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Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in Trinidad and Tobago: challenges and opportunities for teacher education

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ABSTRACT

Trinidad and Tobago responded decisively to the COVID 19 pandemic and was successful in containing community spread of the virus. By mid-march 2020, there was closure of key business and educational institutions. To minimise the loss of learning time, emergency remote learning became the modus-operandi, a response which challenged the most socially vulnerable students. At the University of the West Indies (UWI) the 500 participants enrolled in the Early Childhood, and Primary education programmes, and the in-service post-graduate diploma in Secondary education were struggling to adjust to online teaching, the existential anxiety of coping with a dangerous disease, and programme completion. The UWI instituted a COVID-19 policy that facilitated a structured response to programme completion and assessment across all faculties. The paper analysed the decisions taken by the UWI School of Education that supported its teachers through the practicum and pedagogy courses. Using a qualitative case study methodology, data were collected through observations, documents, and informal discussions with faculty. Thematic analyses allowed the emergence of three key constructs that facilitated effective learning during the crisis period : Community as an empathetic connection to stakeholders, Creativity as the ability for agile and imaginative responses, and Connectivity through technological readiness.

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Background

Trinidad and Tobago is one of the few countries that have contained the COVID-19 outbreak with minimal deaths or spread of infection to its population. At the beginning of February, newspaper headlines declared that the country and the Caribbean had little possibility of importing the disease. By 12 March, however, Trinidad had its first imported case, and by 13 March the Prime Minister declared schools and all tertiary institutions of education closed. Additionally, a nationwide lockdown of non-essential services and businesses meant immediate removal of income to self-employed service providers and the consequent loss of access to child and elderly care.

As of 19 June 2020, Trinidad and Tobago has recorded eight deaths and 123 positive imported cases, all of which have recovered and there is no evidence of community

spread. Given the small size of the twin-island republic and its limited resources, its capacity to manage the virus with such success has been heralded by many global bodies including the World Health Organisation. This rapid response to the pandemic reflects a situation across the Caribbean archipelago, which was decisive in closing schools, businesses, and borders at the earliest signs of the virus, and instigating strict social distancing and sanitisation measures. The response did not come without a cost to the economic and social well-being of the country. Of concern was the significant disruption to all educational institutions from early childhood centres to universities.

Trinidad and Tobago has universal ECCE, primary and secondary education and access to heavily subsidised tertiary education, including vocational education. The education system is described as seamless, however, Standard 5/Grade 6 students must sit a high-stakes exit examination (Secondary Entrance Assessment [SEA]) to proceed to the secondary level. The results of these examinations funnel students into schools based on their academic performance. Though the examination attempts to assign students by merit, the placement system inevitably produces inequalities across the secondary school system (De Lisle et al. 2011; De Lisle 2012). Exit examinations also occur at Form 5/Grade 9 and Form 6/Grade 11 (CSEC and CAPE). These standardised examinations certify students for employment and entrance to tertiary institutions.

Teachers on the islands can access in-service and pre-service professional training from three (3) main universities, The University of the West Indies (The UWI), The University of the Southern Caribbean (USC) and The University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT). The universities offer certification at the Diploma, B.Ed, Masters and PhD levels. The Centre for Educational Programmes (CEP) at UTT emerged from the Teacher Training colleges which offered primary teacher certification in various manifestations since post-emancipation in the 1850s (Trinidad and Tobago Independence Celebration Committee 1962). Secondary teacher education, as an in-service post-graduate diploma as well as primary and ECCE teacher education began at the School of Education (SOE), St Augustine, in the 1970s (George and Quamina-Aiyejina 2003). Within the last two decades, several other providers aligned to international universities emerged offering online and blended formats of teacher education. Continuous in-service professional development is largely administered through the Ministry of Education.

