

Effect of COVID-19, Lockdown & Upcoming Exams on Form 5/6 Students in Trinidad and Tobago



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Lower 6 Students of Fatima College

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic was declared on the 11th March, 2020, by the World Health Organization (WHO) and since then various groups and communities of people have had to face severe hardships. The students of the Anglophone Caribbean comprise one of these groups, specifically those secondary-school students sitting the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) examinations. On simply speaking to these students, one gets a glimpse at the various obstacles and challenges that they have to face in attending online school and sitting exams amidst the pandemic; ‘lack of motivation’ and various other effects plague the physical embodiments of the future of the Caribbean. In fact, in Trinidad and Tobago, schools have been closed since the 16th March, 2020.

Thus, this study is being carried out to explore the effect of COVID-19, lockdown and upcoming examinations on students of Forms 5 and 6 in Trinidad and Tobago, in order to arrive at possible sustainable solutions to help students currently and in the future. It is the hope that the findings of this research could potentially aid students, teachers, the Ministry of Education of Trinidad and Tobago and CXC, by revealing the present issues and providing possible short and long-term solutions to address them.

The data being used in this study was obtained using a questionnaire and a random sampling method. The questionnaire (Appendix 1) was created using the website *Google Forms* and it was shared nationwide using *WhatsApp*. It consisted of 21 questions categorised into two broad groups: ‘Health/Well-being of Students’ and ‘Notions on Upcoming Exams’. Collectively, 862 students of Forms 5 and 6 participated, displayed below. All responses were used in the study.

Choropleth Map Showing the Geographical Distribution of Students who Participated in the Questionnaire

