

Come Pandemic and Lockdowns, School Must Go On!

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Abstract

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic forced schools to close in many countries around the world, compelling teachers and students to adapt to an alternative modality of instruction and assessment. This essay outlines the challenges experienced while trying to prepare my high school students for their national standardized examinations. It highlights Integral Theory, a framework from American philosopher Ken Wilber, to situate my experience working as a teacher in an independent school in the Commonwealth of The Bahamas during this unprecedented time.

Keywords: COVID-19, integral theory, culturally responsive assessment, standardized examinations

Introduction

An announcement with far more reaching implications came from the school principal: “Due to a spike in COVID-19 cases, all schools in the country would be closing—tomorrow.” As a veteran teacher and head of the small geography department at an independent school in the Commonwealth of The Bahamas, I was trying to envisage what this type of online schooling would look like. After all, I, like many of my colleagues, naïvely thought, that we would be back to school in two weeks, just in time for Easter break. Several questions flooded into my mind: How was I going to convert my home into a virtual classroom, and deliver lessons to my students in a meaningful and culturally responsive way? How would I support the other teachers in my department? Were we to continue with “business as usual?” If schools remained closed, were the standardized national examinations going to take place? At that moment, I did not know how to answer these questions. There was no uniform plan of instruction or evaluation strategies in place to address this unique teaching and learning situation. Each teacher was left to his or her own discretion regarding what, if any, online platform would be used, as well as how they were to get through these weeks of uncertainty associated with the pandemic. It was like pioneering a new frontier, with each teacher doing his or her own thing in order to survive. There appeared to be no standardization of instruction in the school, let alone the country. As the weeks and months progressed, some of us were experimenting with the online technology, and in fact, learning alongside with our students. Additionally, the workload experienced by many of us also increased during the remote teaching and learning process.

Throughout the pandemic, both teachers and students used a variety of technological devices to ensure that the “business of school” continued. These devices included, but were not inclusive of smart phones, tablets, laptops, desktops, pen tablets. Moreover, in the early weeks of nation-wide school closures, teachers made use of various online platforms including Google’s

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Workspace for Education (i.e., Google Classroom), Edmodo, and Zoom. Additionally, prior to the pandemic, the Ministry of Education launched its virtual learning platform, which was also available on a national television channel. This platform was initially created in September 2019, for students in remote areas of the Bahamian archipelago, and offered instruction for students in islands, which were affected by Hurricane Dorian. However, as a result of the pandemic, live and online instructions, including volumes of resource material were made available for all students and educators in the Commonwealth of The Bahamas.

Assessment in Education

Assessing students has been a part of life in schools. Evaluating our students can assist them, their teachers, parents and other educational stakeholders acknowledge what criteria is being taught and learned, and what needs to improve. As educators we use both formative and summative assessments, and a variety of other traditional and alternative assessment strategies to ascertain what our students know, can demonstrate, or where they need additional support. Where high-stakes tests and standardized examinations are used, teachers are shifting and aligning their pedagogy in order cover more content, and engage in assessment practices that meet the examination requirements (Au, 2009).

Formative assessments provide ongoing feedback for the student outlining their strengths and weaknesses in particular tasks. We use writing, drawings, presentations, and examples of formative assessments in our classrooms. *Summative assessments* often take place at the end of a unit or learning cycle and evaluate the overall performances of our students. In some instances, teachers have used case studies, projects, tests, and standardized high-stakes examinations to determine the degree in which students can display their content knowledge or skills.

Today, schools aim “to prepare for employment so planning, knowledgeable marketable skills, and understanding realities about job success deserve attention” (Strom et al., 2014, p. 176). In that vein, teachers and schools must consider not only using high-stakes tests, but consider including alternative evaluation strategies in their classrooms. Offering alternative and authentic assessments to the traditional approaches will address 21st century competencies where students can engage in real-world problem-solving and use higher-order thinking (Koh, 2017). Authentic assessment will look at a variety of tools to measure the “real work” that students “do and produce rather than on test scores” (Russell & Waters, 2022, p. 84). What a student actually learns should be paramount rather than what is taught in a classroom.

