



Chapter 2

Curriculum Decision-Making in Times of Uncertainty: A Case Study of a Top-Down Technician Approach During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Aruna Ankiah-Gangadeen 
Mauritius Institute of Education
a.ankiah@mie.ac.mu

Ajay Ramful 
Mauritius Institute of Education
a.ramful@mie.ac.mu

Abstract

Curriculum decision-making is a key process in curriculum development and implementation. It involves a complex set of elements and diverse stakeholders who are geared by governmental objectives for the country as well as the values and orientations of the educational system. However, in times of crisis or uncertainty, such a process may be curtailed while responding spontaneously and urgently to unpredictable situations. If not properly steered, curriculum decision-making can result in visible incompatibility between the intended and implemented curriculum. Policymakers, by virtue of their position and power, are key players in this process. This chapter uses the Mauritian experience during the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study to examine and theorise curriculum decision-making in a centralised education system during a crisis. It analyses the underlying factors that influenced the moves of policymakers during the COVID-19 pandemic and reflects on the impact of a top-down technician

approach on the main stakeholders, namely headmasters, teachers and parents. Using a combination of Brofenbrenner's ecological systems theory and ecosystem functioning as a lens, the chapter reveals how, in times of crisis, policy decisions that are guided by predominantly administrative values and accountability mechanisms can disrupt the balance in a harmonious educational ecosystem despite the prevalence of a shared ideology. The study highlights the significance of participatory curriculum decision-making through a close collaboration between stakeholders at the strategic, tactical and operational levels of curriculum decision-making during a crisis.

Keywords: *curriculum decision-making, top down technicist approach, curriculum intention and implementation*

Introduction

Towards the end of 2019, the world gradually started to shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. What had started in China soon spread worldwide, bringing all economic, social, and educational activities to a halt. More than two years later, even though these activities have slowly resumed, stumbling on the way as new waves of the COVID-19 pandemic were encountered and with a heavy reliance on the efficacy of vaccines, the educational sphere, globally, is having to deal with the consequences of school closure. Undeniably, the circumstances were dire for all educational stakeholders, mostly policymakers who were expected to proclaim firm measures for continued teaching and learning within a context that was new, unpredictable, and constantly in flux. No less than 1.6 billion learners worldwide (UNESCO, UNICEF & World Bank, 2021) were affected. Decision-making in matters of curriculum content and implementation is a complex endeavour on account of the particularities of education systems rooted in historical and political contexts and the varying values, aspirations, and motives of different stakeholders (Frede & Ackerman, 2007). During the COVID-19 pandemic, problems were exacerbated by emergent and

unpredictable situations, and educational decisions had to be taken to the tune of new variants. Inevitably, factors such as disrupted school calendars, closure over diverse time spans and disparate provision for or access to alternate modes of delivery impact curriculum implementation. In this chapter, we use Mauritius - a Small Island Developing State (SIDS) - as a case study to explore curriculum decision-making in a centralised education system during the COVID-19 pandemic. An analysis of the moves of policymakers and the underlying factors influencing these as the educational ecosystem of the prior to the COVID-19 era shattered into an unstable environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, allows us to theorise curriculum decision-making in times of crisis. We highlight the decisions taken towards ensuring the continuity of learning and the new problems these generated. Finally, we propose a participatory approach to curriculum decision-making in times of crisis with due consideration to the strategic, tactical, and operational levels to ensure that all aspects of the situation are dealt with in collaboration with all stakeholders.

Dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic: A glimpse of the educational sphere

As the COVID-19 pandemic gained ground, education authorities and higher officers scrambled to salvage teaching and learning as best they could amidst health concerns. Amongst the most common responses were periodical school closures and remote learning. Regarding the latter, the nature of teaching and learning depended greatly on the facilities available and thus varied from online modalities using digital resources to paper-based resources, radio transmissions and television broadcasts (Meinck *et al.*, 2022). The implementation of measures taken differed in relation to how far the educational system was centralised. For instance, the degree of leeway afforded to educational partners differed in Burkina Faso, which has a centralised system; Ethiopia, where schools have some autonomy; and Denmark that has a decentralised system (Meinck *et al.*, 2022). However, as noted

Theorising Curriculum in Unsettling Times

by Sayed and Singh (2020, p.27), the main preoccupation remained curriculum coverage:

A remarkable feature of the debate about the impact of COVID-19 and education responses is the strong focus on educational content. Rearranging school timetabling, extending the school year and increasing teaching hours for each learning area focus education policy attention on the loss of learning content, measured by the amount of time children are expected to spend on learning. Underpinning this understanding of education in times of crises is the notion of learning as curriculum coverage. In other words, school closure as a response to the pandemic is understood as the loss of learning content due to insufficient time for covering the content specified in the curriculum.