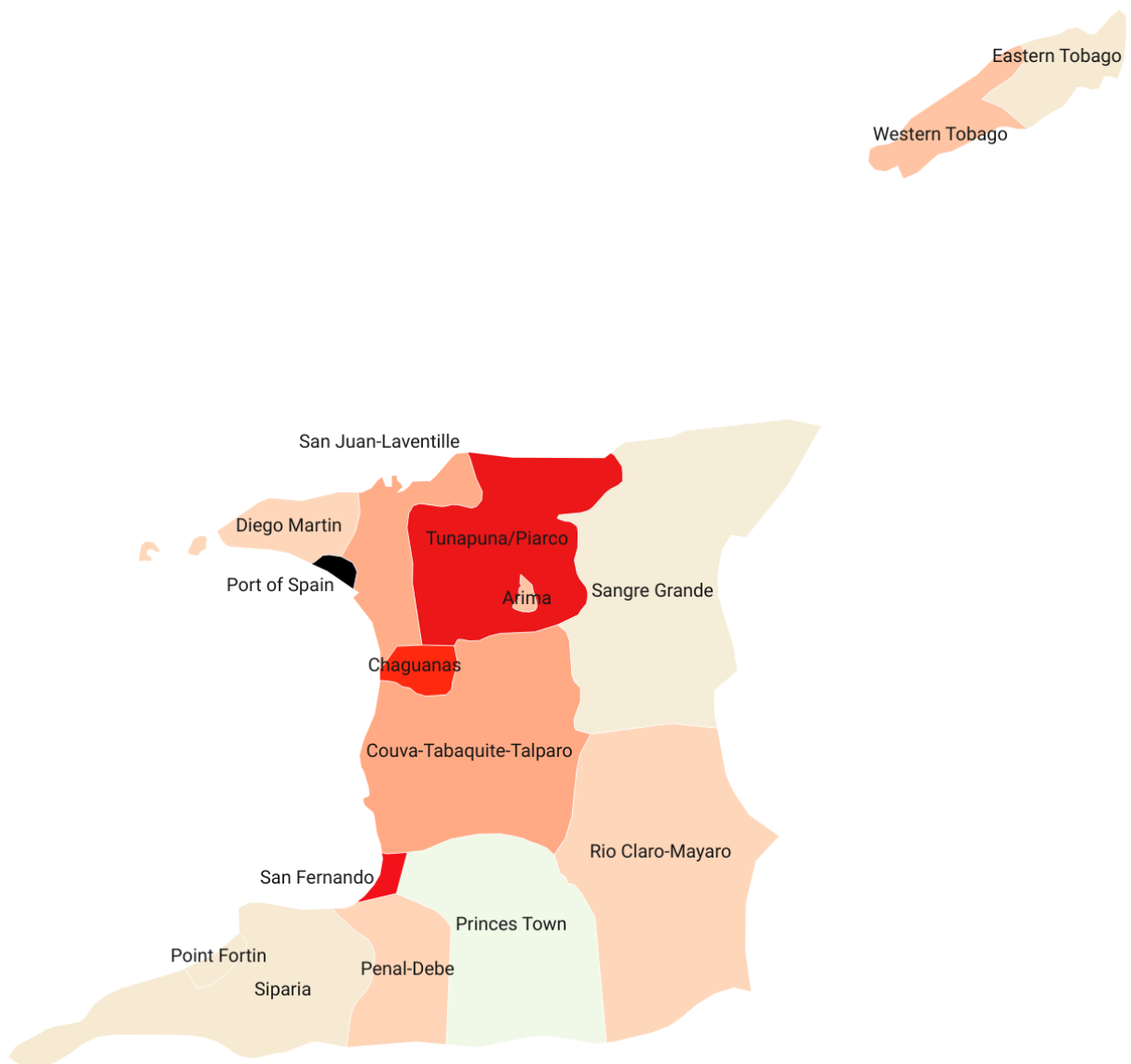


Table 1: Table Showing the Number and Percentage of Students from each Form

| Form | Number of Respondents (Out of 862) | Percentage (%) |
|---------|---------------------------------------|----------------|
| Form 5 | 348 | 40.4 |
| Lower 6 | 290 | 33.6 |
| Upper 6 | 224 | 26.0 |

PRESENTATION & ANALYSIS OF DATA

(Diagrams follow explanations)

1. Health/Well-being of Students

- The first part of the questionnaire assessed the students' health, well-being and experience of online learning. The vast majority of students stated that their greatest challenge to studying was their lack of motivation and inability to focus, with many explaining that there were many distractions in their homes (Textbox 1).

Textbox 1: Textbox Showing a Summary of Students' Responses to the Question, "What is the greatest challenge you face when it comes to studying?"

Predominantly, students stated that the greatest hindrance to their studies was lack of motivation. Furthermore, they stated that they cannot seem to stay focused. Many also revealed that there were many distractions in their homes, where they spend all their time due to COVID-19.

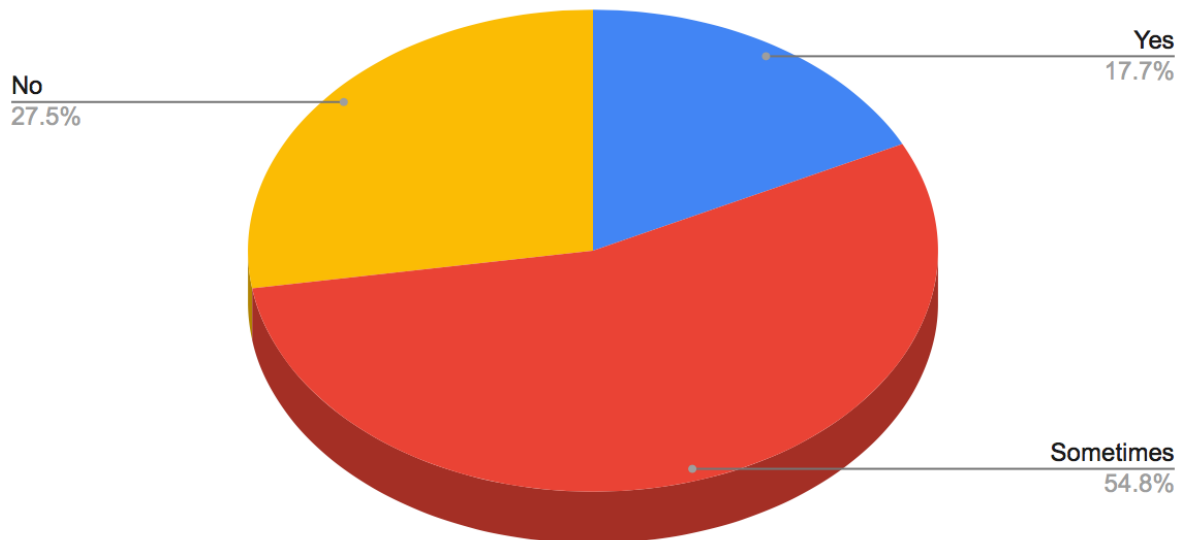
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- When asked what they found was the most effective way of studying, the students gave a variety of responses (Textbox 2). Some preferred to read or make their own notes from a textbook, or by doing online research, while others preferred to do past papers. Some students explained that they studied best at night, perhaps due to there being less distractions. Only 17.7% of students found that studying virtually with friends was helpful. 27.5% found that it was not helpful and the remaining 54.8% found it helpful

only sometimes (Pie chart 1). Some students explained that studying with friends kept them focused while others stated that their friends were distractions (Textbox 3).

Textbox 2: Textbox Showing a Summary of Students' Responses to the Question, "What have you found is the most effective way of studying?/What is the easiest way for you to study?"

