Your workday doesn't really end because you can receive messages anytime from students, parents, the Ministry, any time after the official end of the day, weekends, Saturdays and Sundays ... and it's constant.

Interviewee 1 also noted, "... he's also our ITC and then he's expected to liaise with the technical persons from the community, the telecoms company on weekends or whenever they decide to show up, he's expected then to be there assisting."

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

According to Hilliard (2015) and Spring et al. (2016), if blended implementation is to be successful on a wide scale, leadership teams and administrators at all levels must be supportive to faculty and facilitate adequate structures to allow for and promote BL. In the Barbadian context, while there are internal administrators at the school level, there are also administrators at the external or ministry level who must provide adequate guidelines to the internal school administrators, as the latter are limited in their decision-making power. This is evidenced by the many examples provided in Theme 1, Insufficient External Governance, and in Theme 3, Systemic Barriers to Readiness. Further, it must be noted that these two themes are underpinned by Graham et al.'s (2013) component of structure, whereby its subcomponents of governance, the infrastructural supports such as devices, Wi-Fi, etc., and investments for establishing these supports, were lacking, and ultimately affected leadership readiness to lead competently for and during the shift to BL.

Theme 2, Lack of Leadership Training, aligned with Acree et al. (2017) and Wharton-Beck et al. (2024), who found that school leaders did not receive adequate leadership training for their specific leadership roles related to the transition to online modalities including BL. Kokare and Strautins (2018) indicated, in their multi-site case study of 15 schools in Latvia, that more than half the participants lacked experience and training. Acree et al.

(2017) outlined areas in which leaders should be trained: defining BL and what it means in one's school, creating a culture which supports BL, adapting teaching and learning to align with BL practices, supporting teachers in a BL environment and addressing the nuts and bolts of implementing and sustaining BL. These outlined areas for leadership training incorporate the specifications mentioned by all the participants for the specific type of leadership training they felt would have improved or increased their readiness to lead the transition towards BI. However, since Insufficient External Governance from Theme 1 and the Systemic Barriers in Theme 2 are for the most part out of the hands of the internal school leaders, some of the leadership training outlined by Acree et al. (2017) may be better suited for the external leaders who are the ones with the power and authority to address the systemic barriers. Such training would have better prepared them to understand what is needed for a transition to the blended approach and to be better equipped to provide the necessary strategies, structures and supports for the internal school leaders.

Theme 3, Systemic Barriers to Readiness, posed the most challenges to leadership readiness. Participants revealed three systemic barriers to leadership readiness: insufficient ITC personnel, no boundaries for non-working hours and inadequate structures such as poor Wi-Fi and Internet, limited ability to provide devices, financial issues and inadequate physical classrooms. While many of these factors are directly related to school readiness, the participants revealed these barriers as factors which affected their readiness to lead the transition and implementation of the blended approach. These findings were not surprising, as according to Antwi-Boampong et al. (2019), Dziuban and Picciano (2015), Lim et al. (2019), Spring et al. (2016) and Tulyakul (2020), administrators must support and prepare staff by providing adequate structures, strategies, policies and supports to allow for and promote institutional and teacher readiness for BI. The findings of this study therefore showed an overlap in leadership readiness and some other institutional readiness factors such as strategic readiness, structural readiness and support readiness; the three pillars of this study's conceptual framework: strategy, structure and support.

It must be noted, however, that since the participants of this study played varying leadership roles, some of the abovementioned factors affected some leaders directly while affecting others indirectly. For example, the leadership role of the ITC is one where he is responsible for everything related to technology and providing advice to the Principal and the Deputy Principal regarding the infrastructural and technological requirements. His ability to lead was therefore hindered by virtue of the fact that there was only one ITC in the school to manage this overwhelming amount of work, especially

considering that the ITC is also a classroom teacher and also usually the Head of the Information Technology department. While this affected the ITC's leadership readiness directly, all the other leaders were also affected, some more directly than others.

