Understanding Caribbean Early Childhood Teachers’ Professional Experiences During the COVID-19 School Disruption

Sabeerah Abdul-Majied1 · Zoyah Kinkead-Clark2 · Sheron C. Burns3

Accepted: 19 January 2022 / Published online: 4 February 2022
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2022

Abstract
The COVID-19 Pandemic and resulting school closures, present a serious threat to young children’s care, learning, and the achievement of their developmental potential (UNESCO, 2020a). Disruptions to normal school functioning worldwide have presented challenges for teachers who were generally unprepared to teach using different methodologies (United Nations in Policy brief: Education during Covid-19 and beyond, 2020). Since a child’s right to care and education extends even during emergencies this study was conceptualized to better understand the professional experiences of early childhood teachers as they navigated the teaching learning process during the COVID-19 school disruption. A multiple site qualitative case study was designed to answer two research questions: What were the professional experiences of Caribbean Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) teachers at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic period? And how did Caribbean ECCE teachers adapt to ensure continuity of children’s rights to access education? Almog and Perry-Hazan’s (2012) conceptualisation of the Right to Adaptable Education provided the theoretical foundation for this study. Data were collected using a questionnaire sent to teachers from seven Caribbean countries. Five themes were extricated from the findings: changed teacher experiences, significant new understandings, changed teacher collaboration practices, changed individual qualities, and warning signs for support. We conclude by making recommendations for macro level support for the ECCE sector during educational disruptions.

Keywords Caribbean early childhood education · Teaching in a pandemic · Education in emergencies · Emergency online teaching

Early childhood education in the Caribbean, like many other parts of the world, covers the period from birth to 8 years. Care and education of young children takes place in group settings to facilitate their growth, development, and learning. Among the many benefits of early care and education is that it has the most profound impact on a nation’s investment for sustainability (Kinkead-Clark et al., 2019; Samms-Vaughan, 2004). Research, including that in the Caribbean, points to the social dividends from investments in quality early years care and education on later learning and life (Samms-Vaughan, 2004; Sullivan, 2015).

As the Caribbean and our global partners grapple with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become abundantly clear that perhaps only next to the region’s economic and health care systems, no other facet of society has suffered more deleterious effects from the pandemic than our education systems (Drane et al., 2020). In most instances, because many young children in several countries in the Caribbean are no longer able to access schooling on a regular basis, the emergence of COVID-19 has threatened to overturn the social dividends which have been promised to the region by investing in Early Childhood Development (ECD).
It is in this vein that we note that though some Caribbean researchers such as Kalloo et al. (2020), Mutton (2020) and Leacock and Warrican (2020) have sought to delve deeply into how COVID-19 has shaped education in the Caribbean, none has zeroed in on the early childhood sector. Research has been clear that the COVID-19 Pandemic and resulting school closures posed a major threat to young children’s care, learning, and the achievement of their developmental potential (UNESCO, 2020a, 2020b). Among other issues, disruptions to normal school functioning worldwide have presented challenges for teachers, who were mostly unprepared to teach using different methodologies and technologies (United Nations, 2020; Leacock & Warrican, 2020). Further exacerbating this, is that many of the teachers struggled to address other important aspects of young children’s development including their mental, socio-emotional, psycho-social and physical well-being via distance learning.

As the research community continues to investigate the effects of COVID-19 on our education systems, we specifically wish to illuminate the issue from the perspective of early childhood teachers. Fullan (1996) advocated that significant educational change happens not at the policy level but at the implementation level in the classrooms. Since change depends on a cultural or philosophical shift or buy-in from teachers, it is imperative that the voices of the teachers operating in the early childhood sector during the pandemic, be amplified. This study seeks to uncover the teachers’ views relevant to the following: How have they grappled with the effects of COVID-19 on their profession? How have they responded to the new approach to teaching young children? It also explores some of their professional experiences navigating COVID-19 in their “classrooms”.

We anticipate answering these questions will enable us to make recommendations to enhance the care and education of young children which can also be extended to other emergencies and other jurisdictions. These recommendations will hopefully benefit a variety of stakeholders including parents, teachers, teacher educators, policy makers, NGOs and development partners such as UNICEF.

**Theoretical Framework**

Almog and Perry-Hazan’s (2012) conceptualisation of the Right to Adaptable Education provided the theoretical foundation which supported the design of this study. The underlying premise of this theory acknowledges that access to education, as a fundamental right for all children, must be adaptable and directly aligned to the needs of children. Almog and Perry-Hazan (2012) note that adaptability not only refers to the social context (social-cultural adaptability) in which children exist, but also to the preferences children have in relation to how, why, and what they learn (preferential adaptability).

