

Time to Turn the Tide

Privatisation Trends in Education in the Caribbean

Summary of research findings

Dr Steven J. Courtney
& Dr Rinnelle Lee-Piggott
February 2022



Photo: Jake Brewer / Flickr

Context

Education privatisation across the Caribbean is under-researched, with very few studies that address it directly. We consequently set out to investigate the extent and impact of privatisation features across the region, as well as the role of public policy in relation to privatisation trends and that of supra-national organisations such as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE).

We are operationalising 'privatisation' in this study in three ways. First, we consider exogenous privatisation, or the direct intervention into educational services and provision of private-sector actors. Second, we consider endogenous privatisation, where public-sector actors adopt the methods, goals, language, and dispositions of the private sector. Third, we consider the privatisation of the state itself and its policymaking functions and apparatus.

Methodology and methods

Our multiple-methods case study consists of three strands: the first is a documentary analysis that explores privatisation trends in

ten nations. These are Antigua and Barbuda; Barbados; Belize; Grenada; Guyana; Jamaica; St. Kitts and Nevis; Saint Lucia; Saint Vincent and the Grenadines; and Trinidad and Tobago. Here, we drew on a range of primary and secondary sources to reveal through discourse analysis the respective state's attitude(s) towards privatisation, as well as any tensions evident through the documents. We mainly used strategy documents, but also speeches, education acts and a range of secondary sources. We analysed these using discourse analysis. The second strand was a questionnaire survey with three groups of participants: parents (n=64), teachers (n=11) and school leaders, i.e., principals (n=21). Respondents were from Jamaica; Trinidad and Tobago; Guyana; Barbados; and Saint Lucia. We adapted the questionnaire from Winchip et al.'s (2019) instrument. This questionnaire generated mostly Likert-scale and free-text responses. The third strand comprised interviews with seven people from the following participant groups across five countries: a) Regional Body representative, b) teacher, c) school leader, d) teacher union



representative. We analysed these data using thematic analysis.

Case-study documentary analyses:

Antigua and Barbuda has a philosophy of education and its purposes which is holistic, and which does not privilege a narrow, economically oriented conception of education. However, there is discursive pressure building around the need for increased competitiveness and entrepreneurialism, which places at risk this wide-ranging understanding of what education is for.

Barbados has a much narrower, growth-oriented statement of educational purposes at the heart of its strategy. It consequently has a more explicit focus on privatisation as a mechanism to develop its 'human resources'. The state sees a role for the private sector in co-constructing the curriculum to introduce entrepreneurship and competitiveness. The context is budgetary; Barbados has received support from the IMF that commits the state to neoliberal restructuring.

Belize is relatively economically disadvantaged and is greatly influenced by organised religion. A Kansas-based Catholic mission has established a company there that combines spiritual with commercial objectives, and which the state can only partially resist.

Grenada sets out in its 'Vision 2035' strategy document a conceptualisation of education and its purposes that is strongly adherent to privatising discourses. It exemplifies well the colonisation of the state policy machinery by private-sector interests, aims and language.

Guyana has been very economically disadvantaged but is expecting alleviation through newly found gas reserves. Its strategy for education constructs its societal problems as economic and a corporatised education system as responsible for solving them, through an enhanced accountability structure and financial aid.

Jamaica positions its education system as unaffordable and proposes a range of private-sector-dependent means to address this. It constructs the purposes of education as instrumental; education is intended to create a

globally competitive high-quality workforce.

St. Kitts and Nevis is precariously balanced; on one hand, it positions its education system and provision as a key challenge yet on the other hand, it proposes solutions that do follow the more extreme measures and approach of, for instance, Jamaica and Barbados. However, the state uses strongly corporatised language in its policy texts.

Saint Lucia is similarly balanced, with an education strategy that reveals a reasonably holistic conception of education, but which is framed through the Minister's and Permanent Secretary's forewords through an economic-growth lens. The policy pressure clearly exists; as in other states, capital project funding is an area of vulnerability.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines identifies wide-ranging roles for the private sector in its National Economic and Social Development Plan, including as partners in its management. The state apparatus appears greatly colonised by the discourse and methods of privatisation.

Trinidad and Tobago's recent White Paper for education (2017) acknowledges a holistic range of educational goods. However, it is also committed both to increasing exogenous and endogenous privatisation, despite specific proposals lacking in detail.

Questionnaire

Parents reported that the following features of privatisation were most evident in their context and experience: school choice; additional fees; private tuition and teachers' lack of professional accreditation. The features impacting most upon them as parents were parent choice, private tuition, teacher qualifications and fees. We suggest that the high position of private tuition reflects the importance of the secondary-school entrance exam in Barbados, where most of the questionnaire respondents are located. The feature impacting most on their child's education was teachers' qualifications. Concerning the reasons behind their own choice of secondary school, parents' reports may be argued to prioritise how their child 'fits into' the school, at the expense of how convenient the school is to attend. This disposition underpins the marketisation of provision.