Policy decisions pertaining to curriculum implementation were scrutinised. A survey of the literature revealed that, in most instances, the inadequacy of these decisions is brought out. Staton (2021) vociferously highlights the flaws of the educational policy decisions in the UK, especially the fixation on centralisation and constant changes. Commenting on curriculum revisions, which they term ‘tinkering’, to ensure coverage in South Africa, Amin and Mahabeer (2021, p.496) criticise the unilateral decisions that disregard contextual and individual disparities:

Policy statements are generic in nature and address broad parameters of action. In the case at hand, the curriculum recovery plan is just that: an interim set of measures to deal with the aftereffects of the closure of schools for more than two months and the resultant loss of contact time. However, the recommendations offer little, if any, direction for reducing inequalities. In fact, the revised curriculum ignores the contextual distinctions amongst schools (readiness to deliver technology-based education), glosses over pedagogical approaches (how to teach a compressed and complex curriculum), overlooks student diversity (how to accommodate differentiated needs), and is vague on the guiding principles for teachers (how to implement the recommendations).

Similarly, Ramrathan (2021, p. 386) disapproves of the top-down decision to do away with continuous assessment in South Africa, arguing that it signals a technical concern that “*speaks to issues of accountability through curriculum coverage rather than accountability through competence or outcomes of learning*”. The top-down approach, also adopted in Pakistan, is rejected by Gul and Khilji (2021) due to its lack of responsiveness to current conditions and straight-jacketing decisions that take away teacher autonomy to turn the COVID-19 pandemic into live learning experiences for their learners. What emanates from the literature surveyed is dissatisfaction at policy decisions not deemed adequately responsive (a recurrent term in most of the articles consulted) to the realities of the situation.

Additionally, the upheaval created by the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing policy decisions have led to questioning the curriculum as we traditionally know it and, hence, the nature of and goals of education, that is ‘How ought we to teach or learn?’ (Le Grange, 2021, p.426). A simple answer may be a reconsideration of the instruction theory, for instance adopting the Thinking-Based Instruction Theory which, according to Li *et al.* (2021, p.2),

“could arouse students’ motivation, suitable for students to study at home, and meet the requirements of curriculum reform (i.e., conducive to students’ intellectual development, while enabling students to cultivate their key competencies, and facilitating systematic knowledge construction)”.

However, taking the reflection to another level, Wong and Mishra (2021, p.891) aver that the reconceptualisation of the curriculum in line with “what our students truly need both right now (in this moment before a vaccine is widely available) and years from now, when our children become leaders in this world” is required. To them, “(i)t is increasingly clear that this ‘one-size-fits-all,’ age-driven curriculum does not work” (Wong and Mishra 2021, p. 892). Pushing the debate a step further, Goodson and Schostak (2021, p.30) ask a fundamental question:

Theorising Curriculum in Unsettling Times

“How might this experience stimulate a reimagining of the curriculum? More fundamentally, how might it lead to the development of a knowledgeable, intelligent, effective public, able to engage freely and equally in decision-making at all levels of social, cultural, political, and economic life, as a condition for personal freedom?”

The authors contend that the uncertain times have shown that

“the notion that schooling can transmit certainties and verities through a pre-planned and preactive curriculum can no longer hold sway. We have to think of ways of moving beyond preactive planning by elites and top-down transmission into a more collective, cooperative, mutual pattern of learning.” (2021, p.35).

Goodson and Schostak (2021, p.42) thus propose

“a curriculum founded upon real experiences, real practices, and real infrastructures that extend way beyond a given classroom and age group, one that can be carried forward into the lives of the adults capable of demanding a social system that meets their desires for a good life for all.”

Like them, others have tendered proposals to replace a curriculum that is no longer deemed relevant in an era where the traditional notion of ‘normal’ has been effaced. For instance, Cahapay (2020, p.2) points to the need for a curriculum that is

“relevant, appropriate, and responsive (by catering for) the development of preparedness in times of disasters, diseases, and emergencies.”

For Ramrathan (2021, p.390) “a new conceptual architecture of school education that straddles a contextualized and responsive curriculum addressing local educational needs and a global imperative formed by core literacies that will enable one to work within and be part of a globalized world context” is required. He thus propounds “an exploitation of the COVID-19 context to make school education relevant to the lives of the people, the community and the country.” (Ramrathan, 2021, p.386). All these authors

espouse the philosophy that the curriculum is not a static document to be implemented as given but, rather, one that requires reshaping in line with the realities of the times.

The gamut of dissenting comments on top-down policy decisions taken relate to the different aspects of the curriculum, namely content, operationalisation and assessment. The disavowal of these decisions is an apt reflection of the upheaval the COVID-19 pandemic caused in the educational sphere worldwide. When all sense of normalcy has been brushed aside by the COVID-19 pandemic, and ontological and epistemological stances disrupted, what paradigm does one draw from to provide a curriculum experience in keeping with the needs of the learners and of the times? While Maistry (2020, p.28) avers that the COVID-19 pandemic “*presents with novel challenges for higher education curriculum theorising since it brings into view the need to re-orient thinking in this field*”, we argue that this applies to the education sector as a whole. Curriculum theorising is an important feature of curriculum studies as it foregrounds the philosophical underpinnings of processes involved, ranging from educational policymaking to curriculum development, implementation and assessment. However, the predominant focus in the literature tends to be on the latter aspects as opposed to policy decision-making, especially in crisis situations. This is the gap that the current chapter addresses. It engages in an examination of curriculum decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic with a view to theorising the process in a top-down technicist context. This endeavour, situated in a small island state east of Madagascar and the African continent, is aligned with Fomunyam and Khoza’s (2021, p.1) call for action so that “*African contextual matters can form the basis of curriculum theory and theorising*”.

