

A brief story of my PhD journey

Dr. Nirjala Ramnarine

Recipient of the Most Outstanding Graduate Researcher Award

The Early Days

Earning my PhD is a dream come true, and words cannot fully capture how honoured and excited I am to have successfully completed this most prestigious programme. In addition, receiving the Most Outstanding Graduate Researcher Award is a most welcomed and incredible honor.

The journey started in 2014 after the completion of my Master's in Education. I graduated with a distinction and decided to enroll in the PhD programme because I was interested in continuing the research I started under the Master's programme, and I wanted to upgrade my knowledge. My supervisor, close friends and family encouraged me to take the leap into this new challenge. Although I knew I had the ability, a few doubts circulated in my mind, and I delayed starting the PhD programme until Semester 2 of the 2015-2016 academic year.

Overcoming Challenges

I completed all the compulsory courses first and then focused on my thesis. All the sessions, in all my courses were face-to-face in nature which required me to drive for ninety minutes after work to sit in three-hour-long information rich classes. These classes were at times overwhelming, but they provided an opportunity for us to socialize, share our experiences, and engage in fruitful discussions as we all tried to analyse and discuss ways in which we could improve the educational system.

In 2016 and 2019, I had my two daughters, and in 2020 I constructed and moved into my new home while the world was battling the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, I took two years leave of absence to

attend to the needs of my family after which I rose to the challenge of managing being a mother, having a full time job and studying part time. I was also engaged in yearly seasonal work as a CXC Moderator and a CSEC e-marker.

The PhD Juggle

Doing the PhD required me to maintain a balance between an active, healthy lifestyle and my academic life. I focused on my job during the day, spent time with my family in the afternoon and used the night time and vacation periods to focus on my thesis. A lot of sacrifices were made throughout the journey which required me to be self-motivated. I continuously reminded myself that one of the main reasons why I needed to complete the programme was to improve the assessment system in our country.

My Support System!

The journey was not without obstacles and disappointments, but these contributed to my growth and resilience. For instance, data collection was the most cumbersome part as I was required to physically visit schools across Trinidad and Tobago to collect data, and in 2019 I had to decline a scholarship because of my pregnancy. During periods when I felt overwhelmed or my responsibilities became unmanageable, I chose to pause sometimes for several days or extended periods, and I engaged in physical activities, participated in social interactions, or allocated time to safeguard my mental well-being. My strong support system of friends and immediate family who encouraged me and were a constant source of motivation also assisted me to overcome all the hurdles, and these experiences allowed me the opportunity to grow and develop as an academic.

Thank you, Professor De Lisle!

In addition to my personal support system, my Supervisor, Professor Jerome De Lisle, always supported me with great mentorship and guidance in the best way possible. He always encouraged group work and

collaboration with fellow post-graduate students thus creating a professional support system. We met virtually and shared our knowledge, developed our research skills and worked collaboratively to produce several pieces of work either for publication or to present at conferences. They were most instrumental in contributing to the 2025 Most Outstanding Graduate Researcher Award.

My PhD program not only provided me with knowledge regarding educational assessment, but also transformed, shifted and nurtured my beliefs, thoughts and values. I thank God for giving me the wisdom, strength and passion to continue every day of this journey.

My Academic Background

I am currently a secondary school Physics teacher. I completed a Bachelor of Science in Physics and Mathematics (minor), Post-Graduate Diploma in Educational (Science), Master of Education (Science) and Doctor of Philosophy in Education at the University of the West Indies. I was trained in Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with Mplus at Todd Little Stats Camp (2019) in Albuquerque, New Mexico. In addition to these academic qualifications, I am involved in research and specialize as a facilitator for teacher professional development sessions in the field of educational measurement, assessment and evaluation. I was also part of a research team which produced the following output:

I. Book Chapters

Ramsawak-Jodha, N., De Lisle, J., Kronberg, C., Alexander, V., Lucas, T. M., **Ramnarine, N.**, ... & Phillip, S. (2024). Public examinations in the Anglophone Caribbean education systems. In S. Fraser-Burgess, J. De Four-Babb, V. Knight, Oluseyi M. Odebiyi, A. V. A. Allert, I. A. Salami (Eds.) *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Caribbean and African Studies in Education*.

II. Conference Presentations

- 1) Kronberg, C., Ramsawak-Jodha, N. and **Ramnarine, N.** (2024) Using padlet to facilitate formative assessment activity in a tertiary environment. Paper presented at 2024 TTATE Virtual Conference, Trinidad.
- 2) De Lisle, J., Braithwaite, R., Ramsawak-Jodha, N., Mark-Worrell, N., Phillip, K., **Ramnarine, N.** (2024, April). Integrating Transformative SEL into formative

classroom assessment. Paper presented at 2024 NCME Annual Conference in Philadelphia.