It is acknowledged that various factors determine the success, or lack thereof, of children’s fulfilment of their right to adaptable education. It is also noteworthy that a significant aspect of the actualisation of children’s right to adaptable education fundamentally resides in the efficiencies of the current educational systems and structures which exist to enable teachers and other stakeholders to support their students. Therefore, understanding teachers’ needs is crucial, in order to establish the foundation for adaptable education.

**Emergencies and Early Childhood Education in the Caribbean**

Beyond a shared Colonial history and a common geographical space, another experience many Caribbean countries have in common is a direct understanding and first-hand experience with emergencies brought on by the region’s high susceptibility to natural and manmade disasters (Boruff & Cutter, 2007). The past 30 years has shown the region’s relentless suffering from the devastating effects of natural disasters not only resulting from climatic factors but also health crises as well. In more recent years, the devastation of countries such as St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Montserrat (by volcanic eruptions), the Cayman Islands, Dominica, Haiti and the Bahamas (by hurricanes), and Haiti and Puerto Rico (by earthquakes) have gained global attention and demonstrated the high levels of vulnerabilities faced by the region (Bellegarde-Smith, 2011). Similar to the effects of natural disasters, the Caribbean has also been ravaged by the effects of manmade disasters as well. As Small Island Developing States (group of islands in the Caribbean and Pacific which share similar economic and geographic vulnerabilities), many islands in the Caribbean have directly suffered from economic shocks and socio-political turmoil over the years, which for many countries has put them in the precarious position of financial insufficiency (Kouame, & Reyes, 2011).

As with many other nations, in 2020, when the World Health Organisation (WHO) notified the global community of a deadly virus in China, regional leaders were once again faced with the daunting task of preparing their countries for a new disaster. Unlike wealthier neighbours in the north which arguably had the resources to tackle the pandemic with urgency, Caribbean nations had to take a more pragmatic approach, whereby, critical decisions had to be taken relevant to where and what the region’s minimal resources would be used to do.

It is fair to state that beyond the more obvious effects of natural and manmade disasters on the Caribbean, there are ripple consequences which arguably are more long lasting and insidious. These consequences have ramifications for
children, their families, and by extension, their communities. Such is the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to UNICEF, an analysis of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on education has shown that the Caribbean and Latin America’s education systems have been most affected when compared to other countries. UNICEF noted that “children in the region have already lost on average four times more days of schooling compared to the rest of the world. While schools are gradually reopening in several parts of the world, the vast majority of classrooms are still closed across the region”.

A number of factors account for this position. As promulgated by Obiakor and Adeniran (2020) and Bassok et al. (2020), COVID-19 has clearly illuminated the differences in those who can and cannot access education. In this regard according to Obiakor and Adeniran (2020), one such way is that the pandemic has demonstrated differences in how children and their families have been able to navigate the education system during a global crisis. Obiakor and Adeniran (2020), for instance noted that in Nigeria, children from private schools were less likely to lose out on schooling when compared to their counterparts in public schools, due to their increased access to the necessary technologies. In a similar vein, anecdotal evidence from across the Caribbean also demonstrated differences in access to schooling based on school level (early childhood, primary, secondary). A scoping review of the leading newspapers from five countries (Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, the Bahamas and Belize) reveals an inherent leaning of the region’s ministries of education to buttress primary and secondary education with little to any mention of an articulated plan to support the early childhood level. In most instances the rationale which was provided was that there was a need to ensure primary and secondary students were prepared for high stakes exams.

**Linking Education During Emergencies to Children’s Rights**

It is in fact practices such as those noted above which affirm the importance of ensuring children’s rights, especially during crises when it seems they are most at risk. These rights are not only noted in the Convention of the Rights of the Child but are also underscored in Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals and in UNESCO’s Education 2030 Agenda which addresses actions to ensure that education systems are resilient during and after times of emergencies (UNESCO, 2020c). As suggested by Seusan and Maradiegue (2020), the social needs of children (such as poverty, and parental support), and governments’ responses to the pandemic, have compromised children’s fulfilment of their right to education. It is therefore clear that any attempt to ensure young children’s rights of access to education must consider the diverse needs of not only children, but also their families and schools as well.

In light of this, Bassok et al. (2020), proffer that an important aspect of ensuring children’s right to quality education also hinges on the support given to early childhood teachers which enable them to provide high quality pedagogy. In their assessment of the experiences of early childhood teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, Bassok et al. (2020) pointedly address the differences in the treatment of primary and secondary teachers when compared to that of early childhood practitioners. They note that the working conditions and overall well-being of early childhood teachers decreased significantly when compared to their counterparts at other tiers of the education system. These differences, they indicated, had significant implications for teachers’ ability to sufficiently perform their duties.