Examining curriculum decision-making through the lens of ecosystem functioning

Curricular endeavours are not the sole concern of an individual or an institution. The emergence of insights

into the complexity of curricular processes (for example, see Kelly, 2009) drew attention to the plethora of actors involved – the main ones being policymakers, curriculum developers, school principals, teachers, learners and parents. The recognition that a network of stakeholders impacts curriculum development and operationalisation, often interactively, calls for the conceptualisation of curriculum processes as an ecosystem functioning. The term ‘ecosystem’ is not new in the educational arena, as can be inferred from Bronfenbrenner ecological systems theory (Tudge *et al.*, 2009) or concepts such as ‘educational ecosystem’ and ‘learning ecosystem’. The terms ‘educational ecosystem’ and ‘learning ecosystem’, as seen in the literature, at times have nuanced meanings or tend to be used interchangeably. In either instance, they place the learner and learning that is responsive to the times (often involving technology) at the centre of all considerations (eg, Lamprini & Bröchler, 2018; Niehmi, 2016; Pillai *et al.*, 2019). Shedding further light on the way ecosystems function, biological ecosystems reveal that organisms within an ecosystem function interactively in the quest of homeostatic stability, particularly when external events disrupt that system. Far from being static, ecosystems are affected and even transformed by events as the different organisms holding varying roles adapt to the changes. In an ecosystem, all organisms hold equal importance, and the emergence of dominant organisms causes a disbalance. By mapping this as a metaphor onto the educational sector, it becomes clear that the collaboration of all stakeholders is crucial if the educational or learning ecosystem is to function smoothly and efficiently, since each acts as a significant cog in curriculum implementation. As Lamprini and Bröchler (2018, p.5) aver, it is essential that “*all the stakeholders of the learning ecosystem (be brought) into a shared and common site, where they share their responsibility in the learning process, and they openly collaborate and interact as a part of the same community with common goals.*” Their views are elaborated by Niehmi (2016, p.9) who posits:

Chapter 2

For an educational ecosystem to be sustainable, its participants must intentionally share joint aims and take action to ensure interconnectedness, interdependence, and open and transparent mutual communication between all partners. In complex and moving systems, many of the components undergo their own change processes, and this information needs to be analysed, updated and shared when working towards common goals. Interaction and communication with the flow of information are basic conditions for maintaining commitment from partners.

The success of the collaboration is inevitably determined by the performance of the various partners and their ability to review initial stances and adapt to circumstances.

Making curricular decisions within an ecosystem that constitutes a web of educational stakeholders with varying functions, accountability thresholds, values and expectations can be a convoluted process. Decision-making is a process of selecting lines of action from amongst a number of alternative courses. With respect to curriculum decision-making, a particular choice may have significant repercussions regarding educational investment and desired or expected outcomes.

Klein's conceptual framework for curriculum decision-making (Klein, 1991) is a practical model to analyse the interaction of different stakeholders with respect to curriculum elements. The framework consists of two interacting dimensions, namely participants at different levels and curriculum elements. The participants in the curriculum decision-making process comprise the following seven components: academics (eg, experts in subject areas and curriculum development), societal (eg, government agencies, business, industries), formal (curriculum development authorities), institutional (the school), instructional (teaching), operational, and experiential (the students). The nine curriculum elements include: goals, objectives, purposes; content; materials, resources; activities, teaching strategies; evaluation; grouping, time, and space. The framework is useful to identify gaps in decision-making in terms of incompatibility of the same curriculum elements at different decision-

making levels. Amongst the seven levels of decision-making, the formal, institutional and instructional are particularly critical and align complementarily with the commonly used managerial concepts, namely strategic, tactical and operational decision-making (Kaufman *et al.*, 1996).

Decisions in matters of curriculum may thus be viewed at three different levels, as follows: (i) the policy level, where strategic decisions are taken by policymakers, who are in a position of authority, to set the course of action; (ii) the tactical level, where curriculum designers and pedagogical experts, including representatives of teachers and headmasters, are involved in providing guidelines for the smooth enactment of the policy in schools; and (iii) the operational level, where headmasters and teachers decide what and how to enact the curriculum in their particular setting. The tactical and operational level decisions may be context dependent.

The context of the study

Context is a key aspect of curriculum theorising (Fomunyan, 2014; 2021). Having situated the curriculum decision-making process within the premise of an ecosystem, we now provide some contextual information about the Mauritian education system to illustrate how the different elements of the system interacted during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Mauritian education system comprises state (or government) schools and private (fee-paying and non-fee paying) pre-primary, primary and secondary schools. State schools are funded by and are under the administrative purview of the Ministry of Education (MOE) or Early Childhood Care and Education Authority (ECCEA) in the case of pre-primary schools. Private fee-paying primary and secondary schools have the freedom to choose their curriculum and examining body but must abide by the broader regulatory structures and decisions of the MOE. For instance, while they had to abide by decisions regarding school closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they did not necessarily modify their school calendar. The secondary sector comprises a category known as private grant-aided

schools which function under the aegis of a parastatal body, the Private Secondary Education Authority (PSEA). These schools are owned by individuals, companies or religious bodies but are wholly funded by the government, hence they are non-fee paying. The staff of private-subsidised colleges have the same employment conditions as their colleagues in state schools and also implement the National Curriculum Framework. All the students take part in the Primary School Achievement Certificate (PSAC) national examinations at the end of the primary cycle (Grade 6), the National Certificate of Education (NCE) examinations at the end of middle school (Grade 9), and the Cambridge School Certificate (SC) and Higher School Certificate (HSC) examinations at the end of Grades 11 and 13 respectively. In this chapter, we focus mainly on policy decisions pertaining to the primary and secondary schooling sectors.