Educational response to COVID-19

For Trinidad and Tobago, like many countries across the world, remote learning became an immediate, emergency response to unprecedented work and school closures (UNESCO Educational Sector 2020). However, this response proved problematic at several levels. The population of the island is multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and stratified by race, class and culture. Equity and quality, though pivotal policy elements of education, have always presented a challenge and were exacerbated and made visible based on the shifts to online teaching and learning. Disparities in household income and resources led to an estimated sixty thousand students without the necessary hardware or social support to access online education (Parsanlal 2020). This figure represents approximately 20% of the total school population between the ages of 3–18 years (UNESCO 2020; MOETT 2016). Narrative accounts from teachers reveal sometimes low participation in online classes due to lack of parental supervision, internet access and paucity of teacher resources and

expertise (McKenzie 2020). It was noted, however, that students used multiple means to access their curriculum – the television, phones and other devices (COVID-19 update media briefing, 9th June, 2020; George 2020). The public, not surprisingly, has been concerned about the date for high stakes school exit examinations and the conditions for their administration which include wearing masks, social distancing, temperature checks, and improved school hygiene (AZP News 2020, March, 20).

Prior to the crisis, the Ministry of Education (MOE) had already embarked upon a number of technology-driven initiatives such as the provision of an online platform, school hardware and infrastructure and continuous professional development in technology integration such as ScreencastOmatic. However, there was not an emphasis prior to COVID-19 on using online teaching. An ICT curriculum exists only at the secondary level but infusion of ICTs is encouraged at both the primary and secondary levels. (MOE, 2020 June, Doodnath 2020; George 2020). Teachers could also access professional development in using ICT tools through their in-service teacher education programmes at tertiary institutions and through teacher professional communities, for example, the IT Teachers Professional Network Global (ITTPN). In response to the closure of schools, teachers attempted to access the MOE platform and its resources and adjust their timetables. However, teachers (mainly female) were juggling their computers between themselves and their children, preparing lessons and teaching online, marking assignments, and managing increased household demands (McKenzie 2020). Student teachers within the professional programmes at the School of Education at UWI now had to cope with these increased demands, anxiety due to the lock down restrictions, and existential worry about the severity of COVID-19, and uncertainty about the completion of their courses.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the response of a teacher education institution to the abrupt closure of learning institutions across the island, through a case study of initial teacher preparation at the School of Education (SOE), UWI, St. Augustine. We explore the impact on course completion, assessments, and the practical components of the three main teacher education programmes the Certificate in ECCE (Cert. Ed.), the B.Ed ECCE and Primary and the Dip Ed Secondary (PGDipEd).

The research falls within the qualitative paradigm. It is presented as a descriptive and analytical narrative based on documents, artefacts, informal interviews, literature and reflections. The data sources include programme documents; SOE documents outlining decisions on programme changes; COVID-19 UWI web page; public documents from the teachers' union (TTUTA), the Ministry of Education (MOE), as well as newspaper articles and discussions with coordinators of the Cert. Ed; B.Ed., and faculty of the PGDip Ed programmes. All the researchers are faculty of the SOE and brought their observations and experiential knowledge to the research. Content analysis of documents and discussions has been used to guide the development of the paper. Analytical themes drawn from the SOE's response to the pandemic will emerge through this analysis.

The case context

The university of the West Indies: history and operations

The UWI is an established, internationally recognised, regional institution which celebrated its 72nd anniversary this year. The University offers undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in numerous fields of study: the arts, sciences, business, law, the humanities and services to 17 regional territories. The University has five campuses – St Augustine campus in Trinidad and Tobago, Cavehill Campus in Barbados, the Mona Campus in Jamaica, most recently, the Five Island Campus in Antigua and Barbuda and the Open Campus which offers higher, distance and continuing educational programmes across the Caribbean.

The school of education: programmes and operations

At the School of Education, the B.Ed. is a three-year in-service programme. The PGDipEd is a one-year in-service 24 credit programme. The one-year Cert. ED is a 30 credit programme and the 3-year B.Ed. a 90 credit programme. In-service programmes are designed to allow teachers to pursue their professional development while remaining full-time classroom practitioners. Teachers access these programmes after school, during their vacations and online. All the professional development programmes have a practicum component. Approximately 500 teachers accessed the programmes for the 2019–2020 year, the majority of teachers – 400 plus were enrolled in the PGDipEd.