Standardized Assessment in the Bahamian Context

The Bahamas is an archipelago of over 700 islands, cays and rocks extending over 800 kilometres (500 miles) from the north to the south and is situated just over 100 kilometres (60 miles) off the Florida coast (Harris et al., 2023). Secondary school students in the country sit a variety of high-stakes tests, including standardized national and international examinations. Some high-stakes tests have been used for “cross-national comparisons of student achievement” (Koh, 2017, p. 4), to determine a student’s placement in a class or grade promotion, or have been used to determine a teacher’s salary promotion or tenure (Orfield & Wald, 2000). In one independent school, the results from the national standardized examinations in The Bahamas have been used to place students in accelerated or advanced courses. Unfortunately, some

individual teachers and subject departments have been either rewarded or rebuked for their students' individual and collective results.

Historically, it was the purpose of schools in The Bahamas and its education system to provide minimal literacy and sound moral training, along with the minimum basic skills and appropriate ethic for basic labour rather than social mobility or even useful skills (Cration & Saunders, 1998). As such, traditional standardized testing was not needed for students to transition into the workforce. Prior to the creation and implementation of the current national examinations, including the Bahamas Junior Certificate (B.J.C.) in 1975, and Bahamas General Certificate of Secondary Education (B.G.C.S.E.) in 1993, the schools in The Bahamas offered external examinations, including the University of Cambridge Junior Certificate examination, the University of London General Certificate of Education Ordinary (O-level), Royal Society of Arts and Pitman examinations (Bethel, 1999).

In grades eight and nine, students write the B.J.C. examinations in eleven subjects and the B.G.C.S.E. in 25 subjects. The B.J.C. examinations are “designed to measure mastery of the curriculum in the core subjects” (Government of The Bahamas, 2011a, para. 1), whereas the B.G.C.S.E. examinations are “based on the United Kingdom General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) models, but has been tailored to meet the specific needs of The Bahamas” (Government of The Bahamas, 2011b, para. 2). These national examinations are created by and assessed by a team of educators working in The Bahamas. In addition, there are some private schools, and a few public schools, that offer the American College Board's Advanced Placement courses and examinations for grade 12 students. Additionally, there are a few private schools that use the International Baccalaureate (IB) program and assessments in their schools.

Although the types of assessment used by an individual teacher in his or her classroom may vary in method and approach, the final summative evaluations in The Bahamas are the national standardized examinations (i.e., B.J.C.s and B.G.C.S.E.s). In schools and subject departments, there may not even be uniformity in the type of assessment used. Each teacher uses a variety of assessment strategies that they feel comfortable in administering or believe are best-suited for a particular topic of study. Throughout my career, I have used a variety of formative and summative assessments with my students. Regardless of the assessment strategies we employ in classrooms during daily instruction, at the end of the day, our students must possess the knowledge and skills needed to write the national standardized B.J.C. and B.G.C.S.E. examinations.

Many of the traditional methods of assessments that I used over the years had to change in the new online format and delivery when we could no longer teach our students through face-to-face instruction. Following the national curriculum, most of the assignments and examination preparation that I administered during this time included content that was culturally relevant and responsive for the students in The Bahamas. Gay (2002) notes that “when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly” (p. 106). As a seasoned teacher, I have found that framing subject matter and information in a local context, and situating it within the personal experiences of my students, help in their retention of the content, proving beneficial with the end-of-year school and national examinations. Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) identify *culturally responsive assessment* to

include “language that is appropriate for all students when developing learning outcomes, acknowledging students’ differences in the planning phases of an assessment effort, developing and/or using assessment tools that are appropriate for different students, and being intentional in using assessment results to improve learning for all students” (p. 10). While culturally responsive assessment recommends that students be engaged fully in the assessment process, including the development of their learning outcomes, that was not, nor is it an inherent part of the school’s culture or instructional practice. Regardless of the modality used during the pandemic, academic modification did not exist and online learning and assessment were not conducted at a pace that was more fitting to individual students’ needs. All students, regardless of ability, were required to persevere and excel.