According to Le Brocque et al (2017) teachers are in a unique position to help children during times of crises however in order to be effective, they must be provided with the requisite training and support in order to effectively perform their duties. In this regard, Jackson (2021) maintains that beyond the obvious training in the use of technologies to adequately manage distance learning, early childhood teachers also need to be facilitated to meet the “emotional labour of working with young children”. Navigating crises is not easy; therefore, teachers need to have the skills and support to address the socioemotional needs of children.

**Teachers’ Professional Experiences During Emergencies**

An examination of teachers’ professional experiences during emergencies seems important for assessing teaching practices and the possible impact on young learners. An investigation of the perspectives of technology education teachers in Canada, (Code et al., 2020) found that the rapid changes in teaching due to COVID-19 measures, lead to a transformation in teaching practices which they termed pandemic transformed pedagogy. That is, educators were compelled to deeply rethink and shift their thinking and teaching practices due to the rapid switch to remote teaching. Further, an analysis of the difference between effective online education and emergency remote teaching at the tertiary level by Hodges et al. (2020), also seems useful for examining the professional experiences of Early Childhood (EC) teachers during the COVID-19 emergency. The analysts explain that effective online programmes require time, to develop and to build an ecosystem of support for learning. These supports come from formal, informal, and social resources. Therefore, even though teachers had to adjust to continue discharging their professional responsibilities, the change would have affected their comfort level. They explained further that faculty usually become more comfortable by the second or third
iteration of teaching online. Another point raised was that even at a university where there are resources which faculty can access for assistance, those resources soon become overwhelmed due to the scale of changes required.

A review of research which examined the significance of different types of education on reducing disaster risks and increasing preparedness in vulnerable peoples, found that people should learn about disaster prevention and risk reduction methods from childhood (Torani et al., 2019). To this end families, schools, and hospital staff should be familiar with its importance. This suggests that education for disasters or emergencies should be a part of EC teachers’ professional development and dissemination especially during a pandemic. This would help to minimize the effects of the emergency. The Chinese government was able to launch their policy of “Suspending Classes Without Stopping Learning” to continue classes throughout the period of person-to-person contact restrictions imposed to fight COVID-19 infections (Zhang & Wang, 2020). Though not without some drawbacks, the Chinese seemed able to implement this programme early into the pandemic, because of prior preparedness for continuity in education during a disruption to the education system. The problems which arose pointed to improving the internet and teaching/learning equipment for teachers and students. It also highlighted the need for online teacher training, and a national strategic plan for large scale online education. Research into online education, particularly to assist students with online learning difficulties, was also recommended.

Similarly, an investigation into the rapid digitization of teaching in Spain during COVID-19 examined teacher experiences with using SELFIE (Self reflection on effective learning) during emergency remote teaching. SELFIE is an online self-reflection tool for schools to measure their progress using digital technologies which was proactively developed to support The European Framework for Digitally-Competent Educational Organisations. A survey of 67 primary and secondary school teachers 1 week into lockdown, measured teachers’ use of digital technologies for teaching. The findings indicated that teachers who had more opportunities for training during the pandemic, gained greater confidence in using technologies for teaching and communicating with parents and students. They also found online training to be more useful. However, differences in student access to digital technology, and a lack of technical resources and support affected the effectiveness of online teaching (Albó et al., 2020).

That pedagogical changes in teaching which occurred during the COVID-19 emergency remote teaching affected teachers’ professional experiences is unquestionable. However, the extent of country preparedness, including policy support for teaching, would have affected teachers’ professional experiences during the early stages of the pandemic.

Methodology

In this section we outline the overarching means by which the data were gathered and analysed for the study. We elaborate the research purpose and questions, as well as the general design of the research study.

Research Purpose and Questions

This study was conceptualized to better understand Caribbean teachers’ experiences with managing the “new normal” of educating children 3–6 years old during the pandemic. In essence, the overarching goal of this paper is to highlight Caribbean early childhood teachers’ experiences as they navigate COVID-19 and its effects on their professional practice. In order to achieve our goal, two questions guided this research:

1. What were the professional experiences of Caribbean Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) teachers at the start of the COVID-19 Pandemic period?
2. How did Caribbean ECCE teachers adapt at the onset of COVID-19 Pandemic period to ensure continuity of children’s rights to access education?

Research Design

In designing this qualitative case study, we considered Fullan’s (1996) advice that it is the teacher on the front-line implementing policies, who best understands the challenges of continuing education during times of emergencies. A multiple site case study was designed to understand early childhood teachers’ professional experiences navigating the teaching and learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recruitment of Participants

Participants were recruited using traditional snowball sampling (Creswell, 2015). This approach to data collection involves recruiting participants who then can refer other participants who meet the research inclusion criteria. In this case, participants were initially recruited based on the researchers’ familiarity with them via either being former students, previous workshop attendees, or teachers affiliated with the university’s laboratory early childhood centre in Trinidad and Tobago. Once participants were recruited they were asked to recommend other participants who they knew met the criteria.
Established criteria for participation included:

- Being a teacher of children 3–6 years.
- Being a member of the CARICOM (Caribbean Community—a group of 15-member states and 5 associate members comprised of former colonies and current dependencies of the British. Haiti is the only non-English speaking country which is a member of CARICOM).
- Teaching in a public or private school.