Many students found that reading or making notes from a textbook was an effective way of studying. Some preferred to do research online. Almost all found that practicing past papers was very effective. Furthermore, many revealed that they studied best at night due to there being less distractions.

Pie Chart 1: Chart Showing Students' Responses to the Question, "Do you find that studying virtually with friends is helpful?"

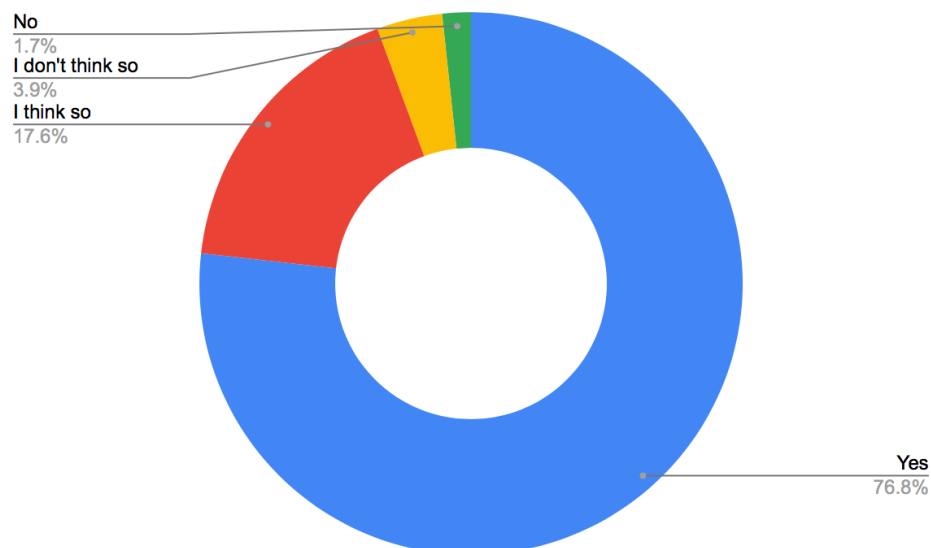


Textbox 3: Textbox Showing a Summary Students' Responses to the Question, "Do you find that studying virtually with friends is helpful?"

Some students revealed that studying with friends could be quite helpful; they could share ideas and information and help them get a different perspective on a topic. Others thought that it was distracting and preferred to study alone.

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- 76.8% of students stated that their mental health had been affected by this time of online learning, isolation or preparation for exams, with many expressing that they were experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety and depression which was obviously impeding their ability to study effectively (Doughnut Chart 1, Textbox 4). In an attempt to alleviate these effects, many students slept, listened to music or exercised (Textbox 5). However, 31.2% of students stated that they engaged in no physical activity at home (Bar Graph 1). Other students cried, meditated, prayed, watched television, played video games or talked to friends (Textbox 5).

Doughnut Chart 1: Chart Showing Students' Responses to the Question, "Has your mental health been affected by this time of online learning/isolation/preparing for exams?"



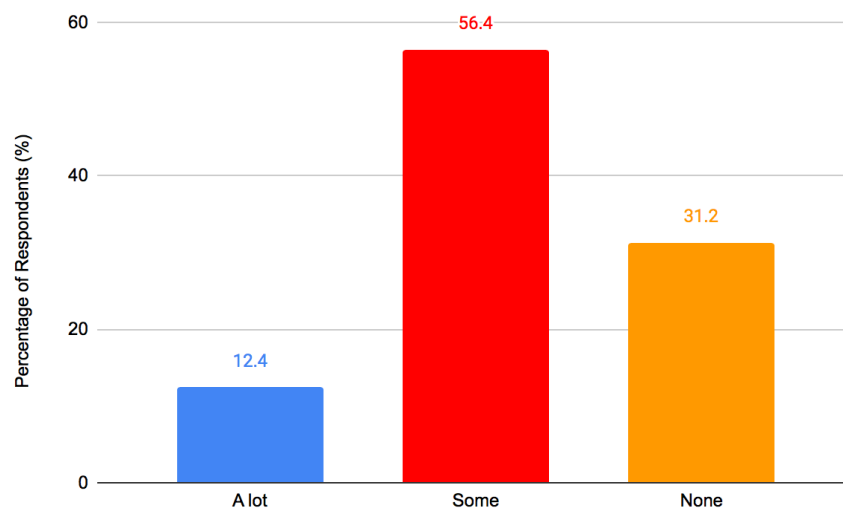
Textbox 4: Textbox Showing a Summary of Students' Responses to the Question, "In what way has your mental health been affected?"

Students expressed that they were feeling high levels of stress and anxiety, even depression.