The Mauritian educational system has a relatively rigid system of control from a centrally driven administration. The control is manifested through a prescriptive curriculum, an examination-oriented focus and accountability-led mechanisms where schools are under the purview of the Ministry of Education and teachers and school administrators are at the executing end of policy decisions. From their vantage point, decision-makers have the privileged authority to decide on the course of action in matters of curriculum selection and implementation. This does not suggest that schools do not have autonomy in curriculum implementation, but they must conform to the policy guidelines of the central administration. They follow a standard curriculum which is ultimately assessed by a local or an external body, the Mauritius Examinations Syndicate (MES) and Cambridge Assessment International Examinations (CAIE) respectively. The heavy premise on high-stake examinations at four points (Grades 6, 9, 11 and 13) of the education cycle implicitly provides a product-oriented rendering to the implementation of the curriculum, giving way to a highly competitive system with a ripple effect of massive private tuition practices (Bray & Silova, 2006; Hollup, 2004). The conviction that education

is the major driver to economic success is reflected in key policy documents, such as Educational Reforms in Action 2008–2014, (Ministry of Education, Culture and Human Resources, 2009) and the National Curriculum Framework (Mauritius Institute of Education, 2015). This scenario is not surprising in a postcolonial SIDS lacking natural resources, that has developed an examinations-oriented culture due to the affordances of academic certification for social mobility and openings in the global world. The overtly result-driven philosophy and culture of education is espoused by all Mauritian educational stakeholders, shaping parental and students' objectives, pedagogical choices, schools' ethos, etc (Altinyelken, 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted successive changes in the running of the educational system (see Table 2.1 for an overview of changes) with the consequence that the key players in the ecosystem felt insecure and vulnerable due to the inevitable disruption of their routine and comfort zone. Parents feared that the loss of precious school time would negatively impact performance (Coronavirus: la nouvelle réalité, 2020). Simultaneously, they were apprehensive about the sanitary security of their wards. Teachers and school administrators were concerned about curriculum coverage and examination-preparedness as well as safety (Éviter le décrochage, 2020). In addition, they grappled with new ways of operating in a dystopian environment with novel and unfamiliar work-related demands. Struggling with policy fatigue and operating in survival mode, the stakeholders sought support structures to protect their well-being and values. Teacher and headmaster unions were continuously solicited to raise their concerns while parents voiced out their worries and anxiety through the media. The debate was also fuelled by opinion leaders, including politicians.

Undeniably, the volatile COVID-19-ridden ecosystem, with new variants or threats unpredictably surfacing and overturning established operational structures and practices, makes decision-making a challenging endeavour as measures constantly need to be reviewed and readjusted. The resulting

Table 2.1: COVID-19 pandemic triggered changes in the Mauritian educational system

Ecosystem 1 (prior to the COVID-19 period)	Ecosystem 2 (COVID-19 period)	Issues / concerns / rationale for decision
Established syllabus: full coverage of syllabus	Syllabus for national programmes de-loaded Syllabus for international programmes maintained	Reduced school time No control on external examinations syllabus
Established administrative procedure: Headmasters monitor teachers' work	New control mechanisms for teachers' work (eg, Online Teaching Learning reports) to ensure that teachers are connected to students Tracking of students' online presence WhatsApp groups for permanent communication with teachers	Need for accountability
Established school calendar	School calendar drastically changed with varying periods of closure Staggered timetable to limit student population on site Timetable changed from periods to hourly slots upon resumption	Ensure curriculum coverage Students should be on task Online timetable should follow school timetable to maintain contact hours
Established teaching practices	Online teaching for upper secondary students Broadcast of lessons for primary students on national television Handouts provided to students No provision for the Extended Programme	Ensure pedagogical continuity Monitoring of students' work under less control Issues with access to technology Limited face-to-face interaction New forms of indiscipline High rate of absenteeism

Ecosystem 1 (prior to the COVID-19 period)	Ecosystem 2 (COVID-19 period)	Issues / concerns / rationale for decision
<p>Established assessment practices (local and international examinations)</p>	<p>Assessment on de-loaded syllabus for national examinations Minor adjustment for international examinations Prioritisation of continuous assessment Disruption in assessment practices Automatic promotion to the next grade level for grades where no national examinations involved</p>	<p>Reduced syllabus coverage</p>
<p>Established ways of working: students - at school from 8.00 a.m. to 2.30 or 3.30 p.m.</p>	<p>Video lessons Online learning Student Support Programme Private tuition online</p>	<p>Students should be on task</p>
<p>Established routines of parents</p>	<p>Provide technological and academic support to their wards</p>	<p>Loss of precious school time Examination readiness lacking Marginalisation of students from precarious home backgrounds</p>

frustration of school administrators and teachers, who find themselves at opposite poles of the central administration, tends to mount. While policymakers affirm that appropriate decisions have been taken, teachers perceive guidelines as jarring with the reality of the field and constraining their autonomy. Parental concern is exacerbated in the face of continuously changing measures. In summary, the ambiguities and uncertainties generated by the pandemic perturb the balance that normally prevails in the educational ecosystem due to the heightened and dominant role of policymakers and lack of say of other partners.