A total of 15 early childhood teachers from seven Caribbean countries responded to the challenge and agreed to participate (Barbados (n = 2), Belize (n = 1) Jamaica (n = 3) Montserrat (n = 2), St Lucia (n = 1) St Vincent and the Grenadines (n = 2) Trinidad & Tobago (n = 4). Table 1 provides further demographic details of the participants).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study were gathered over a 3-week period from August 1 to 21, 2020. Data were collected using a questionnaire which was sent either via Google Forms or email because we wanted to hear the narratives of teachers from across the Caribbean. Anonymity was guaranteed hence fictitious names and numbers are used in the study. The open-ended questionnaire consisted of ten semi-structured questions which was first piloted with three teachers from the islands of St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Trinidad and Tobago. Guided by the feedback, adjustments were made to the instrument relevant to its readability and similarity in jargons used across the islands. This was advantageous because as suggested by Salmons (2015), it allowed for consistency in the questions asked and the opportunity to follow up based on the responses. An online open-ended questionnaire was also used because we wanted to provide an opportunity for the research participants to freely share their thoughts and provide “impartial answers” (Creswell, 2015). Questions were developed by the researchers based on our intimate knowledge of the research and guided by the focus of the research which was to gain insight of Caribbean teachers’ experiences during the pandemic. The survey sought to elicit demographic details including participants’ qualifications and years of professional experience, as well as practices during COVID-19, including challenges encountered by participants and their learners. Proposed recommendations for policymakers were also elicited.

Data for this study were analysed thematically. To do this, we were guided by both Creswell (2015) and the five steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), which include identifying, analysing, organizing, and describing, in order to extricate the dominant themes. According to Nowell et al. (2017), “thematic analysis provides a highly flexible approach that can be modified for the needs of many studies, providing a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data” (p. 2). Since the three researchers are located on three different islands, this method enabled us to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings as themes were derived from a synthesis of participant data collected from different Caribbean islands.

Following guidelines outlined by Creswell (2015), the data analysis process involved converting raw data derived from questionnaire responses into codes and then themes. The raw data were first read to obtain an overall sense of what the teachers were saying, before codes were added to label chunks of the data.

| Participant | Country                        | Age group teaching | Years of experience | Highest academic qualification          |
|-------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|----------------------------------------|
| 101         | Barbados                       | 3–4-year olds      | NR (No Response)    | Other (unspecified)                    |
| 102         | Barbados                       | 3–4-year olds      | NR                  | Other (unspecified)                    |
| 103         | Belize                         | 4–5-year olds      | NR                  | Associate Degree                       |
| 104         | Jamaica                        | 5–6-year olds      | NR                  | Bachelor’s Degree                      |
| 105         | Jamaica                        | 5–6-year olds      | 1–3 years           | Certificate                            |
| 106         | Jamaica                        | 4–5-year olds      | 4–6 years           | Bachelor’s Degree                      |
| 107         | Montserrat                      | 3–4-year olds      | NR                  | Certificate                            |
| 108         | Montserrat                      | 3–4-year olds      | NR                  | Certificate                            |
| 109         | St. Lucia                       | 4–5-year olds      | NR                  | Certificate                            |
| 110         | St. Vincent & the Grenadines   | 4–5-year olds      | 1–3 years           | Associate Degree                       |
| 111         | St. Vincent & the Grenadines   | 5–6-year olds      | 1–3 years           | Associate Degree                       |
| 112         | Trinidad & Tobago              | 4–6-year olds      | 4–6 years           | Bachelor’s Degree                      |
| 113         | Trinidad & Tobago              | 3–4-year olds      | 10+ years           | Bachelor’s Degree                      |
| 114         | Trinidad & Tobago              | 4–5-year olds      | 10+ years           | Bachelor’s Degree                      |
| 115         | Trinidad & Tobago              | 4–5-year olds      | 10+ years           | Master’s Degree                       |
These initial codes were then reduced wherever overlapping ideas were observed. The resulting codes were then used as evidence for themes which were developed to report the major findings in response to the research questions. In the process, quotes from participant responses were also selected for use in the final report to add a realistic description of the issue studied using the actual voice of the teachers. In keeping with the suggestions of Nowell et al. (2017) to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings by ensuring consistency in the inherent themes which were arrived at, two researchers independently coded the data and compared dominant themes which they believed were evident in the findings. Discussions were then held to support differences and affirm similarities of the themes which were arrived at.