The Cert. Ed. programme is delivered at three levels. Each level consists of core courses and a two-week practicum. The B.Ed. consists of compulsory core courses, professional and content courses and a two-week practicum. The major objectives of both programmes are to foster the development of professionals in the field of ECCE who are able to effectively plan, implement and assess curriculum suited to all the domains of child development. The main goal of the B.Ed. is to provide the initial and ongoing professional development of teachers at the primary level. The programme exposes student teachers to professional development courses in the teaching of all primary school subjects and includes a practicum at level three. It seeks to positively impact teaching and learning at the primary schools by deepening practitioners' knowledge and teaching competencies in the range of primary school subjects. The stated aim of both the B.Ed. primary and ECCE is 'to provide for the holistic development of reflexive professionals who are sensitive to the need to combine care and advocacy with school and classroom management skills, effective leadership, and information and communication technology in creating appropriate learning opportunities for students' (SOE, 2019, 9).

The PGDipEd is an in-service part-time programme offered to practising teachers and administrators at the secondary level over a period of one academic year. The programme caters to the traditional academic disciplines, as well as the creative arts and technical vocational subjects. The main aim is to develop a professional approach to teaching informed by a solid theoretical foundation. Since 2018, the programme has adopted a blended approach. For the academic year, 2019–2020, there was a stronger blend with lectures and tutorials delivered using online tools, while school field days and practicum sessions remained face to face. This shift accommodated an increased intake of teachers

in the current academic year. To fulfil the requirements for certification, participants are expected to complete four courses in foundational disciplines, action research, pedagogy and practical teaching. Practical teaching involves a series of individual and group practicum sessions on the field over the course of two terms. These teaching sessions carry 20% of the practicum mark. Eighty per cent of the practicum mark is based on one lesson in the third school term which is viewed and assessed by two lecturers. The rationale for this assessment procedure is related to the focus of the practicum as a reflective practice, through which students should be free to experiment without punitive consequences. The PGDipEd programme is very intense as the participants are full-time teachers who must attend to classroom duties and also fulfil all the requirements of the programme. The programme requires 100% course work in all four courses. Since 2012, a key component of the current PGDipEd programme is a Technology Integration module where teachers are exposed to ICT tools to enhance teaching and learning.

Institutional response to COVID-19

The UWI, St Augustine

In February 2020, even prior to the closure of all educational institutions, The UWI launched a COVID-19 task force to support the region's response to the pandemic. The Task Force was drawn from the regional UWI campuses, comprising multi-disciplinary specialists, scientists, researchers and public health professionals with combined expertise in virology, epidemiology, laboratory diagnostics, critical care, respiratory medicine, veterinary medicine, tourism, trade, international relations and communication. (The UWI, 2020). For The UWI, the suspension of classes had national and regional wide implications. Students from across the Caribbean who were studying outside of their home territories at the main campuses of UWI were immediately affected and these included students in the B.Ed. programme. Further, though UWI had developed a blended learning policy, there were variations in the types of blends which the programmes had adopted. All programmes were now expected to be completely delivered on-line, and final examination formats had to be adjusted in keeping with the policy change. There were varying levels of expertise in using the Moodle platform, the course management system of The UWI. The UWI supported its staff and students in increasing access to devices through short-term loans and internet access through corporate partnerships, both essential for online learning. Further, through its Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL), a professional development webinar series entitled '*Moving Your Course Online*' was launched to develop and strengthen bridging skills to on-line teaching. All practical classes, whether in the department of creative arts, engineering or education immediately ceased and this impacted students' completion of their practical coursework. The University determined an approach to programme continuity through consensus, which allowed for consistency of responses across programmes, accountability, standardisation of assessment, and integrity of outcomes.

