

Chapter 12

Intersectionality and Compromise: Enacting Government Policies in the Caribbean



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Abstract The Caribbean as a region managed the education delivery response to COVID-19 through policy that emphasised a holistic government approach. Though each State maintains its sovereign right, throughout the various phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, locally governed Ministries of Education (Carrington, 1993) created guidance for what and how education was to continue in this region. This approach produced unique ways of continuing primary and secondary school education in the region. It also inevitably had unintended outcomes that many other regions experienced but few could quantify and qualify as to its impact on education as we knew it. Some of the unintended outcomes included how ministerial mandates were translated into actionable activities by teachers, parents and students given the challenges to financial, technological, and teaching resources. This chapter uses the pandemic as the landscape within which the stories of a variety of stakeholders (i.e., teachers, principals, parents) from the pre-tertiary sectors, in select countries outline points of intersectionality and compromise. This thus illustrates how solutions were formalised and actioned, as well as drawing on similarities and differences to extrapolate into a regional and international view.

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1 Introduction

In March 2020 the world was brought to a relative halt as borders closed, with limited international travel and the implementation of physical distancing. These measures impacted the education sector with educational imperatives being moved from the school to the home and where teachers developed new forms of juggling abilities to ensure the continuation of education at home; both for their own children, where need be and the students. Technology became the bridge that connected us while *physically-distancing* and the predominant means for communicating the impact of COVID-19 both internationally and regionally. Like hand sanitisers, technology, its software and hardware became precious and limited resources. The lack of access deepened the divide between those who have traditionally been able to fully participate in education and those who tended to operate on the periphery of participation.

Ministries of Education in the Caribbean made public the inter-sectoral government approach to managing COVID-19 disruptions. Taking close lead from Health Ministries and seeking the support of Ministries with responsibility for social welfare to help manage the care and wellbeing of students, managing collaborative efforts to refocus on physiological (e.g., meals) and safety needs were important (Denton et al., 2002; Maslow, 1943). If meals were a challenge, computers, tablets, mobile devices, wi-fi and associated utilities while critical, for these families would not have been thought to be essential.

On the other hand, for the students who did have access to the technology and were able to participate in online instruction, they experienced other challenges such as sharing devices with their parents or siblings, creating scheduling conflicts for all. Teachers who were anxious about using online technologies to deliver face to face pedagogy were in need of structured professional development and, teachers who were parents battling with the need to have their own children access [the family] devices were faced with a confronting conundrum. The COVID-19 pandemic was an experience of dilemmas and compromises where there was no perfect response, just a compromise of actions and resources that were limited.

Given the varying views of stakeholders and the ways in which their own realities governed their ability to act and conceive of alternative possibilities, oftentimes the determinations of decision makers found no easy fit in the context of the homes for children and teachers. Governmental policies and directives were difficult to implement as conceived. Teachers and leaders had to find ways to bridge the divide between policy and practice, requiring extensions and even the blurring of the personal and professional selves. Educational continuity during a public health crisis where teachers, students and their families were equally at risk was a problem of match, fit and suitability. This chapter outlines five lived-experiences as cases where attempts were made to enact government policies and directives as designed. The cases provide different lens, approaches, and rationales for implementing solutions which when shared can influence the impact of what is intended and what actually

occurs during decision-making. Each contributor answered/considered the following questions in their narratives:

1. What directives regarding education were provided from your Government?
2. How did these directives influence your teaching activities and how you home-schooled your children?
3. What other decisions did you have to make (re: your life, family, etc.) to support educational activities?

2 Pandemic Pedagogy: The Caribbean as a Region

The Caribbean is made up of more than 700 islands, with 13 countries and 15 dependent territories speaking six languages. This makeup within the region is a reflection of its history with further influences as to how each society established their own governance and independence. The education system reflects the changes in governance and worldly norms all associated in some part to decolonisation of the region (Carrington, 1978). The education sector is divided into pre-primary, primary, secondary, technical, and vocational (tech-voc), teacher training and tertiary. The sector is mostly publicly-run meaning that governments are largely charged with providing education to each of their constituents through Ministries of Education or similarly-structured departments. The Minister of Education, along with advisors provide all of the decision-making for how schools are resourced, are financed and what curriculum is provided. Schools are managed by a Principal with the job of ensuring that all directives sent from the government are implemented. The challenge of how to implement any decisions provided from the Ministry provides an impetus for open discourse on interpretations, rationalising belief systems and in itself, reflecting and hypothesing on situational implementations given the current phenomenon being experienced by all (Sawyer & Norris, 2009).