Integral Theory

In this article, Integral Theory has been adopted to describe assessment, in particular, the national Bahamas General Certificate of Secondary Education (B.G.C.S.E.) Geography examination, including the examination’s results and personal observations from teaching in an independent high school in the Commonwealth of The Bahamas, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Established by American philosopher, Ken Wilber, Integral Theory, or AQAL, short for “all quadrants, all levels” is a holistic framework, a meta-theory used to describe the complexities and relationships between and among individuals, organizations and structures from multiple perspectives. The framework presents a map that makes use of quadrants, levels, lines, stages, states, and holons. Ultimately, the best way to understand Integral Theory is to apply it personally to an object or problem of interest, or use it to shed light on a complex and multifaceted issue, such as curriculum or authentic assessment. As a framework, Integral Theory will take on a different form for each of the individuals and organizations applying it. Yet, it is a good place to start to explore teachers’ differences in pedagogy, culture, social systems, and personal feelings and experiences or when analysing a problem in our schools or communities.

Using Integral Theory as a framework for investigation into curriculum or alternative and authentic assessment matters is scalable—it can be used within the context of one teacher’s experience in one classroom, in one school, within a school district or within an entire educational system or all classrooms in all schools around the globe. It is within the four quadrants, that the subjective, objective, inter-subjective and inter-objective perspectives are experienced from two viewpoints—the interior and exterior view of both an individual and the collective (Wilber, 2006). The four quadrants locate the reality that is present in an individual “at any given moment, and moment-to-moment” (Feldman, 2011, p. 8). The perspectives in each quadrant provides us with significant information and “very different but equally real truths, different validity claims, different types of phenomena or qualities or existent realities, and different approaches or methods for accessing them—and leaving out any one of them leaves a gaping hole in the universe” (Wilber, 2017, p. 559).

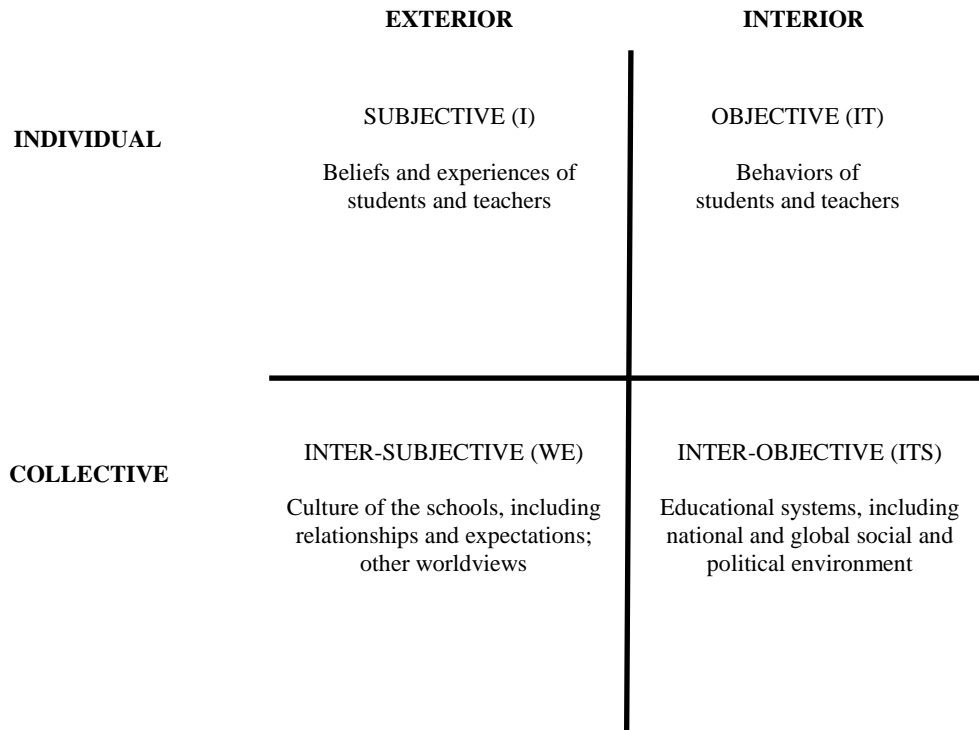
It is through an integral view that we can have “a better perspective or understanding of how any phenomenon can be understood” (Tassett, 2010, p. 98). I was introduced to Wilber’s Integral Theory framework while studying for my doctoral degree. Subsequently, it was adopted in my dissertation, which uncovered the concerns expressed by some high school students in Commonwealth of The Bahamas regarding their pursuits after high school, and their personal