- 3) De Lisle, J., Ramsawak-Jodha, N., Alexander, V., Lucas, T., Phillip, S., Phillip, K., Harry, S., Kronberg, C., Mark-Worrell, N., **Ramnarine, N.**, and Sambucharan, M. (2023) Using Joint Displays for Integration to Explore Trust in Caribbean Public Examinations during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Presented at UWI Fourth Regional Mixed Methods Conference.
- 4) Kronberg, C., De Lisle, J., Ramsawak-Jodha, N., Sambucharan, M., Alexander, V., Harry, S., Lucas, T., Phillip, K., Phillip, S., **Ramnarine, N.**, Mark-Worrell, N., Claxton, P., Brathwaite Cummings, R. and Boodoo, R. (2023). Towards a Taxonomy for Sources of Construct-Irrelevant Variance in the School Based Assessment. Paper presented at 2023 IAEA Conference. Kingston, Jamaica. Theme “Digitalising Assessments and Credentials”
- 5) Ramsawak-Jodha, N., Lucas, T., De Lisle, J., Kronberg, C., Mark, N., Alexander, V., **Ramnarine, N.**, Sambucharan, M. (2022, April). *Wavering trust in public examinations: Stakeholder perceptions of validity and fairness during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Paper presented at the 2022 AERA Annual Convention. [Best Proposal Prize for Caribbean and African Studies SIG]
- 6) De Lisle, J. & **Ramnarine, N.** (2022, October). Applying validity theory to evaluate adaptations to public examinations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Paper presented at the IAEA conference, Mexico.
- 7) De Lisle, J, Herbert, S., & **Ramnarine, N.** (2016, April) *The analytic value of an interpretation/use argument for the 11+ examinations in Trinidad and Tobago*. Paper presented at Roundtable on April 8-12 at the 2016 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Conference Theme: “Public Scholarship to Educate Diverse Democracies” Washington DC., US.
- 8) De Lisle, J (2020, January). Title: *The Caribbean Experience of Public Examinations in a Time of Crisis*. Three papers resented to the Network: Crisis Response in Education Network
 - Presentations in the Symposium
 - i Are Public Examinations a Constraint on System Improvement? Lessons Learned in a Pandemic
Jerome De Lisle (Discussant & Chair)
 - i Do We Even Need a Placement Examination in a Pandemic? The Trinidad and Tobago 11+ in Crisis
Nalini Ramsawak-Jodha, **Nirmala Ramnarine-Sinanan**, Tracey Lucas
 - i When Trust in a Public Examination Agency Erodes: CXC and the CAPE/CSEC 2020 Debacle
Carla Kronberg, Murella Sambucharan, Nicola Mark

- 9) De Lisle, J. (2019, February)-Symposium-Presented at the UWI Schools of Education Biennial Conference, February 19-21, 2019. UWI, St. Augustine. Symposium Title: *Paradigms, perspectives, and variants: Painting an onto-epistemological kaleidoscope*
- i *Two researchers explore classic and constructivist variants of grounded theory-* Ms. Kathy-Ann Lewis & Ms Sabrina Macmillan Solomon
 - ii *Narrative analysis as a tool for understanding resilience —* Ms. Alicia Lucien Baptiste
 - iii *Exploring design variants of MMR- more than timing, points of interface, and emphases-* - Dr Rhoda Mohammed and Dr Alicia Gayah-Batchasingh
 - iv *Exploring qualitatively driven MMR designs -from argument-based validation to creativity--* Ms. **Nirmala Ramnarine**, Ms. Tracey Lucas, & Ms. Janet Ramnanan-Mungroo
 - v *Is epistemological diversity of value in education research in the Caribbean?* Discussant & Chair Professor Jerome De Lisle

III Professional recognition/Awards received for thesis work

Best paper proposal in the Caribbean and African Studies in Education (CASE) SIG at the 2016 American Educational Research Association, Washington, DC., US.

De Lisle, J, Herbert, S., & Ramnarine, N. (2016, April) The analytic value of an interpretation/use argument for the 11+examinations in Trinidad and Tobago. Paper presented at Roundtable on April 8-12 at the 2016 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Conference Theme: “Public Scholarship to Educate Diverse Democracies” Washington DC., US.

The IAEA 2019 Frances M. Ottobre Distinguished Student Scholarship.

I could not accept the scholarship because of pregnancy

AERA Caribbean and African Special Interest Group- the 2022 best paper proposal award for CASE-SIG

Ramsawak-Jodha, N., Lucas, T., De Lisle, J., Kronberg, C., Mark, N., Alexander, V., **Ramnarine-Sinanan, N.**, Sambucharan, M. (2022, April). *Wavering trust in public examinations: Stakeholder perceptions of validity and fairness during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Paper presented at the 2022 AERA Annual Convention.

Here's What My PhD Investigated

An interpretive/use argument (IUA) is described as the proposed interpretations and uses of test scores identified in a network of claims, inferences, assumptions, and decisions. The IUA is considered as the first stage of an argument-based validation (ABV) that is followed by the validity argument. In this first

stage, evidence is gathered on the plausibility and coherence of the argument, leading to an evaluation of the most ambitious claims. My thesis builds an IUA for School Based Assessment (SBA) in the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) public examinations. A critical and ambitious claim is that SBA can be used for formative purposes even with the high stakes purpose of the examination. Although teachers might use SBA activities to provide a mark for a skill that is being assessed (summative), arguably, formative assessment is essential for increasing student knowledge, skills, and understanding in a specific discipline. Thus, the study used educational measurement tools to explore the issue of synergy and tension between formative assessment and SBA.

A qualitatively driven mixed method research design was employed to capture a thorough understanding of individuals' lives in their respective worlds. Document analysis was used to develop the interpretive/use argument from policy documents and then evidence was gathered for the validity argument using multilevel modelling, interviews and observations. The results showed that teachers' espoused beliefs contradicted their practices in the classroom as they highlight factors such as class size, workload and assessment competency significantly impacting their use of formative assessment in SBA. Teachers practiced weak formative assessment where aspects such as peer and self-assessment were not fostered. This weakens the claim made by the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) that SBA can be successfully used for formative purposes and highlights the need for a large scale professional development exercise for teachers on implementation of formative assessment.