Curriculum decision-making in Mauritius during the COVID-19 pandemic

While the country is still dealing with the uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic, in this section we scrutinise a slice of this turbulent period, namely decisions taken during the first COVID-19 wave from its onset in March 2020 to its stabilisation in December 2020. Our main data sources were our lived experiences as curriculum developers deeply involved in implementing policy decisions and highly sold Mauritian newspapers that communicated policy decisions and reported the reactions of various stakeholders. The exhaustive document analysis (Bowen, 2009; Altheide *et al.*, 2008) conducted was an apt supplement to our first-hand knowledge of the situation. It allowed the construction of a detailed chronological account of key policy decisions and events during the COVID-19 pandemic, giving due consideration to the voices of all the actors in the local education ecosystem. The main concern of decision-makers during the discontinuous schooling period was to ascertain that students continued to receive formal education as prescribed in the curriculum by deploying a range of support structures, such as video lessons broadcast on national television for primary pupils; the Student Support Programme, which is a website harbouring instructional videos based on the Grades 7 to 9 curriculum; and online teaching and learning for Grades 10 to 13 (Rivet, 2020). There was a noted inclination

towards providing added attention to grade levels concerned with national examinations, that is Grades 6, 9, 11 and 13. In addition to online classes, the staggered timetable whereby upon resumption, students in different grades attended school on scheduled days, attributed more time to Grades 9, 11 and 13 students – again revealing the preoccupation with examination preparedness. Furthermore, there were more time slots for core subjects such as English, French, and Mathematics.

On the other hand, low-achieving students (such as those on the Extended Programme), most of whom did not have the required logistics for online classes, did not appear to be a major concern for decision-makers. The Extended Programme is an integral part of the Nine Year Continuous Basic Education reform implemented since 2015. Students who fail to attain level 1 for the Grade 6 PSAC examinations are promoted to Grade 7 but sit for the NCE examinations after four years, as opposed to mainstream students who sit for the NCE examinations after three years. As reported by the press, the Ministry of Education relegated the decisions regarding the support attributed to low-achieving students: *“Mais le ministère de l’Éducation est silencieux en ce qu’il s’agit des élèves de l’Extended programme du secondaire et les parents d’élèves aussi bien que leurs enseignants se posent des questions sur cette situation.”*¹ (Silence total du ministère, 2020). They were given relatively less support although they needed it more than mainstream students as they sit for the NCE examinations despite having severe learning difficulties. Such a tendency, where existing inequities are reinforced due to policy during the COVID-19 pandemic, can be observed in other contexts, surprisingly even in affluent countries such as the USA (Sellers, 2021). Thus, in times of uncertainty, the implicit values of an education system become more overt as we observe what is prioritised and what is downplayed. In such times, values propounded by the National Curriculum

1 Statement in French which means: “However, the Ministry is silent with regard to students of the Extended Programme while the students’ parents and teachers are wondering about the situation.”

Framework (Mauritius Institute of Education, 2015), like equity and inclusion, are superseded by mainstream concerns.

The strong orientation towards core subjects and examinations, as well as the marginalisation of the casualties of the system, bring to light the underlying priorities of the Mauritian educational ecosystem. Although examinations are the drivers of both policymakers and consumers in the system, policymakers are empowered by their central position. Reminiscent of Weddle's (in Amanchukwu *et al.*, 2015) level 1 decision-making, which is usually adopted in crisis situations, they strategise a technicist approach driven by administrative values and accountability mechanisms to cater to the requirements of the examinations-oriented education system. Within such an administrative system, however, the practical realities of schools have little bearing on their decisions due to inadequate communication with stakeholders in the field: "Le ministère informe, mais ne communique pas avec ses partenaires"² (Rentrée scolaire, 2020, p.16). As policymakers adopt a one-size-fits-all approach towards schools which vary in terms of public or private status, levels of academic achievement and logistics, teachers and headmasters deplore the dearth of consultation. This may be evidenced in a headmaster's statement to the press, namely that "Il est important (...) d'ouvrir le dialogue et ne pas prendre des décisions unidirectionnelles et unilatérales"³ (Retour des cours en ligne, 2021). Figure 2.1 illustrates the decision-making approach with respect to curriculum implementation during COVID-19. The lack of communication between policymakers and stakeholders operating at the tactical level is brought out through the absence of connecting arrows.

2 Statement in French which means: "The Ministry informs but does not communicate with its partners."

3 Statement in French which means: "It is important (...) to engage in dialogue and not take unidirectional and unilateral decisions."