In addition, it must also be noted that while the above-mentioned authors, Antwi-Boampong et al. (2019), Dziuban and Picciano (2015), Lim et al. (2019), Spring et al. (2016) and Tulyakul (2020), may have been referring specifically to internal school leaders, the findings of this study highlight the need for the external ministry officials and leaders to lead at the forefront and to provide staff, including the internal school leaders, with the adequate supports, strategies and structures to facilitate internal school leaders' preparedness and ability to lead BL transitions and implementations in their schools. According to Adekola et al. (2017) and Hilliard (2015), leaders at all levels needed to ensure strategic, structural and support readiness. The external school leaders at the macro level in Barbados failed to do this. This is evident in Theme 1, Insufficient External Governance. What is also evident is that there is a relationship between Theme 1, Insufficient External Governance, and Theme 3, Systemic Barriers. In fact, Adekola et al. (2017) purported the importance of the role of senior management in articulating vision to provide leadership by informing strategy.

Furthermore, the finding that Theme 3, Systemic Barriers to Readiness, encompassed numerous inadequate structures resonates with the study by Kokare and Strautins (2018), where they discovered that a major challenge faced by one school was infrastructure-related, including issues with Internet connectivity and access. Similar findings were noted by Adekola et al. (2017), Duarte (2016), Graham et al. (2013) and Tulyakul (2020). While Graham et al. (2013) and Mirriahi et al. (2015) purported these to be some possible problems which could occur during initial adoption of HI, the findings of this study on factors affecting leadership readiness found that these problems continued past the initial transition. However, this is not surprising since the issue of these inadequate structures was undergirded by a greater issue, that being the embedded nature of the inadequacies at a systemic level.

The findings of Kokare and Strautins' (2018) study also found that leaders experienced financial and resource problems. In addition, similar to the findings of this study on factors affecting leadership readiness, were the findings of Adekola et al. (2017), who found that financial support was a crucial component of infrastructure as it was required to provide adequate infrastructures and supports.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Like many other countries worldwide, Barbados is currently engaging in intense discussions about education reform for the future of Barbadian education. Barbados' draft proposal for education reform speaks to a digital transformation agenda and the need for institutional preparedness for online and blended teaching modalities (METVT, 2023). As such, the findings of this paper are timely and relevant. As ministry officials and school leaders continue their collaborative discussions to improve the system, the findings of this study can assist with the development of a well-planned framework for a more successful shift to any model of BI. A review of the findings will allow ministry officials the opportunity to better prepare themselves and school leaders at all levels of the educational arena in Barbados to lead successful transitions to BI within the proposed transformative model of education reform which seeks to include digital and virtual modes of instruction in the Barbadian educational system.

The results of this study implied that there is a need to overhaul and restructure many existing systems within the educational framework to facilitate adequate structures for the improvement of HI. It goes beyond simply providing devices, software and training; rather, it necessitates a comprehensive evaluation and reformation of the system itself to ensure that the necessary structures are integrated into the educational framework, enabling their provision when required. The Barbadian government and its Ministry of Education must ensure proper infrastructure and support, especially quality Wi-Fi and internet reliability. As stated by the participants, the employer must provide the worker with the tools necessary to execute their job. In this context, the METVT must ensure that they provide their school leaders with adequate devices for themselves and their teachers if they are serious about education in this technological age, education reform and their digital agenda for this reform. Further, government must align the educational budget for these new upgrades and improvements to the system, including finances to ensure sustainability.

It is also suggested that the METVT provide quality leadership training and opportunities for quality leadership training based on some of the areas mentioned by Acree et al. (2017): defining BL and what it means in one's school, creating a culture which supports BL, adapting teaching and learning to align with BL practices, supporting teachers in a BL environment and addressing the nuts and bolts of implementing and sustaining BL. As school environments are ever-changing, leadership training should also include modules on how to be adaptable leaders, change leadership and how to sustain transitions to new teaching modalities, including BL adoption.

In conclusion, a review of this study, its findings and recommendations will assist the METVT in recognising participants' perspectives of the system as a barrier, making them aware of the need to make adjustments to the system by resolving factors which affected leadership readiness, bearing in mind that leadership readiness also affected the overall institutional readiness for HI. This is significant as the growth of BI in Barbados would ensure continuation of teaching and learning amid any pandemic and amid natural disasters, which threaten school closures yearly. Further, its significance also relates to the implementation of HI as an alternative, pedagogically driven instructional modality to the traditional approach; hence assisting in the fulfilment of the Barbadian government's education reform.

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