3 Experiences during the Pandemic

3.1 Methods

The following narratives used a duo-autoethnographic approach which systematically analyses lived experiences along with anecdotal evidence as a way to connect an autobiographical story to wider, cultural, political, and social meanings and understanding occurring around one centralised problem. To this end, the authors self-reflected on their own experiences of differences through the recreation of in situ perceptual meaning of implementing educational solutions during the COVID-19 pandemic in the region (Sawyer & Norris, 2015). The duo-autoethnography method allows researchers to use dialogue to develop a higher

form of consciousness leading to solutions, a call to action and recommendations for the future. These narratives, weaved together, create one story focused on *the why*, all discuss the use of technology as a way to achieve the directed solutions; yet each story demonstrates the complexity of each context and the ability or inability to achieve the intended learning experience. The story is supported by newspaper articles and perspectives of consultants external to the educational system who are from the native region. This form of triangulation seeks to bring new meaning to the intentions and the interpretations of what was implemented and experienced. Thus, using the duo-autoethnographic method allows for a disruption of the implicit meta-narrative and provides readers with an experience witnessed by multiple perspectives (Norris et al., 2012).

The story of teaching during the pandemic in the Caribbean is presented through the eyes of educators who tell their stories from different perspectives, where the personal and the professional meet. We [the authors] experienced this phenomenon through the eyes of a special education classroom teacher (St. Maarten), a tertiary-level lecturer who is a parent (Trinidad and Tobago), a policy maker who is an older sister (Guyana) and two educators who are native to the Caribbean mentoring teachers in the region (the Bahamas and Australia). Critically we highlight the intersection between the personal and the professional through a brief description of the context, this highlights the positionality of the authors and adds texture to the narrative.

3.2 Educator Bios

Special Education Classroom Teacher Lorraine was born in Trinidad and Tobago and works as a Special Education Teacher, in St. Maarten. This island has over 60 different nationalities. Some young students are locally born but their parents do not speak the language of instruction used in the schools their children attend. There are a number of systems used to educate the masses for example the Dutch system, the English System, the Montessori System, and on the French Side the French system of schooling.

Lecturer and Parent Talia is a national of St. Lucia, living and working in Trinidad and Tobago as a tertiary level educator. Her experience with the early childhood and primary school education system in Trinidad and Tobago is through her children where she gained a deeper understanding of the politics of school placement, the importance of racial and ethnic ties, school type, social networks, and the relative roles of state versus church in relation to that process.

A Bahamian Educator Mentoring Teachers Dauran was born in the Bahamas and resides in Nassau where he received his formal education. He taught at a private high school and currently lectures at a technical vocational institution. Given these roles, he has been responsible for the delivery of instruction and assessment.

Through his mentorships, he encourages a strong commitment to improving delivery of education, equity in education, technology integration and fostering global citizenship.

Education Policy Maker and Older Sister Laurette, is a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, who works for a regional inter- governmental organisation. Her duty station is in Guyana which is the only English-speaking country in South America. Her work largely involves the creation of regional public goods that enable the coordination of regional policy agreements and the harmonisation of systems and practices at the national level. She is still connected to the classroom given her many years of service as a primary school teacher and then as a teacher educator. That connection is strengthened given that she has two siblings who are classroom teachers at the Primary and Secondary level. Their day-to-day experiences are often points of reflection and engagement for her.

Regional Native Who Is an Australian Educator Mentoring Teachers Camille is a native of Trinidad and Tobago where she attended the regional university to complete her Bachelor's and then moved to the US to complete her Master's and PhD. After completing her PhD, she moved to Australia. Still very stubborn to relinquish her ties with the region, she still teaches at the regional university as an adjunct faculty member and uses her expertise to help the regions educational systems improve.

3.3 *What Happened...*

Different parts of the Caribbean responded differently as the news of the pandemic approached. The following case is based chronologically on the experiences of each of the authors.

March 2020 was the yearly Heineken Regatta in St. Maarten. It was not well-attended due to everyone instilling caution with the unknown. Lorraine, recalls her experience:

We were ordered into total lock down without much time to prepare. Curfews were introduced and it was then that many of us as teachers came to these two realizations; many parents were essential workers. Internet access was almost nonexistent. Most parents in the household had internet access on their phones ONLY. That, combined with the fact that the parent/s are essential workers in a shift system, did not help matters when their child had to be schooled at specific hours online. Online education began abruptly as the lockdown continued in St. Maarten.

By May 2020, Laurette was concerned for her siblings, knowing that the combination of being a teacher and parent will soon mean one will have to win over the other. She noted through her own day-to-day activities as she caught up with her siblings.