The School of Education

As the response of the SOE to the closure of The UWI was necessarily part of a larger institutional wide policy, it involved a complete shift to online teaching, adjustment to

assessment procedures which involved final examinations, substitution of those aspects of assessment which required teachers to access data from schools, and a postponement of all practical courses which necessitated face to face classroom interaction with students. The semester was due to end within one month of the university's abrupt closure and outstanding teaching sessions were easily shifted to the online mode. The shift was facilitated by the existing ICT infrastructure for blended programme delivery. The practicum components of all programmes except the Cert. Ed were postponed to September, when schools are expected to reopen. This meant that level three B.Ed students and all PGDip.Ed students were unable to complete their final practicum. However, except for their last field session, PGDipEd students had in the majority completed their formative practical assessment, and had garnered the benefit of supervised practice with its attendant reflective components. The completion of the formative assessment provided the teachers with a sense of confidence in their abilities to deliver at an acceptable standard, indeed teachers experienced substantial pedagogical growth over the three terms prior to the lock down. This was evident in teachers' ability to host their last field session through an online format. Technical-vocational teachers actually taught their students via Zoom, using such techniques as gamification, game-based learning, and demonstrations. Teachers' ICT exposure at the SOE provided them with the confidence to access the MOE Moodle platform as well as to access the online courses which were being offered by both international organisations and the MOE to upgrade skills for online teaching.

Some of the Cert. Ed. students were unable to complete their two week practicum at the end of the second semester. To facilitate their completion, an alternative assessment was designed and administered. The students were required to develop a teaching video with an accompanied lesson plan. The lessons are to be taught in the new semester (September – December 2020) and feedback will be provided. Like PGDipEd the timing of the lock down had a minimal disruptive effect on the outcomes of the Cert. Ed practicum.

The structured UWI response provided student teachers and faculty with a clear framework for completion of their course requirements. Adjustments to course work were minimal and coursework deadlines were adjusted to provide students with increased time for completion. Adjustments to due dates took into consideration the numerous anxieties that student teachers were facing as they changed roles to online teachers and their duties multiplied. Lecturers kept in close contact with the student teachers which allowed the latter to relay the realities of their changed lifestyle. The UWI team seemed to have taken all such psycho-social issues into account and provided an empathetic response in its policy decisions to course adjustments. This response allayed much of the anxiety that was associated with completion of the professional development programmes.

Despite the efficiency of The UWI response, the dynamic and evolving nature of the COVID-19 pandemic is creating on-going crises. The examination structure of the island does not facilitate a smooth transition from primary to secondary school. There has been a contentious decision to hold the SEA in August and the CXC examinations in July. School re-opening is now designed to occur under social distancing, hand washing, and possible mask wearing. These conditions have implications for the final practicum of the PGDipEd. The fact is that teachers have never been expected to teach under such conditions. The practicum encourages authentic, student-centred interactive approaches under normal

classroom conditions. Adjusting even temporarily to these new conditions and expecting teachers to respond to an 80% practicum examination at this point, seems somewhat improbable. Even more daunting is the prospect of teacher educators supporting a new cohort of teachers under the conditions of pandemic classrooms while preparing the previous cohort for a new normal. The conditions of social distancing raise questions as to the role of education under emergency conditions. While there is a global call to return students to school, what constitutes learning in these new conditions is yet to be discussed.

COVID-19 provides an interrogating framework for the role, processes, and philosophy of teacher education for an uncertain twenty-first century, in which crises may be a recurrent theme. How do teacher education programmes address the persistent inequities of the Caribbean school system which inhibit equitable access to distance modes of learning? What lessons can we learn from developing, small island states such as Trinidad and Tobago which successfully contained the disease in the midst of a global pandemic?

In our closing section, we try to reflect on these questions through our observations of the response of the country and the UWI to the professional education needs of our teachers.