Findings

The findings are summarised in Table 2 which displays the five themes and three sub-themes with supporting quotes from the data. This is followed by a discussion of the themes in response to each research question. Figures 1 and 2 show the relationships between the themes and sub-themes.

The first research question asked: What were the professional experiences of Caribbean ECCE teachers at the start of the COVID-19 Pandemic period? Findings were that teachers experienced changes to their routine practices. One overarching theme emerged: “Changed Teacher Experiences”. This was characterized by a Work Increase with Uncertain Results as teachers had to navigate Changed Teaching Requirements and New Parent Demands (See Fig. 1).

With the rapid switch to emergency remote teaching, educators spoke about the changes to their pedagogical routine which required more effort, but they felt the outcomes were uncertain. For example, some teachers determined that they had to prepare, develop and upload videos to a YouTube channel for daily delivery to the class. Sometimes packages of accompanying worksheets had to be prepared, printed, labelled sequentially and distributed to parents who had internet access on a weekly basis. Aunty Monica said, “For children who didn’t have access to a device or WIFI I created learning packages (printed resources) for them and would drop them off and pick them back up”.

Further the new online teaching via the computer had to be undertaken even though teachers had very limited training. Ms. Brown said, “I received crash courses to utilize the online platform. I also was forced to utilize multiple videos to replace books, manipulatives used in class and walks in the actual school’s environment etc.” See Table 2 for further extracts from the teachers’ responses.

Then there were New Parent Demands as parents sought teacher assistance as they too tried to cope with the changes to teaching, and their new role as facilitator of online learning. In the process they were seeking more access to the staff even though it could not be face-to-face. One teacher explained:

I had to become more accessible to parents. Before I never gave out my number to parents as many previously would contact me at odd hours. I now had to use my personal cellular phone so I could reach them and they could reach me.

Parents needed more information and emotional support from teachers even though the teachers had not had an upgrade in skill sets to provide professional support. These changes to the teaching requirements and the demands of parents made teachers feel that their workload was increased albeit with uncertain outcomes. As Teacher Amanda explained, “I had to teach online and try my best to communicate more with parents via the internet”. The uncertainty is reflected in the choice of language where she described her efforts not as “doing” her best but “trying” her best.

The switch to remote online teaching could be summarized as a change that propelled teachers out of their face-to-face comfort zone. The change was rapid and involved an increase in the teachers’ workload to meet new pedagogical requirements and parent demands. Teachers expressed uncertainty about the learning outcomes because they felt inadequately trained to meet the new demands of their job.

The finding that EC teachers did not feel adequately trained to meet their increased responsibilities seems in line with Le Brocque et al.’s (2017) conclusion that teachers are in a unique position to assist children during a crisis. They caution however, that for teachers to perform their duties effectively, they need appropriate training and support. This seems to be an important consideration which would have increased teacher confidence and capability for online delivery and providing parent support. Further, Bas-sok et al. (2020) assert that to ensure children receive their right to quality education, a critical element is ensuring that EC teachers receive the support they need for high quality pedagogy, is another important consideration.

The second research question asked: How did Caribbean early childhood teachers adapt at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic period to ensure continuity of children’s rights to access education?

Figure 2 represents the two major themes which emerged as teachers adapted their routine practices to try to ensure that they continued to facilitate the children’s right to an education. To do this, they had to come to terms with “Significant New Understandings” which was the 4th theme that emerged to represent their changed experiences. These Significant New Understandings had two sub-themes: Changed
Table 2: Themes with supporting quotes from the data