...I spent hours engaging with my siblings around the ways in which the insecurities created by the pandemic and its interaction with policy imperatives were increasing anxieties while creating opportunities for innovation, forcing them to think differently about how they connected with their students while maintaining the progress for their own children. I saw the workday for my siblings radically extended. I witnessed my siblings advocating and fundraising, begging for donations in order to provide devices and food for their students in need. Their concerns became my worries, as I fretted over that child or family that they were worried about and seeking to support. I spent hours problem solving with my sister on the phone around the ways to tackle a particular lesson in an online environment. The experiences were increasingly stressful as I know my siblings were also managing increased surveillance from parents and educational authorities who needed to assure themselves that teachers were teaching

Talia had a first-hand knowledge of what Laurette's siblings were experiencing. In October 2020, she shared similar experiences:

This was particularly a problem because I have children at different stages within the school system and with diverse challenges. Thus, my six-year-old twins continue to struggle with class in the virtual space. This was challenging for them given that they moved from a pre-school with much of their time spent with play and learning, to an online environment that attempted to go structured. They both resisted and did not want to be part of that space. The hardest part for the children was the constant flow of work throughout the day. They were doing at least 5-6 assignments a day and, in some days, more. This is being done with both parents working and without an understanding that the parents are not in a position to fully assist or support those children while they are engaged in online learning. There was no feedback on the completion of the assignments or on the work completed. My eldest is at the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination (CAPE) level, with classes for an entire day online, with notes for the entire period, and with classes beyond the school time

Going back to May 2020, this picture varied across different parts of the Caribbean as in St. Maarten Lorraine's job was compounded by the realization that the Department of Education was also struggling.

It took a while for our school and the Department of Education to realize how dire the situation was as online instruction began. While most parents and students were able to operate a phone, many had no inkling of how to use an email address, or a password. Therefore, to introduce Google Classroom and Zoom Meetings especially in English to the parents was an uphill continuous battle. This was compounded with the essential worker taking the only access to the internet with them when they went to work during the school hours, often returning home late into the night. Only then were students able to access work done that day at school. The internet system on the island was in no way prepared for the barrage of online signals needed by all the schools at the same time each day, in addition to the volume of employees who were now working from home.

As teachers sought to provide solutions for those in need, it took a while for them to realise that they too also struggled to make everything work. Lorraine struggled to help parents enable their student's access and success while having her own challenges with a reliable access to Wi-Fi telecommunications access to share with others and help her students succeed:

I was in a similar situation as the parents as I only had data on my phone. Two of my neighbours thoughtfully offered me their passwords to access their internet which I gratefully accepted.... This online teaching was an utter nightmare for me. I decided to work from school most days as the internet quality at home was poor. The change of location was not

much help at all. The signal was intermittent. Add to that taking all the time from the lesson to just explain to the parent or the older sibling or the child itself how to log on was extremely frustrating for me. There were days when I was close to tears.

I also worked late into the night after 9 p.m. sometimes as that was when the parent returned from work with the device that was needed to conduct the lesson. I ended up taking my tablets with me when I went by the neighbour and just kept them on constantly when at home. Self-imposed on call was the order of the day! I even conducted a lesson with one of my students on the top of a washing machine as the strongest signal from the neighbour's house for the student to do the lesson was there.

And Talia, even as a tertiary educator herself reflected on that time where she felt overwhelmed, due to the chaotic nature of blending home and work-life during 2020

For peace of mind, I ignored certain expectations. I made selective decisions on what I responded to that were within reasonable expectations of the children during this time. I changed my work schedule to provide some time to assist/support them during this time. I also made a decision, not to remain silent and to speak out on some of the injustices within the school system. Even when I did this, I noted that there was no acknowledgement of the difficulties for parents and families and again a reversion to the business-as-usual mode. This reinforces my fundamental decision to choose what my children must respond to at this very trying time.

As the realisation of the pandemic settled various governments began to make plans. In the Bahamas, the directives given and communicated through the media from a governmental perspective was that education must continue by all means. This meant a number of different initiatives such as establishing a virtual school, the creation of instructional resource kits and producing specific review packages for national examination candidates (The Bahamas Ministry of Education, 2020). The governmental directives for educational continuity in Trinidad and Tobago revolved around:

1. keeping students and teachers safe, thus significant investments were made to improve WASH facilities in schools, including air marking specific drop off, pick up and sick bay areas,
2. providing the resources (tablets, computers, wi-fi access) where feasible and affordable to teachers and students, including igniting the private sector to support,
3. accelerating teacher training to support emergency remote teaching (ERT), noting that ERT was not only about online technology and connectivity but also about finding ways to keep learning going, with the support of parents, through the use of packages for students who even if their got a device could not use it because of a lack of wi-fi or electricity and,
4. maintaining social protection through the provision of food cards, hamper drives and psycho-social support.