Textbox 5: Textbox Showing a Summary of Students' Responses to the Question, "If ever you feel stressed or anxious, what do you do to try to alleviate it?"

Some students stated that they prayed, listened to music or exercised when feeling stressed or anxious. They also took naps, meditated, cried at times, watched television, played video-games or associated with friends.

Bar Graph 1: Graph Showing Students' Responses to the Question, "During this lockdown, how much physical activity have you engaged in at home?"



- As expected, 76.3% of students stated that online learning has negatively impacted the quality of education that they have received in the past year (Table 2). While many students were unsure of what would have assisted them with online learning, some felt that classes should have been more interactive while others believed that there should have been less time spent online. Some students thought that certain teachers needed to utilise the technology more effectively while others stated that nothing would have helped them, with some explaining that this is due to the fact that they are practical learners who need hands-on experience. A few students expressed that better devices and Wi-Fi would have improved their online-learning experience (Textbox 6).

Table 2: Table Showing Students' Responses to the Question, "How has online- learning impacted the quality of education that you have received in this past year?"

| Response | Number of Respondents (Out of 862) | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------|
| Positively | 64 | 7.4 |
| Negatively | 658 | 76.3 |
| It has had no effect | 140 | 16.2 |

Textbox 6: Textbox Showing a Summary of Students' Responses to the Question, "What would have assisted you with online learning?"

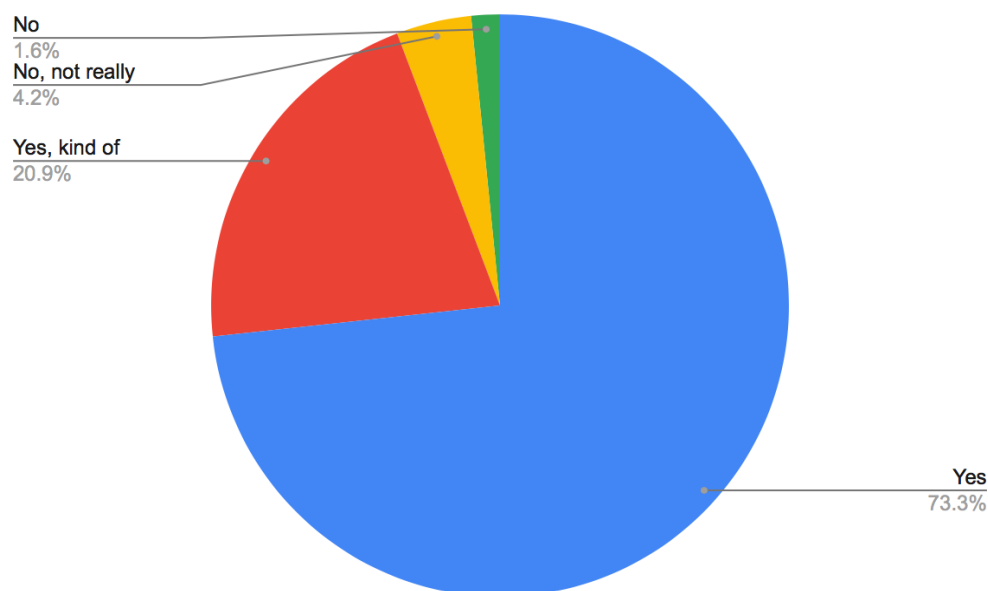
Frankly, some students were unsure on what would have helped them. Some felt that classes should have been more interactive while others believed that there needed to be less time online. Furthermore, students thought that some teachers needed to utilise the technology more effectively. Others stated that nothing would have helped them, explaining that they are practical learners who need hands-on experience. Again, others expressed that better devices and Wi-fi would have improved their online-learning experience.

2. Notions on Upcoming Exams

- The second section of the questionnaire assessed how students felt about the upcoming examinations. 73.3% revealed that they were worried about how they would perform in the upcoming CXC examinations (Pie Chart 2). When asked what advice they would give to their peers facing this challenge, some gave worthwhile pieces of advice, such as making a properly structured plan or schedule and keeping desired goals to the forefront, studying in many short sessions, getting sufficient hours of sleep or associating with friends as much as possible. Still, many reiterated that they faced the same issue and disclosed that they themselves needed advice. Others gave subpar, unsustainable solutions (Textbox 7). Furthermore, many students felt that there was not anything that their school could do to alleviate any of their stress or worries, though there were some worthwhile suggestions. These included holding regular counseling sessions with

guidance counselors or having mental health support groups to ensure that students were not neglecting their mental health (Textbox 8).

Pie Chart 2: Chart Showing Students' Responses to the Question, "Are you worried about how you will perform in your upcoming exams?"