| Themes and sub-themes                                      | Supporting quotes from teacher responses                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Changed teacher experiences                           | *The following quotes support this theme:*                                                                |
| Work increase with uncertain results                      | I had to teach online and try my best to communicate more with parents via the internet                  |
|                                                           | I had to become more technologically savvy and research more online strategies I can use to get my      |
|                                                           | students to understand the content easily                                                                |
|                                                           | I tried making myself more accessible (to parents)                                                      |
|                                                           | One teacher said that she-incorporate the use of technological devices in providing students with les-  |
|                                                           | sons working from home on a daily basis                                                                 |
|                                                           | Another said she-used an online form of communication such as Zoom or WhatsApp for messaging and       |
|                                                           | marking students’ work                                                                                  |
|                                                           | *However, the results of increased effort were uncertain due to:*                                        |
|                                                           | Fear of - Not being able to bring across the lesson as I would want to the children                     |
|                                                           | The children’s - attention span is limited so working around that will be a hurdle                      |
|                                                           | Also - A child stimulated through online learning gets bored so easily                                   |
|                                                           | And - The videos teachers are making are assisting but we need training to make them more interactive   |
| 2. Changed teaching strategies                            | *The following were new strategies mentioned:*                                                             |
|                                                           | Due to COVID-19 I had to start teaching online                                                          |
|                                                           | Planning and executing online work has been most challenging                                           |
|                                                           | I had to - Learn new technical skills and do extensive online research on how to teach effectively via   |
|                                                           | the media                                                                                               |
|                                                           | I had to teach online and try my best to communicate more with parents via the internet                  |
|                                                           | I received crash courses to utilize the online platform. I also was forced to utilize multiple videos to  |
|                                                           | replace books, manipulatives used in class and walks in the actual school’s environment etc.             |
|                                                           | For children who didn’t have access to a device or WIFI I created learning packages (printed resources) |
|                                                           | for them and would drop them off and pick them back up                                                  |
|                                                           | I had to incorporate many apps and features to ensure leaning was still meaningful and fun                |
|                                                           | I have personally visited children who would end the online class in tears because they miss their       |
|                                                           | teacher                                                                                                 |
|                                                           | I strategically place emphasis on the emotional state of students and parents                           |
| 3. New parent demands                                     | *New parent demands identified were-*                                                                     |
|                                                           | I had to become more accessible to parents. Before I never gave out my number to parents as many         |
|                                                           | previously would contact me at odd hours. I now had to use my personal cellular phone so I could          |
|                                                           | reach them and they could reach me                                                                         |
|                                                           | This has impacted my relationship with parents as they themselves feel uncertain and rely heavily on     |
|                                                           | guidance from the Educator                                                                                |
|                                                           | Some parents have become more appreciative                                                               |
|                                                           | I tried making myself more accessible, I used several ways to contact them and show them the impor-      |
|                                                           | tance of having their children involved in work while at home. I used WhatsApp, sending messages         |
|                                                           | with others who might be in contact with them, creating group chats, asking the principal to send        |
|                                                           | announcements and even allowing myself to be available on school premises so they can bring the          |
|                                                           | work to me if they don’t have access to a device to go online                                            |
| 4. Significant new understandings                         | *The staff used collaborative planning, to determine teaching strategies they had to adapt. Teachers      |
| Changed teacher collaboration practices                   | said-*                                                                                                   |
|                                                           | I have addressed the issue through collaborative team work with colleagues                              |
|                                                           | In some instances, “staff collaboration” has been a major challenge                                      |
|                                                           | Teachers also collaborated with parents and the community, to support changed teaching require-           |
|                                                           | ments. Teachers said-*                                                                                    |
|                                                           | I have sent YouTube links so parents can make learning more fun                                          |
|                                                           | One teacher assisted where parents—...had the inability to assist children at home when the activities   |
|                                                           | were given. Therefore, children were at a disadvantage due to parents’ work hours and parents being     |
|                                                           | impatient with children                                                                                  |
|                                                           | It has made me more lenient in giving out my phone number and allowing parents to get easy access       |
|                                                           | to me                                                                                                    |
|                                                           | Covid-19 taught me that...having support from the level of Administration, staff, parents and family     |
|                                                           | is of utmost importance                                                                                 |
|                                                           | A further new requirement was-Collaborating with Social services and other stakeholders to ensure       |
|                                                           | children’s needs are still being met                                                                     |
Table 2 (continued)

| Themes and sub-themes                      | Supporting quotes from teacher responses                                           |
|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Changed individual qualities               | Teachers stated that-                                                              |
|                                            | Covid-19 has taught me to be more patient                                          |
|                                            | I had to exercise more patience as I had to adjust to teaching with my family at home, waiting on the internet connection to work so I can reach my students |
|                                            | They needed to develop a mindset that allowed them to be adaptable to change        |
|                                            | They had to-Adapt to using various apps to share information with students and parents |
|                                            | It has taught me to quickly adapt to changing conditions                           |
|                                            | It has taught me that I have a strong will                                         |
|                                            | That I am resilient, can adapt to the needs of my students                         |
| 5. Warning signs for support               | These were gleaned from the following teacher expressions-                        |
|                                            | I have to be finding ways to gain resources to meet the demands by the ECC (Early Childhood Centre) with no funding from the government |
|                                            | Burn out is very high amongst ECCE practitioners. Some incentives would help practitioners cater to their mental and emotional well-being |
|                                            | I need more technical training on online platform use for teaching young children  |
|                                            | I have to speak to children during lessons to get them to refocus                  |
|                                            | There are parents who had the inability to assist children at home when the activities were given. |
|                                            | Therefore, children were at a disadvantage due to parents’ work hours and parents being impatient with children |
|                                            | Some parents from time to time were provided with credit to put on data plans to access work for students |
|                                            | I expressed to principal to solicit help from the government to assist the in-need students |
|                                            | Government (should) be more respectful and understanding of the time and effort that practitioners put into ensuring that the needs of their students and families are met |