Teachers ranked the five most-evident features of privatisation as follows:

- 1) teachers may be hired on temporary contracts
- 2) parent choice
- 3) teacher performance management
- 4) teachers may teach outside their specialism
- 5) parents pay fees for essential items

However, for 12 of the 16 measures on the questionnaire, the most common response was 0, indicating 'not evident'. Teachers therefore largely do not experience or perceive significant privatisation in education. On the other hand, in their free-text responses, teachers were able to describe a range of indicators of privatisation. However, they were not always opposed to these. Some asked for more performance management and others appreciated the galvanising effects of competition.

Leaders ranked the five most-evident features of privatisation as follows:

- 1) parent choice
- 2) teachers may be hired on temporary contracts
- 3) your school is ranked nationally in league tables of school performance
- 4) teachers undergo performance management
- 5) you are responsible for your school's budget

Three features received a score of zero, indicating absence from the survey sites. These were "teachers' salaries are individually negotiated", "teachers' salary scales are determined at the school level" and "teachers' salaries are linked to their students' exam scores". Again, whilst some respondents noted the damaging effect of school marketisation and hence hierarchisation, others were appreciative of the perceived advantages offered by a marketised system. These include more autonomy in decision making and a raised profile for the school.

Interviews

Our analysis of our interview data enables us to make three strong claims. First: favourable conditions for education privatisation exist across the region. Despite often articulating positions on education that are oriented

more towards the public than the private, interviewees were often unable or perhaps unwilling to identify features of privatisation where they manifested. We identified in the data strong evidence of marketisation and a lack of investment by the state. These costs are passed on to parents, who then perceive public education as deficient. Second, we claim that ubiquitous endogenous privatisation is regarded as education modernisation. We see this in the creation of quasi-markets, working conditions for teachers, including their performance management, and in a generally business-like approach to education, including policy formation and leadership and management. Third, we claim that exogenous privatisation seems provisionally welcomed. Interviewees reported that it was the responsibility of nation states to fund education. However, where this wasn't happening (which is essentially everywhere in our sample), they welcome the intervention of the private sector to fill the gap.

Mapping privatisation in education in the Caribbean

Nation states, revealed through policy texts, are variously committed to privatisation as a key mechanism to modernise education provision and improve outcomes. Selection at the end of primary in many Caribbean nations establishes and reinforces the notion of schooling as fundamentally competitive. Whilst opposition is seen in the data, participants in the questionnaire and interview strand are often supportive of privatisation, or key features thereof. It is not always clear to participants that a given phenomenon is an indicator of privatisation; this is more often the case with endogenous forms. Suggestions concerning key actors do not include large, international edu-businesses, implying either that these are operating under the radar, or that the private sector is made up here of heterogeneous actors, with diverse motives. These include religiously motivated companies.

We recommend that policymakers:

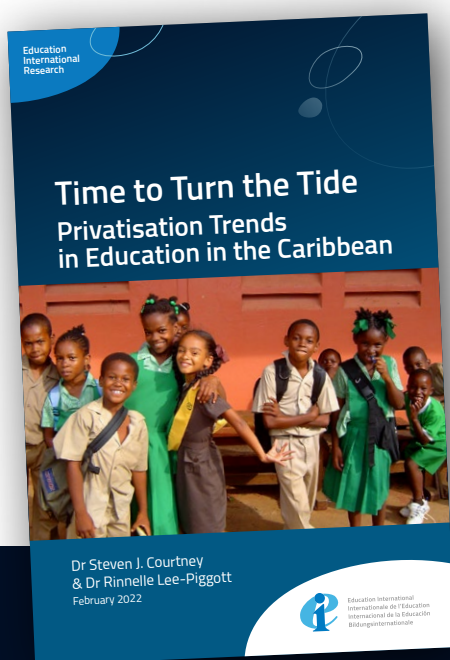
- enact the full breadth of conceptualisations of education that exist in their strategies and laws, rather than privileging the economic;
- fund education to remove additional, often prohibitive costs for parents of their child(ren) attending school. These include the costs of text books and extra-curricular activities;
- create a policy narrative foregrounding education as a public good;
- engage with research demonstrating the limitations of privatisation;
- cease selection to secondary-level schooling;
- tax profits from private-sector involvement in education to fund work towards achieving goals in education-sector plans and/ or the achievement of UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education;
- end the use of temporary teaching contracts where the role is permanent; and
- ensure all teachers are professionally qualified.

We recommend that teacher unions:

- increase awareness of all forms of education privatisation;
- deploy positive images and political narratives of teachers, education systems and educational leadership that are predicated on education as a public good;
- create and use “public-education champions” in each school to articulate amongst teachers the impact on publicness of a given policy and to suggest alternatives or amendments; and
- work in partnerships to amplify counter-arguments to privatisation and enhance impact.

We recommend that future researchers:

- conduct larger, cross-national surveys in the region;
- explore more fully the ‘who’ of privatisation; and
- investigate through qualitative approaches the embeddedness of dispositions favourable or antagonistic to privatisation in key stakeholder groups.



This research was funded by the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF/FCE) and commissioned by Education International (EI)



The research paper by Dr Steven J. Courtney & Dr Rinnelle Lee-Piggott can be found here:
<https://eie.io/PrivatisationCaribbean>



Education International
Internationale de l'Éducation
Internacional de la Educación
Bildungsinternationale

www.ei-ie.org
[#unite4ed](https://twitter.com/unite4ed)