Textbox 7: Textbox Showing a Summary of Students' Responses to the Question, "What advice would you give to someone who is struggling to find motivation and who does not believe they will do well in these upcoming exams?"

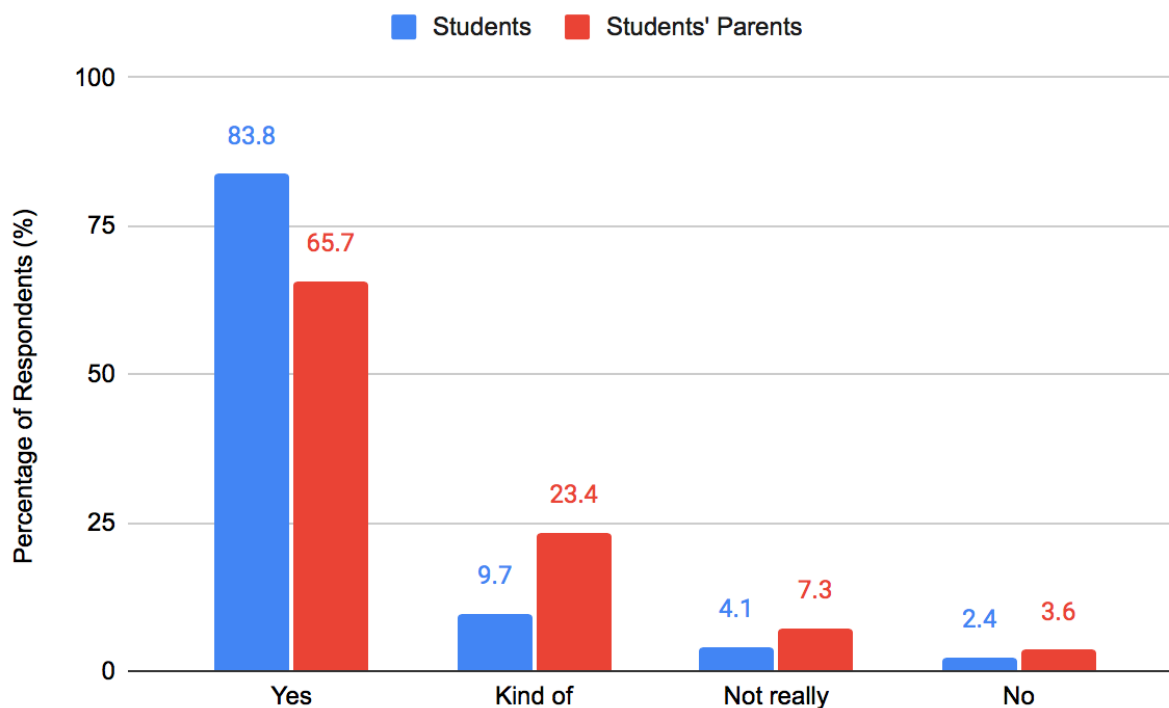
Some students suggested making a structured plan and keeping desired goals to the forefront, studying in many short sessions, getting sufficient hours of sleep or associating with friends as much as possible. Many stated that they faced lack of motivation and focus and disclosed that they themselves needed advice. Others' advice was not well thought out.

Textbox 8: Textbox Showing a Summary of Students' Responses to the Question, "Do you think that your school can do anything/implement anything to help alleviate any stress/anxiety? And if so, what?"

Students suggested that their schools hold regular counseling sessions to ensure that students are not neglecting their mental health with guidance counselors. Others suggested having mental health support groups. *

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- It was not surprising that 93.8% of students were to some extent worried about taking in-person exams during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, 89.4% of students revealed that their parents were genuinely worried for them to take in-person exams (Bar Graph 2). A large number of students felt that the number of daily cases in Trinidad and Tobago had to drastically decrease in order for them to feel more comfortable and safe taking the exam in-person (Textbox 9).

Bar Graph 2: Graph Showing Students' and Parents' Responses to the Question, "Are you worried about *taking/your child taking* an exam in-person given the current COVID-19 situation in our country?"