Theorising Curriculum in Unsettling Times

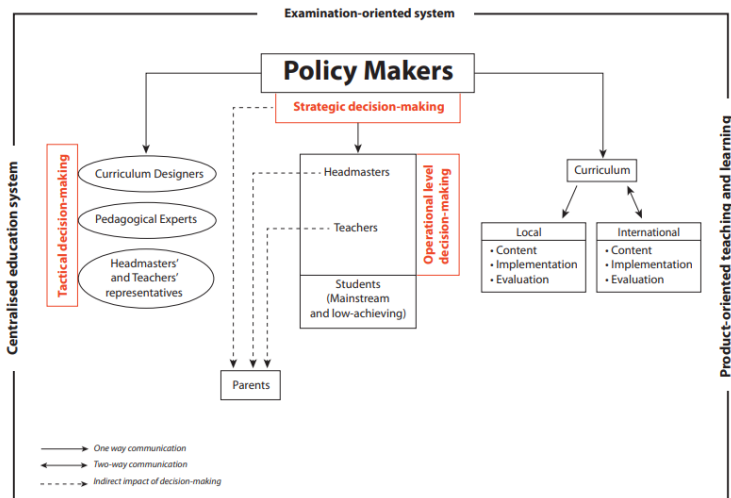


Figure 2.1: Decision-making approach for curriculum implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic

However, even as we highlight the lack of consideration attributed to operations at the tactical level while examining decision-making processes during the COVID-19 pandemic, we cannot downplay the dilemma of policymakers who were themselves dealing with unforeseen and highly uncertain situations. The constant review of previous decisions and often lengthy delays in communicating measures may be indicative of the caution that had to be exercised. Possibly, policymakers had to gauge the implications and repercussions of such decisions in relation to diverse stakeholders. In matters of curriculum decision, it is often difficult to reach a consensus amongst stakeholders who bear different ideologies. In crisis situations, policymakers thus resort to taking decisions by accommodating, as best as they can, the stakes of different partners.

There is little doubt that the new ecosystem that was generated by the COVID-19 pandemic required different stakeholders to adapt to the new realities. This entailed a change of mindset and a pragmatic alignment of expectations with the affordances of the situation. It should be recognised

that, in times of uncertainty, the situation is effervescent and unpredictable. Taking decisions swiftly to the satisfaction of every actor in the ecosystem within such complex configurations is bound to be challenging, especially when certain decisions may have unanticipated repercussions. As a case in point, we refer to the change in the conventional school calendar (January to December) to a new one (July to March) and back again to the conventional calendar in 2022. This led to a range of disruptions at the levels of the examinations period (which additionally clashed with the season of cyclones and flooding); the movement of students from one grade level to the next; and the need for curriculum readaptation or new routes to be promoted to a higher grade due to the broadening age range of students within one classroom after the extension of the school year.

Discussion

In this chapter, we examined and theorised decision-making pertaining to curriculum implementation in a centralised educational system during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using Mauritius as a case study, we explored the crisis decision-making approach adopted by policymakers and its impact on other stakeholders in the educational ecosystem. We found that, even if all stakeholders are performance-oriented, lack of consultation leads to decisions that are not aligned with the realities of the field. This finding corroborates with the findings of a study by Ankiah-Gangadeen and Nadal (2021), which revealed how policy decisions curtailed the actions of heads of schools who were themselves exercising democratic leadership. As such, centralised decision-making that is primarily at the strategic level and with limited attention to the tactical and operational levels gives rise to frustration, since it disrupts the prevailing harmonious relationship of a shared ideology. It is precisely the overemphasis on strategic actors that pushes Hart *et al.* (1993, p.30) to rightly highlight the “*crucial significance of (operational actors) in determining the course of events*” during crisis decision-making. In ‘normal’ times, top-down administrative moves ruffle less because

processes are devolved according to an established method. However, in times of crisis, when educational parameters are unfamiliar, the overt dominance of one stakeholder irks especially as the others grapple to reinstate stability. With reference to Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory, it may be said that the learners are at the centre as the key consideration in curriculum implementation; the microsystem constitutes parents and the school that establish the goal and pedagogical orientation; the exo-system comprises policymakers; the macrosystem involves the forces of an examinations-oriented culture; and the chronosystem, in the context of the study, represents a disrupted COVID-19-ridden environment. Due to the change in the environment, the mesosystem, that is the interrelations among microsystems, is perturbed because of tensions generated between the micro and exo-systems. Constant policy changes are disruptive, more so when the stakes (here represented by examinations) are high. This explains the trend made overt in the literature review, whereby top-down policy decisions regarding curriculum implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic have attracted criticism from diverse quarters, been countered with alternative solutions and triggered fundamental questions about the nature and goal of education. Citing the case of South Korea which successfully dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic, Lee *et al.* (2020, p.374) attribute the success to "*policy decisions at each stage (that) were chosen based on the government's awareness of objective reality and following adaptive policy-making principles to minimize risks and damages.*" The authors go on to explain how, what they term 'adaptive policy-making in quadruple-loop learning' is sensitive to the reality of the field since it "*includes both detecting changes in external environments (backstage) and activating a relevant internal response system, and finding adaptive solutions to solve problems organization face at each stage*" (Lee *et al.*, 2020, p.374).

However, it is interesting to note that in Mauritius, although policy decisions attracted criticism, they did not lead to a reflection on the way in which curricular goals were

flouted or the essence of education distorted. This could be explained by the inherent ideology shared by all stakeholders, whereby more significance is given to performance in examinations to the detriment of other aspects of education.