beliefs and perceptions about their country in the future regarding climate change, employment, brain drain, and social issues, including poverty, immigration, and crime (Kellock, 2017).

Integral Theory and Assessment in the Classroom

In this article, I have used one element in the Integral framework, the four quadrants, to describe my teaching experiences and to explain how students, from one high school in The Bahamas, were assessed during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic (**Figure 1**). The results of school-based and external assessments (B.J.C.s, B.G.C.S.E.s, and APs) “provides feedback to both those inside (teachers and students) and outside (parents, administrators, politicians, and the general public) about what is happening in the learning process” (Davis, 2010, p. 245). While it is not essential that all elements of the Integral approach are necessary for inclusion to be impactful, it is essential to encompass the four quadrants, which are “one of the most important and most often-used aspects of the AQAL Framework” (Wilber, 2017, p. 560). Esbjörn-Hargens (2011) for example, believed that by drawing on the elements of the Integral framework, it could offer educators an effective guide to pedagogical design, classroom activities, evaluations, courses, and curriculum.

Figure 1. *Standardized Assessment Nested in the Four Quadrants of Wilber’s Integral Theory (adapted from Esbjörn-Hargens, 2011).*



It is from the *Upper Right quadrant* (UR), the behavioral quadrant, which addresses the individual-objective, the measurable and observable biological features of the body and brain. In this quadrant we position our personal obligations as educators, work colleagues, family members, and members of the community. This may include how we cope with emergencies in the home

and at work, it may impact our relationships and interactions with others, and can include the shadows of the negative self-talk and thoughts thus amplifying our own internal toxicity. This quadrant addresses the individual behaviors which are impacted and involved in how and what we teach, including the types of assessment we use in our classrooms. From my experience, the pressure I placed on myself, including the long hours needed to prepare and assist my students navigate through the vast content of a national geography syllabus and standardized examination was stressful. It is in this quadrant where my regular routines, behaviors and traditional actions were disrupted when schools closed for face-to-face instruction. My actions, as an educator in an independent school, required me to spend countless hours helping my students sift through the quagmire of assignments that I and fellow colleagues at the school, were uploading and emailing to the students at fast and steady intervals, during the final weeks of the school year. During this time, we had to revamp our pedagogical approach with the national curriculum, including our instructional and assessment strategies for online instruction and examination preparation using a new modality. We had to ensure that all standards and benchmarks were met so that our students could have the knowledge and skills needed to be successful on these high-stakes examinations. We were expected to keep soldiering on, in this abrupt transfer to online learning. There was no definitive return date to school, and furthermore, internal, national and international examinations were only a few weeks away. It was a daunting task. We imposed immense pressure on ourselves to cover the vast amount of content in the national syllabus so that our students were prepared to write upcoming examinations. Some of us experienced fatigue, sleepless nights, strained eyesight, headaches, mindless eating or loss of appetite.

During the pandemic, I had to get creative with the assessment strategies employed in my classes, especially in one course that contained a laboratory component. I often had to rely on my students to use their own resources to complete the required assignments and activities. Additionally, school closures, island-wide and national lockdowns and curfews severely impacted the fieldwork component needed by my students for their final geography examination. While I was not the sole geography teacher in the country, I was concerned for my students and wanted to ensure that I was preparing them adequately under the circumstances. Despite these concerns, I was able to get 91 students out in the field to complete a geography field study safely, while being mindful of maintaining small class sizes and adhering to the national requirements for physical distancing.