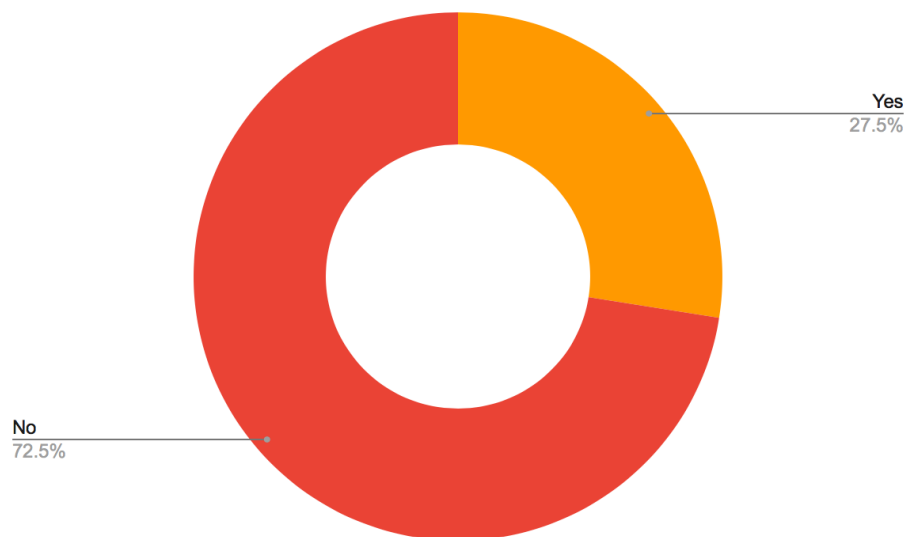


Textbox 9: Textbox Showing a Summary of Students' Responses to the Question, "For you to feel more comfortable taking the exam, what needs to happen in our country with regard to the COVID-19 situation?"

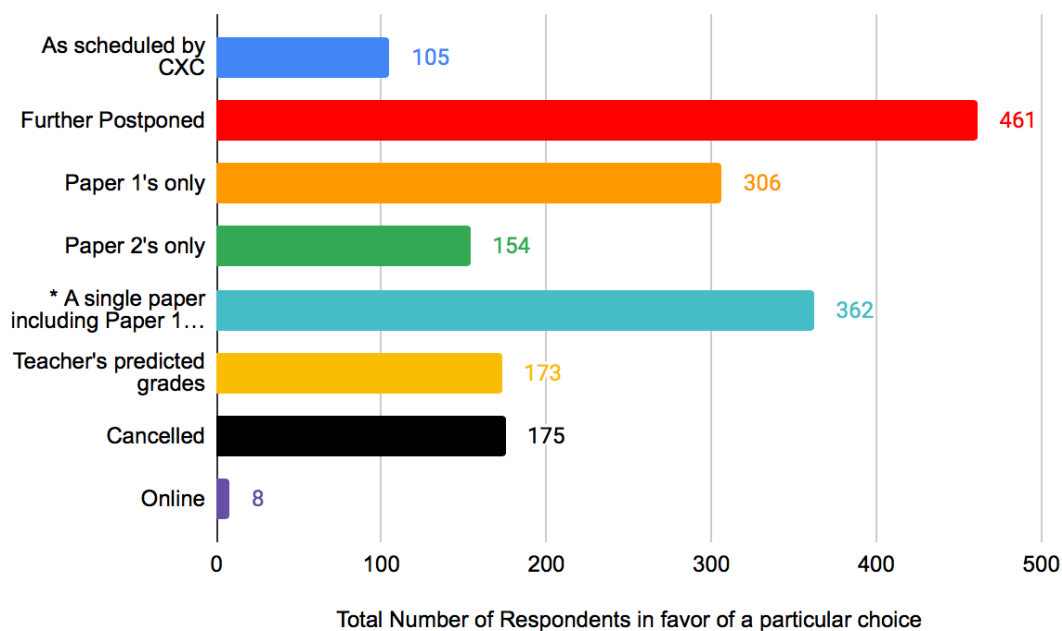
Mainly, students felt that the number of COVID-19 cases needed to go down dramatically in order for them to feel safe taking the upcoming exams.

- The majority of students, 72.5%, did not agree with CXC's recent decision to postpone the examinations by two weeks and administer both papers (Doughnut Chart 2). Instead, most respondents felt that exams needed to be further postponed. The second most popular choice was to have a single paper containing both Paper 1 and Paper 2 questions for each subject, and the third most popular choice was to solely administer Paper 1's (Bar Graph 3). However, in direct contrast to the latter, 68.9% of students admitted that the sole administering of Paper 1's was not an accurate representation of students' capabilities (Pie Chart 3). Many stated that Paper 2's more accurately displayed how students were able to apply their knowledge with very few stating that paper 1's were sufficient to test students (Textbox 10).

Doughnut Chart 2: Chart Showing Students' Responses to the Question, "Do you agree with CXC's recent decision to postpone the examinations by two weeks and administer both papers?"