Conclusion

Klein (1991, p. 24) rightly avers that *“The topic of curriculum decision-making clearly needs further study and clarification.”* The scrutiny of curriculum decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic was enlightening as it revealed the shortcomings of a top-down technicist approach even in a context where the different stakeholders upheld the same ideology. It should be said that, like other partners, policymakers also strive for stability despite the contestations they generate. This includes the forced unwinding of some decisions, similar to the feedback loop of the ecosystem, which serves to reinstate balance in the system after a disruption. Curricular decisions have wide-ranging consequences, whether immediate or in the long term. Consequently, the decisions taken by policymakers are critical in that they affect every stakeholder in the educational ecosystem. It is thus imperative to include the different stakeholders in the decision-making process, especially in a centralised education system, as each represents different vantage points that deserve consideration. The recommendation emanating from the study is that a participatory approach to curriculum decision-making, with due attention to the strategic, tactical, and operational levels, will ascertain that policymakers have a comprehensive picture of the situation and address all aspects of the problem. It also ensures that decisions are appropriated and executed as a collective endeavour rather than an externally imposed plan.

References

- Altinyelken, H.K. (2015). *Evolution of curriculum systems to improve learning outcomes and reduce disparities in school achievement*. (EFA GMR background report; No. ED/EFA/MRT/2015/PI/13). UNESCO. Available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002324/232420e.pdf>
- Altheide, D., Coyle, M., DeVriese K. & Schneider, C. (2008). Emergent Qualitative Document Analysis. In Hesse-Biber, S.N. & Leavy, P. (Eds). *Handbook of Emergent Methods*. (p. 127-154). New York: The Guilford Press. ISBN: 9781609181468
- Amanchukwu, R.N., Stanley, G.J. & Ololube, N.P. (2015). A Review of Leadership Theories, Principles and Styles and Their Relevance to Educational Management. *Management*, 5(1), 6-14. <https://doi.org/10.5923/j.mm.20150501.02>
- Amin, N. & Mahabeer, P. (2021). Curriculum tinkering in situations of crises and inequalities: The case of South Africa. *Prospects*, 51, 489-501. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-021-09564-8>
- Ankiah-Gangadeen, A. & Nadal, P. (2021). School Leadership during the Disruptive Time of COVID-19. *Alternation*. 28(1): 292-315. DOI <https://doi.org/10.29086/2519-5476/2021/v28n1a11>
- Bowen, G.A. (2009). Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27- 40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Bray, M. & Silova, I. (2006). The private tutoring phenomenon: International patterns and perspectives. In I. Silova, M. Bray, A. Zabulionis, V. Budiene & M. Kubánová (Eds). *Education in a Hidden Marketplace: Monitoring of Private Tutoring* (pp. 27-40). Open Society Institute. Available at: https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/394bb3b8-ef04-4f5f-8521-5e0b4dff389c/hidden_20070216.pdf

Chapter 2

- Cahapay, M.B. (2020). Rethinking education in the new normal post-COVID-19 era: A curriculum studies perspective. *Aquademia*, 4(2), ep20018. <https://doi.org/10.29333/aquademia/8315>
- Coronavirus: la nouvelle réalité des parents mauriciens. (2020, April 2). *Le Mauricien*, p.2. Available at: <https://www.lemauricien.com/le-mauricien/coronavirus-education-la-nouvelle-realite-des-parents-mauriciens/341511/>
- Éviter le décrochage avec la reprise prévue en août. (2020, May 6). *Le Mauricien*, p.8. Available at: <https://www.lemauricien.com/le-mauricien/education-eviter-le-decrochage-avec-la-reprise-prevue-en-aout/348511/>
- Frede, E. & Ackerman, D.J. (2007). *Preschool curriculum decision-making: Dimensions to consider. Preschool Policy Brief, Issue 12*. National Institute for Early Education Research. Retrieved from <http://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/12.pdf>.
- Fomunyan, K.G. (2014). Curriculum theorizing and individualism: An exploration of the curriculum's relation to the social, personal and political dimensions of schooling. *Mevlana International Journal of Education*, 4(2), 122-13. <https://doi.org/10.13054/mije.14.40.4.2>
- Fomunyan, K.G. (2021). Theorising alternative pathways for curriculum theorising in Africa. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 9(4), 720-726. <https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2021.090402>
- Fomunyan, K.G. & Khoza S.B. (Eds.) (2021). *Curriculum theory, curriculum theorising, and the theoriser: The African theorising perspective*. Brill Sense. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004447943>
- Goodson, I.F. & Schostak, J.F. (2021). Curriculum and coronavirus: New approaches to curriculum in the age of uncertainty. *Prospects*, 51, 29-45. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09523-9>