**Fig. 1** Changes teachers experienced

*Teacher Collaboration Practices* and *Changed Individual Qualities*. These two dimensions were adaptations which became necessary to continue teaching in the new paradigm. In the process teachers had to be mindful of, and where possible, address the 5th theme which emerged—*Warning Signs for Support.*
In terms of the first sub theme—*Changed Collaboration Practices*, teachers soon realized that they had to form greater cooperative relationships at two levels. First the staff had to pool their ideas, skills and resources and through collaborative planning, work through the teaching strategies they needed to adapt. Secondly, they had to collaborate at the level of the parent and the community, to form or draw upon partnerships in a more significant way to support changed teaching requirements. One teacher explained that she had to try to assist in situations where parents “…had the inability to assist children at home when the activities were given. Therefore, children were at a disadvantage due to parents’ work hours and parents being impatient with children.”

The second sub-theme—*Changed Individual Qualities* represented critical personal attributes which teachers said they needed for teaching in the online/blended environment. Teachers needed patience to complete online tasks because they were unfamiliar with online teaching strategies and how to adapt their teaching. They also experienced challenges with using the technology and equipment to teach which could have led to frustration if they did not patiently persist with the tasks. Oftentimes they did not have expert technical support for teaching online. One teacher said that she had to “Learn new technical skills and do extensive online research on how to teach effectively via the media.”

A second attribute needed was adaptability to change, mainly to adapt their face-to-face teaching style to the online mode. Finally, teachers said they needed to develop resilience by having a mindset that allowed them to negotiate the change process. One teacher explained that she had to, “Adapt to using various apps to share information with students and parents.”

The third theme which emerged was the *Warning Signs for Support*. These were situations teachers incidentally identified which were critical to address because they had the potential to undermine the success of the remote teaching venture. Warning signs were identified within the school setting where the sustainability of teachers having to self-fund resources and the impact of the stressful teaching transition on teachers’ mental health needed to be addressed. Teachers also needed professional development training in online teaching for young children.

Another area of concern was where children were not attentive online, which was affecting their learning. Parents too expressed that they were busy and frustrated. One teacher explained that the online teaching, “…has impacted my relationship with parents as they themselves feel uncertain and rely heavily on guidance from the educator.” Other parents with more limited means, needed resources to purchase data for their phones.

The silence of governments on providing stimulus packages and financial incentives to assist the early childhood sector was also a warning sign that support was needed but not forthcoming. One teacher said, “Amidst the various roles of teachers, … I have to be finding ways to gain resources to meet the demands by the ECC with no funding from the government.” Yet another respondent recommended that the government...
...be more respectful and understanding of the time and effort that practitioners put into ensuring that the needs of their students and families are met. (They should) [o]ffer some incentives which would help practitioners cater to their mental and emotional well-being. Burn out is very high amongst ECCE practitioners.

Teachers’ adaptation of their practices to meet the changed online teaching requirements seemed similar to the transformation in teaching practices due to COVID-19 measures which Code et al. (2020) termed pandemic transformed pedagogy. The participants’ shift in thinking led them to include greater collaboration at different levels. They also had to undergo a personal transformation to adopt work habits and character traits like creativity, persistence, and adaptability to change, characteristics commonly associated with twenty-first century skills. Since the shift to emergency remote teaching was rapid, there was no time to undergo the time-consuming processes necessary for developing effective online programmes with the required ecosystem of support (Hodges et al., 2020).

Teachers also lamented the fact that there was no governmental support for EC education to facilitate the switch from face-to-face to emergency remote teaching. Unlike the more developed economies like China or Spain where governments could quickly tap into existing national efforts to improve teaching in the digital format, in the Caribbean, teachers had to mostly decide what to do for themselves using limited shared knowledge within their schools. Had there been resources in place to fund continuity in early childhood education during a disruption to the education system, the transition would have more adequately met children’s right to continuity in education.

This study revealed that EC teachers were willing to adjust and adapt their practices, however, they were limited by the lack of funding and support for continuity in education particularly at the EC level. Large scale disasters such as COVID-19 need committed state intervention to buffer the disruption. Individual teachers and schools cannot finance the support needed. While the Caribbean economies have been badly bruised by hurricanes and national disasters in recent times, Early childhood education should, nevertheless, be prioritized for government support to address the issues raised by teachers and those highlighted under the theme Warning Signs for Support. Caribbean governments should not compromise the advances gained from systematically investing in ECCE over the years. They should continue to invest and strengthen the foundation of the education system, for the sustainability of the education system and to fulfill their obligation to meeting children’s rights to an education even during a pandemic.

Funding No funding was received for conducting this study.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no conflict of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

Data Availability Data is stored in a Google folder.