Responding to emergency teacher education: lessons from the SOE, UWI

Trinidad and Tobago (TT) is in a unique position compared to the rest of the world, as the State was able to contain the virus with minimal infections, and therefore few deaths. This environment meant that trauma to citizens was reduced, providing a more facilitative environment for schooling to resume within the new normal. Given the small size of the island and its limited health resources, the country certainly would not have been able to respond effectively to any kind of schooling intervention had the pandemic taken the course of some of the more developed countries. It seems that the first lesson we are taught is that early intervention to prevent disease spread and death is a precursor to providing continuing education for children in times of crisis.

Secondly as has been noted, a successful transition to distance modes of education require elements of readiness – technological, content, pedagogical and home-based learning support, monitoring and evaluation components (UNESCO Educational Sector 2020). These elements were evident, in varying degrees, at the SOE. A blended learning mode of delivery meant that student-teachers and faculty had the skill and experience necessary for distance learning. Figaro-Henry and James (2016, p117) concluded that students of the B.Ed. programme were using their own devices for learning and had a satisfactory level of mobile learning readiness. This satisfaction may have contributed to student ease into an instruction format that was predominantly online during university closure.

The familiarity of student teachers with a variety of ICT tools through their teacher education programmes at the SOE equipped them with the capacity to access the Moodle platform successfully. The UWI further supported their staff with rapid training in using the Moodle platform, and SOE facilitated its own in-house professional development for full and part time staff, which made teacher educators more distance-education ready. Therefore, the transition to distance learning was accomplished smoothly and without major disruption to programme completion. This does not deny the fact that there was nevertheless dissonance and disequilibrium at the onset, however, the SOE's level of readiness meant that this was reduced and short-lived. It should be noted though, that

other options such as simulations, 360-degree videos and other innovations, as reported by Hartshorne, Baumgartner, Kaplan-Rakowski, Mouza & Ferdig (2020), were possible options that may need to be considered for completion of the final practicum. Nevertheless, the experience itself would prove instructive and point the way to the possibility of a teacher education system that is more open, inclusive and flexible after the crisis period.

A third critical aspect of supporting teachers' course completion was an empathetic communication system which was instituted at the level of the University. Communiqués from the University Vice Chancellor and the Campus Principal kept staff and students informed, motivated and positive. The University as part of its outreach also supported students with care packages and facilitated access to both hardware and technological expertise to use the hardware. Decision making was inclusive with staff and student webinars where participants were encouraged to make inputs pertinent to the current situation. This psycho-social element of the UWI's response cannot be undervalued in terms of its impact. Current research is evaluating the impact at the institutional level.

Because of the inclusive nature of the decision-making process, student teachers at the SOE, in spite of their unique home/work challenges were able, in the majority, to complete their programmes/courses successfully. Flexibility, communication, and adjusted timelines, revised examination formats and a sensitivity to the personal needs of student-teachers went a long way to fostering resilience during the crisis period.

Teacher education in the twenty-first century for the Caribbean

We can predict from present world events such as climate change, migrations and global conflicts with their potential for disease spread and economic upheaval, that the twenty-first century will continue to be characterised by sporadic crises. Further as the #BlackLivesMatter movement forcefully highlights, there is a parallel global movement to confront structures of inequity and disenfranchisement within societies. The present pandemic forces teacher educators to raise questions about the goals and objectives of teacher education and its ability to prepare teachers for this dynamic and challenging new society which is emerging.

Trinidad and Tobago like its Caribbean neighbours is a small island state which has needs peculiar to its geography, culture, history and resources. The pandemic brought to the fore the persistent inequities that stymie the teachers' efforts to support their students within and outside of crises. It is worth noting that school closure can occur for a number of other reasons including natural disasters which are seasonal to the Caribbean. Students also suffer from learning loss due to high absenteeism brought on by punitive school suspension policies and family crises. In a sense, absenteeism is a personal crisis that students regularly face, as it forces them to lose learning time. Helping students to bridge learning loss, whether because of natural crisis or absenteeism, should be a best practice by teachers and leveraging technology to assist learners who are marginalised should be a learning outcome of teacher education.