Theorising Curriculum in Unsettling Times

- Gul, R. & Khilji, G. (2021). Exploring the need for a responsive school curriculum to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic in Pakistan. *Prospects*, 51, 503–522. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09540-8>
- Hart, P., Rosenthal, U. & Kouzmin, A. (1993). Crisis Decision Making: The Centralization Thesis Revisited. *Administration & Society*. 25(12),12-45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009539979302500102>
- Hollup, O. (2004). *Educational policies, reforms and the role of teacher's unions in Mauritius*. HiT Publication no 8/2004. Telemark University College Porsgrunn. Available at: https://openarchive.usn.no/usn-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2439162/skrift2004_8.pdf?sequence=1
- Kaufman, R.A., Herman, J.J. & Watters, K. (1996). *Educational planning: Strategic, Tactical, Operational*. Scarecrow Press. ISBN: 9780810842977
- Kelly, A.V. (2009). *The Curriculum: Theory and Practice*. Sage. ISBN: 9781847872753
- Klein, M.F. (1991). A Conceptual Framework for Curriculum Decision-Making. In M.F. Klein (Ed.), *The Politics of Curriculum Decision-Making: Issues in Centralizing the Curriculum* (pp. 24-41). State University of New York Press. ISBN: 9780791404874
- Lamprini, K. & Bröchler, R. 2018. How collaborative innovation and technology in educational ecosystem can meet the challenges raised by the 4th Industrial Revolution. *World Technopolis Review*, 7(1), 2-14. Available at: <https://www.koreascience.or.kr/article/JAKO201821142173895.pdf>
- Lee, S., Hwang, C. & Moon, M.J. (2020) Policy learning and crisis policy-making: quadruple-loop learning and COVID-19 responses in South Korea. *Policy and Society*, 39(3): 363-381. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14494035.2020.1785195>
- Le Grange, L. (2021). Covid-19 pandemic and the prospects of education in South Africa. *Prospects*, 51, 425–436. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09514-w>

Chapter 2

- Li, Y., Zhang X., Dai D.Y. & Hu, W. (2021). Curriculum innovation in times of the COVID-19 pandemic: The thinking-based instruction theory and its application. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 601607. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.601607>
- Maistry, S.M. (2020). Curriculum theorising in an economics education programme. *Alternation Special Edition*, 31, 28–50. <https://doi.org/10.29086/2519-5476/2020/sp31a3>
- Mauritius Institute of Education. (2015). *National Curriculum Framework: Nine-Year Continuous Basic Education*. Available at: <https://fliphtml5.com/bookcase/jhboy>
- Meinck, S., Fraillon, J. & Strietholt, R. (2022). *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education*. International evidence from the Responses to Educational Disruption Survey (REDS). UNESCO. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380398>
- Ministry of Education, Culture and Human Resources. (2009). *Education Reforms in Action 2008-2014, Learning for Life*. Available at: <https://education.govmu.org/Documents/downloads/Documents/Education%20Reforms%20in%20Action%202008-2014%20.pdf>
- Niemi, H. (2016). Editorial: Building Partnerships in an Educational Ecosystem. *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal*, 6(3), 5–15. <https://doi.org/10.26529/cepsj.62>
- Pillai, K.R., Upadhyaya, P., Balachandran, A. & Nidadavolu, J. (2019). Versatile learning ecosystem: A conceptual framework. *Higher Education for the Future*, 6(1), 85–100. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347631118802653>
- Ramrathan, L. (2021). School curriculum in South Africa in the Covid19 context: An opportunity for education for relevance. *Prospects*, 51, 383–392. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09490-1>

Theorising Curriculum in Unsettling Times

- Rentrée scolaire: Interrogations et suggestions pour <<une remise à niveau psychologique>>. (2020, July 5). *Le Mauricien*, p.16-17. Available at: <https://www.lemauricien.com/actualites/societe/rentree-scolaire-interrogations-et-suggestions-pour-une-remise-a-niveau-psychologique/361115/>
- Retour des cours en ligne. (2021, November 6). *Le Mauricien*. Available at: <https://www.lemauricien.com/actualites/societe/education-situation-sanitaire-les-syndicats-plaident-pour-le-retour-des-cours-en-ligne/455650/>
- Rivet, A.D. (2020, April 12). Les élèves en mode studieux à partir de lundi. *Le Dimanche/L'HEBDO*.
- Sayed, Y. & Singh, M. (2020). Evidence and education policy making in South Africa during Covid-19: Promises, researchers and policymakers in an age of unpredictability. *Southern African Review of Education*, 26(1), 20–39. Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/ejc-sare-v26-n1-a3>
- Sellers, K. (2021). “All kids matter”? Catholic institutional advocacy for federal COVID relief funding for non-public schools. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 29(131) <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.29.6201>
- Silence total du ministère. (2020, April 14). *Le Mauricien*, p.2. Available at: <https://www.lemauricien.com/le-mauricien/education-a-distance-silence-total-du-ministere-sur-lextended-programme/344223/>
- Staton, B. (2021). UK’s education policies during Covid under fire in damning report. *The Financial Times*. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/cd7f8674-9f63-46e9-9e87-f5eb54bfe013>
- Tudge, J.R.H., Mokrova, I., Hatfield, B.E. & Karnik, R.B. (2009). Uses and Misuses of Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Theory of Human Development. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 1, 198–210. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1756-2589.2009.00026.x>

Chapter 2

- UNESCO, UNICEF & World Bank. (2021). The State of the global education crisis: A path to recovery. Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/publication/the-state-of-the-global-education-crisis-a-path-to-recovery>
- Wong, L. & Mishra, P. (2021). Reforming Our school systems around a humanizing curriculum: Schooling during and after Covid-19. *ECNU Review of Education*, 4 (4), 890–898. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2096531120980750>