Ethical Approval All ethical procedures as outlined by The University of the West Indies were adhered to.

References

Albó, L., Beardsley, M., Martínez-Moreno, J., Santos, P., & Hernández-Leo, D. (2020). Emergency remote teaching: Capturing teacher experiences in Spain with SELFIE. In C. Alario-Hoyos, M. J. Rodríguez-Triana, M. Scheffel, I. Arnedillo-Sánchez, & S. M. Dennerlein (Eds.), Addressing global challenges and quality education. EC-TEL 2020. Lecture notes in computer science. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-57717-9_23

Almog, S., & Perry-Hazan, L. (2012). Conceptualizing the right of children to adaptable education. The International Journal of Children’s Rights, 20(4), 486–500.

Bassok, D., Markowitz, A., & Michie, M. (2020). COVID-19 highlights inequities in how we treat early educators in child care vs. schools. Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2020/10/23/covid-19-highlights-inequities-in-how-we-treat-early-educators-in-child-care-vs-schools/

Bellegarde-Smith, P. (2011). A man-made disaster: The earthquake of January 12, 2010—A Haitian perspective. Journal of Black Studies, 42(2), 264–275.

Boruff, B. J., & Cutter, S. L. (2007). The environmental vulnerability of Caribbean island nations. Geographical Review, 97(1), 24–45.

Braun, V., & Clark, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–101.

© Springer
Code, J., Ralph, R., & Forde, K. (2020). Pandemic designs for the future: Perspectives of technology education teachers during COVID-19. *Information and Learning Sciences, 121*(5/6), 419–431. https://doi.org/10.1108/ILS-04-2020-0112

Creswell, J. W. (2015). *30 Essential skills for the qualitative researcher*. Sage.

Drane, C. F., Vernon, L., & O’Shea, S. (2020). Vulnerable learners in the age of COVID-19: A scoping review. *The Australian Educational Researcher, 48*, 585–604.

Fullan, M. (1996). Professional culture and educational change. *School Psychology Review, 25*(4), 496–500.

Hodges, C., Moore, S., Lockee, B., Trust, T., & Bond, A. (2020). The difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning. *Educature Review*. Educause.

Jackson, J. (2021). Early childhood educators are leaving in droves. Here are 3 ways to keep them, and attract more. In: The conversation. Retrieved from https://theconversation.com/early-childhood-educators-are-leaving-in-droves-here-are-3-ways-to-keep-them-and-attract-more-153187

Kalloo, R. C., Mitchell, B., & Kamalodeen, V. J. (2020). Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in Trinidad and Tobago: Challenges and opportunities for teacher education. *Journal of Education for Teaching, 46*(4), 452–462.

Kinkead-Clark, Z., Burns, S., & Abdul-Majied, S. (2019). Actualizing children’s rights through early childhood care and education: A focus on the Caribbean. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X19875765

Kouame, A., & Reyes, M. I. (2011, January). The Caribbean Region beyond the 2008–09 global financial crisis. In: *Document presentado en la conferencia “Options for the Caribbean after the Global Financial Crisis”* (pp. 27–28).

Leacock, C. J., & Warrican, S. J. (2020). Helping teachers to respond to COVID-19 in the Eastern Caribbean: Issues of readiness, equity and care. *Journal of Education for Teaching, 46*(4), 576–585.

Le Brocque, R., De Young, A., Montague, G., Pocock, S., March, S., Triggell, N., & Kenardy, J. (2017). Schools and natural disaster recovery: The unique and vital role that teachers and education professionals play in ensuring the mental health of students following natural disasters. *Journal of Psychologists and Counselors in Schools, 27*(1), 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1017/jgc.2016.17

Mutton, T. (2020). Teacher education and Covid-19: Responses and opportunities for new pedagogical initiatives. *Journal of Education for Teaching, 7*, 1–3. https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2020.1805189

Obiakor, T., & Adeniran, A. P. (2020). Covid-19: Impending situation threatens to deepen Nigeria’s education crisis.

Samms-Vaughan, M. (2004). The biology, sociology and economics of early childhood education. *Regional conference on screening, referral and early intervention*. Early Childhood Commission.

Seusan, L. A., & Maradiegue, R. (2020). *Education on hold: A generation of children in Latin America and the Caribbean are missing out on schooling because of COVID-19*. UNESCO.

UNESCO. (2020a, July 17). New drive to protect early childhood education in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. Retrieved from https://en.unesco.org/news/new-drive-protect-early-childhood-education-context-covid-19-crisis

UNESCO. (2020b, August). *Policy brief: Education during Covid-19 and beyond*. Retrieved from https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wpcontent/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg_policy_brief_covid19_and_education_august_2020.pdf

UNESCO. (2020c, November 26). *Education in emergencies*. Retrieved from https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-emergencies

Publisher’s Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.