While officials stated that possible 60,000 students did not have access to computers and data, the MOE was able to offer learning through a variety of formats via other forms of hardware and software. Students were using their phones, television, and teachers were using Notes Master, the Big Blue Button (the MOE's Moodle platform), Google Classroom,

and even newspapers (George 2020). The variance in pedagogical quality of these diverse approaches and distance modes will inevitably have unequal outcomes. The quality of students learning is also exacerbated by the poor housing and social conditions under which too many families exist. These conditions became more extreme as job losses of daily paid workers threw working class families into economic crisis. The Caribbean is also subject to extreme climate change which results in worsening hurricanes, floods, earthquakes and extreme dry seasons. These climatic issues are predictably disruptive to the school system and the lives of children, teachers and their families. Such conditions suggest that the education system must be part of a holistic national development plan if our students are to achieve their potential for development. Teacher education has to respond to the needs of students with greater emphasis on raising teachers' consciousness of inequity and providing a pedagogy which is culturally sensitive to classroom diversity.

Teacher education at the SOE has not typically addressed crises as a critical element in programme development. The pandemic highlights that professional preparation of teachers needs to reach beyond the acquisition of technical skills required for effective teaching in the 'normal' classroom. Teachers need resilience, responsiveness and flexibility to respond to crises and indeed to prepare students to embrace the opportunities for a challenging twenty-first century.

Teaching is social practice and therefore there is also the need to foster the skills of social interaction, interpersonal relationship, and effective communication which form an integral part of the teaching process (D'Eon, Overgaard, and Harding 2000). School closure and the shift to online distance teaching would have reduced the opportunity for the full development of the teacher's capacity for social interaction and engagement. It was underscored through the experience of teaching in a crisis that social relationships are the bedrock of effective teaching and should be an integral component of teacher education programmes.

Distance learning which includes online teaching and learning cannot be seen as an add on but as an integral part of teacher education. Such a change will require varying levels of reform which must begin with a re-imagining of educational goals, structures, and relationships. Adding online learning components to existing frames can enhance students' proficiencies by enriching their learning experiences and reaching students beyond the walls of the classroom, thereby harnessing the tools of their highly technological world for learning and problem-solving. At the same time without the necessary resources, political will, and sound policies, online learning can alienate students and increase marginalisation of the most vulnerable in our society. Online learning of course cannot replace the social needs of children and their teachers. However given the inevitability of future crises and the potential of distance and online learning to support schooling, it needs to be not just a compulsory component of initial teacher education but incorporated into continuing professional development. Indeed, it was the IT courses which introduced the student teachers at the SOE to a variety of platforms and applications that allowed them to quickly and creatively adapt to the new normal of online learning.

Continuing professional development is given less emphasis within our teacher education system locally. The pandemic highlighted the importance of continuous professional development, but also the way in which online learning could potentially make such development readily available to teachers in a flexible and low-cost format.

Conclusion

School closure because of COVID-19, and the rush to remote teaching and learning has highlighted the need for teachers and schools to be flexible, adaptable and agile to unforeseen circumstances. (UNESCO Educational Sector 2020). A movement towards a more democratic and inclusive process of learning, which empowers teachers to work on behalf of their rights and the rights of their students, we believe should be an essential element of teacher education in the twenty-first century. Such a change requires a shift to a more emancipatory underpinning philosophy of teacher education, which can confront the pedagogy of the present technical paradigm. The lessons of adaptation to the on-going crisis present an opportunity for such re-imagining to occur. Now is the time we believe to reflect on existing teacher education programme goals, and to interrogate the quality and relevance of learning outcomes. By challenging the current skill-based orientation of teacher education programmes, Caribbean teacher educators can begin to embrace the constructs alluded to in our analysis – that is, practices grounded in Community, Creativity and Connectivity. In so doing, we envision a teacher education which is global in its vision but culturally relevant, authentic, dynamic, and empowering in its practice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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