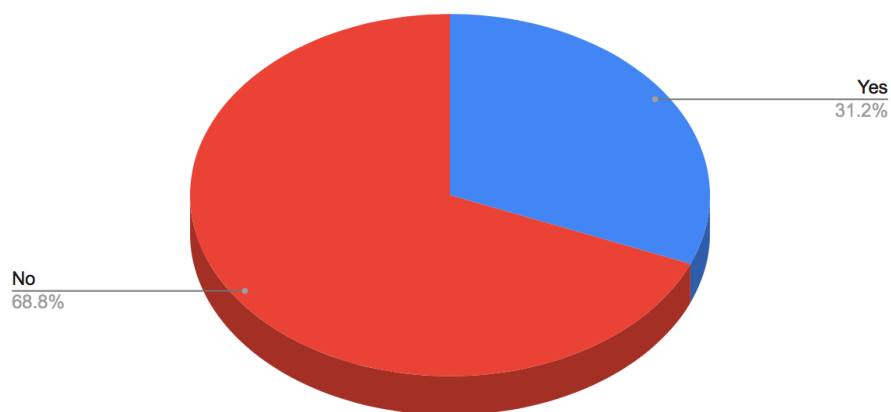
Bar Graph 3: Graph Showing Students' Responses to the Question, "How do you think the upcoming CXC Exams should be held in our country?"



(Students were able to choose more than one option)

(* A single paper including Paper 1 and Paper 2 questions)

Pie Chart 3: Chart Showing Students' Responses to the Question, "Do you think that having Paper 1's only would give an accurate representation of students' capabilities?"



Textbox 10: Textbox Showing a Summary of Students' Responses to the Question, "Do you think that having Paper 1's only would give an accurate representation of students' capabilities?"

Students admitted that solely administering Paper 1's would not accurately measure students' capabilities. Many thought that paper 2's would accurately display how students were able to apply their knowledge.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that now more than ever, students need not merely academic support, but also mental support. This particular response to the open-ended question, “In what way has your mental health been affected?”, captures the reality that exam students are facing currently:

“Waves of sadness due to constant school pressure.... With physical school there is a balance with friends, extra curricular (distractions) and then I make time for school work which is how I work best to avoid “burning out” but because of the switch (which was unfortunately inevitable due to the virus) I’m home 24/7 on the online platform doing school work with no other escape outlets unfortunately. In terms of preparation for exams, it is difficult to keep a momentum because studying tends to get monotonous so it’s hard to find ways to make studying fun/enjoyable as everyday is pretty much the same.”

Humans are social creatures who have evolved to feel safe in groups. Thus, when people are deprived of social connections they feel lonely and it is this loneliness that signals to them that they need to form deep social connections for their own safety. However, when prevented from making such connections, such as during this lockdown, people’s bodies react by producing the stress hormone, cortisol, which keeps them alert to threat. Their bodies enter a state of increased inflammation to heal any injuries that they may get and sleep is shallower so that they can awake to danger. However, if this state is prolonged it can take a significant toll on one’s body which explains why perpetually lonely people are at greater risk of physical, mental and emotional problems and have weakened immune systems. It is thus clear why the majority of students have indicated that their mental health has been affected.

Though difficult in the virtual setting, teachers must pay close attention to their students and not only guide them on how to complete items in an examination but also connect with them on an emotional level through compassion. It can be assumed that the mental well-being of teachers too has been affected by these circumstances and so this can be a source of empathy and a way of starting the conversation.

Classmates and friends must make every effort to maintain contact with each other for the sake of their social well-being. Because exam students are all under similar circumstances, they understand the challenges being faced better than anyone else and it is for this reason that they should give and lean on each other for support.

As the heads of the house, parents should lead their children with love and courage. They too must be mindful of their own mental health at this time, try to respond instead of reacting and show their children that it is okay to make mistakes sometimes. Parents can seek to understand what their sons and daughters are experiencing and can motivate them perhaps by discussing their plans for the future as this will give them a purpose for their work. Parents can also care for their children's physical needs and ensure that their lives are balanced with exercise and recreation as physical well-being is not independent of mental health and academic performance.

If signs of mental illness or a severe decline of mental health are identified, then professional help from a therapist or psychologist should be sought. For such cases, the affiliation of mental health professionals and guidance counsellors with schools is of great importance. However, the implementation of mental health systems in schools is not common in Trinidad and Tobago.

Consideration can be given to the provision of mental health support to students online in one-on-one or group sessions thereby increasing the reach and efficiency of these services which can be continued even beyond the pandemic.

The reason both students and parents are uncomfortable with the physical administration of CXC examinations starting at the end of June is clear. Not only are they worried of getting infected but it is also highly probable that during the course of exams, another student would test positive for COVID-19, in which case the school would be closed down in order to effectively contain the spread thereby preventing the continuation of exams. Many students felt the exams should be further postponed. Students suggested that one paper be given per subject containing a combination of Paper 1 (multiple choice questions) and Paper 2 (structured questions/essays) questions or a Paper 1 alone possibly in order to minimize the time spent in the examination room, where they could potentially be in contact with teachers, students or others with the virus. However, the consensus was that Paper 1s exclusively are not an accurate representation of students' capabilities.