What is key is that critical attempts were made to promote interoperability as a part of the education response in order to address the deep inequity of access and participation in education that was exposed and heightened through the pandemic. According to the Bahamas Union of Teacher president, Belinda Wilson states, "A large number of teachers used Zoom, Edmodo and Google Classroom platforms

that they subscribed personally” (Ward, 2021). A key source of information also became the Ministry of Education (MOE) website, with supplemental material for the National Examination candidates (Lloyd, 2020). The government’s intention to provide instructional packages, devices and internet connectivity all fell to no avail. The challenges were quite similar to the other countries where there was a lack of reliable infrastructure (internet and electricity) to sustain the connections that were needed for remote teaching, the constraints of the state to respond to these infrastructural demands/requirements, and the collective impact of these on the delivery of education during that time.

During the main pandemic period of 2020, some schools reached out for help for their teaching staff as everyone was seeing and feeling the despair of the teachers as they were front and centre of the delivery:

I (Camille) was asked by a Principal in Trinidad and Tobago to assist her teaching staff where the interpretation of the Ministry of education’s directives were that the teachers were expected to swap their 8 hours of teaching in a face-to-face environment to 8 hours of teaching using Zoom. They were asked to take attendance twice a day and basically teach as if they were in a face-to-face classroom. As a result, many teachers bought whiteboards and installed them in their houses, thus making make-shift teacher podiums which would be projected via synchronous technology (Zoom). What I saw was teacher’s going above and beyond to action mandates which they themselves did not quite understand. This resulted in lots of personal costs and sacrifices used and an increase in mental health issues (i.e., insomnia, Zoom fatigue, various levels of stress, etc.). My assistance seemed to focus on kind words instead of the technology-based solutions that were needed. There was also this belief that the developed countries were doing better so seeking their expertise would remarkably provide a relief of solutions. What they didn’t realized is everyone was just coping the same everywhere.

The countries involved in these cases shared similar context in response to how education should be directed and implemented in light of COVID-19. During the pandemic the Caribbean region like the world at large had to divert its learning to a virtual modality. In many cases teachers, students and parents were challenged with learning various forms of technology and online resources to facilitate learning and shouldering the financial, physical and mental costs attached to doing so (Parsanlal, 2020). In addition, teachers were also tasked with utilizing existing resources, rethinking inclusive practices and creating instructional resources for assessment and learning without sufficient instructional and technological infrastructure (Dunkley-Malcolm, 2020; Kalloo et al., 2020). According to UNESCO (2020), “School closures have left seven million learners and over 90,000 teachers across 23 countries and territories in the Caribbean sub-region grappling with a new reality of distance-learning”. This case provides an example of this finding with self-reflective evidence of how decisions were enacted at varying levels of society.

4 Recommendations and Lessons Learned

For much of the early period of this pandemic, educators and policy makers grappled with the uncertainty of the pandemic, but also with the need to make clear decisions to guide the process of educating and training within the collective school system. To a large extent, the process of planning and adapting was influenced by the lack of data both on the pandemic, on the vulnerable groups within the general student population, and on the readiness of the school population to adapt to teaching and learning within a remote environment.

While some of the key considerations to continue teaching and learning functions remain justified, mounting questions unfold in relation to the strategies, procedures, and outcomes of this process. The chapter provided some initial insights into some of the contentions, struggles, and gaps within the experiences of teaching remotely during this pandemic. Some key lessons learnt within the discussion of these experiences revolved around the need for sustained systems of support for vulnerable groups, to work with teachers, students, parents and school administrators in the drafting and implementations of strategy to adjust during this time, and, to increase the compassionate responses that allow for continuity with flexibility. This is particularly the case for pedagogical approaches and assessments utilised during this pandemic.

Given these concerns, our recommendations are for:

1. More robust and continuous data collection processes that feed into the development of protective mechanisms/interventions strategies, which are aimed to address existing and new educational inequalities/gaps.
2. Ongoing dialogue with critical stakeholders in the education system, (including but not restricted to teachers, students, parents, and administrators) to address some of the challenges of teaching and learning during difficult times and to adopt more flexible methods as a continuous measure of improvement regardless of dire straits.
3. A review and actioned approach to the physical, system and institutional infrastructure that supports the intention and expected educational outcomes

These concerns are not unique to the Caribbean and are particularly important for assessments of the efficiency of public design, implementation, outcome and most importantly sustainability of the region.

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