LIMITATIONS

Some geographical areas were underrepresented in the questionnaire. Thus, the data may not reflect accurately the crucial opinions of some students from these areas. Furthermore, although anonymity was preserved, there is still no guarantee that all respondents answered with complete truthfulness which may, as a result, affect some of the data.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the combination of COVID-19, the lockdown and upcoming exams has had and continues to have a substantial impact on students of Form 5 and 6 in Trinidad and Tobago. Many students are lacking the motivation and focus required to study effectively and the majority have stated unequivocally that their mental health has been affected. Students have found various ways to try to alleviate stress and anxiety with more than half engaging in some amount of physical activity. However, their ability to live balanced lives at this time has been compromised.

Students are worried about taking the upcoming CXC examinations, not merely because of how they fear they may perform, but also because of the high number of cases of COVID-19 in Trinidad and Tobago. As such many feel that the examinations should be postponed or altered. Students shared what they felt would have assisted them with online-learning but the consensus was that the quality of education received in the past year was negatively impacted by online-learning.

It is the hope that the CXC examinations will be administered in a way that is first and foremostly safe while also fair, allowing for an accurate representation of students' capabilities. Furthermore, based on these findings, it seems critical for the sake of the mental health and education of the students of Trinidad and Tobago, that beyond these exams the returning of students to school be prioritised such that, to paraphrase Dr. Eric Williams, the children can carry the future of Trinidad and Tobago in their school bags, once more.

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Let There Be Health. (2020, April 3). *Your Brain On Social Distancing: Loneliness & Isolation During The COVID-19 Coronavirus* (Video). Youtube. <https://youtu.be/xAbQSqU3Ofg>

APPENDIX

Questionnaire

1. What form are you in?

Form 5 ()

Lower 6 ()

Upper 6 ()

2. What area is your school in?

Arima ()

Chaguanas ()

Couva-Tabaquite-Talparo ()

Diego Martin ()

Eastern Tobago ()

Penal-Debe ()

Point Fortin ()

Port of Spain ()

Princes Town ()

Rio Claro-Mayaro ()

San Fernando ()

San Juan-Laventille ()

Sangre Grande ()

Siparia ()

Tunapuna-Piarco ()

Western Tobago ()

3. What is the greatest challenge you face when it comes to studying?

4. What have you found to be the most effective way of studying?/What is the easiest way for you to study?

5. Do you find that studying virtually with friends is helpful?

Yes ()

Sometimes ()

No ()

Why?

6. Has your mental health been affected by this time of online learning/isolation/preparing for exams?

Yes ()

I think so ()

I don't think so ()

No ()

7. In what way has your mental health been affected?

8. How has online learning impacted the quality of education that you have received in this past year?

Positively ()

Negatively ()

It has had no effect ()

9. What would have assisted you with online learning?

10. If ever you feel stressed or anxious, what do you do to try to alleviate it?

11. During this lockdown, how much physical activity have you engaged in at home?

A lot ()

Some ()

None ()

12. Are you worried about how you will perform in your upcoming exams?

Yes ()

Yes, kind of ()

No, not really ()

No ()

13. What advice would you give to someone who is struggling to find motivation and who does not believe they will do well in these upcoming exams?

14. Do you think that your school can do anything/implement anything to help alleviate any stress/anxiety? And if so, what?

15. Are you worried about taking an exam in-person given the current COVID-19 situation in our country?

Yes ()

Kind of ()

Not really ()

No ()

16. If you answered 'yes' or 'kind of' to the last question; for you to feel more comfortable taking the exam, what needs to happen in our country with regard to the COVID-19 situation?

17. Are your parents worried about you taking an exam in-person given the current COVID-19 situation in our country?

Yes ()

Yes, kind of ()

No, not really ()

No ()

18. Do you agree with CXC's recent decision to postpone the examinations by two weeks and administer both papers?

Yes ()

No ()

19. How do you think the upcoming CXC Exams should be held in our country? (You can check more than one box where appropriate, for example, 'Postponed' &/or 'Paper 1's only'.)

As scheduled by CXC (as of 26/5/21) ()

Further postponed ()

Paper 1's only ()

Paper 2's only ()

A single paper including Paper 1 and Paper 2 questions ()

Teachers' predicted grades ()

Cancelled ()

Other _____

20. Do you think that having Paper 1's only would give an accurate representation of students' capabilities?

Yes ()

No ()

21. Why?