Past teaching experiences, viewed from the *Upper Left quadrant* (UL), the individual-subjective, told me and other teachers that we had to ensure our students continued to receive the information they needed to succeed in the upcoming high-stakes national examinations. As a point of note, each independent school in The Bahamas is responsible for their own modalities and internal matters, yet continue to follow along with the Ministry of Education's curriculum and pacing guides as they have always done. In this quadrant, individual teachers, students and parents try to make sense of our felt experiences from past and current events, which may include how we coped with forces beyond our control or influence, such as school closures during a hurricane or pandemic, or the nature of questions on a national standardized examination. Some reflective questions teachers may consider include: What can we, as teachers, interpret from the students' results and what can we do to improve the standings for next examination cycle? What strategies are we using to help their students understand the types of questions that are being asked and what comprises model answers? Why and how are we "teaching for the test?" As a veteran teacher, of more than 20 years, my perceived and real personal feelings, experiences and

beliefs about the national curriculum, the culture of the school, and the expectations of parents, I knew that each academic year there would be immense pressure on all of the teachers and the students to get through the process of examination preparation. These familiar feelings, included varying degrees of anxiety, stress, and panic.

Within the *Lower Left quadrant* (LL) we identify and address the collective and organizational cultures, with its shared experiences and relationships. We look at our shared knowledge, traditions and group values, our worldviews, multiple perspectives, mutual understandings and disagreements, and ideologies. All teachers within a school find strategies in which to work together with and influence other members of their grade level or department, or with members of the administrative team, parent associations, school boards and other community stakeholders. For many years, I was the head of a small, but diverse geography department at an independent school. The department comprised of teachers from three countries, who were well versed in several international high-stakes examinations. We often had conflicts about the specific grades that were assigned to students on larger projects and internal examinations, and we held different views about standardized tests, including the structure of the national examinations and the topics and nature of questions asked. However, as a team, we shared ideas and assessment strategies with each other in order to assist the students in our classes. We worked to develop assignments, projects, fieldwork exercises and their respective coursework reports, as well as honed a variety of strategies to assist students prepare for both internal and external examinations. This independent school thrived on the collective success of its teachers and students. At the commencement of each new academic year, we, along with other teachers from the school, commiserated or were held accountable for lower than expected examination results, or shared and celebrated the successes of all of our students who completed both the national B.J.C. and B.G.C.S.E. examinations, including Advanced Placement examinations.

Found in the *Lower Right* quadrant (LR), from the collective-inter-objective perspective, different systems, including societal, political, environmental, legal and economic entities are found. Pressing national issues and global influences, foreign curricula, job market requirements and demands are also positioned in the lower right quadrant. These systems and forces have influenced educational policy, curriculum development and various assessment strategies used in schools from the events and experiences of colonialism and decolonialism, and how these circumstances have impacted the people of The Bahamas.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, decisions regarding when to impose the national lockdowns and curfews, or whether or not to postpone, cancel or reschedule national examinations are situations that can be placed in the lower right quadrant. Regardless of school closures, teachers and students were required to forge ahead with curricula content. National examinations and coursework reports continued with the mindset of “business as usual,” in the first year of the pandemic, with only a slight delay in implementation. However, not all school-aged children in the country were able to adapt to the closure of schools, or online instruction. Despite valiant efforts to assist public school children acquire devices to aid in virtual schooling, reliable and available Internet service and electricity was not present in some homes and communities. Unfortunately, students were also left to their own devices in how to best prepare for the national and international examinations amidst school closures and online instruction. Some students were even required to write the high-stakes Advanced Placement examinations online for the first time. These were unprecedented times. We were stranded on our own “island,”

literally and figuratively. Teachers, including myself, scurried around to revamp their traditional means of instruction in order to deliver the copious amount of content found in the curricula documents. It was not an ideal situation, but what else could we do? These were forces and policies beyond our personal influence and control. I was one teacher, in one school, on one small island trying to prepare my students for end-of-year national and international assessments.

When the national examinations were suspended during the 2020 sitting (due to an increase in COVID-19 cases in some other Bahamian islands), this meant that for all students, the writing of these final examinations were on hold. Although the Cambridge Assessment International Education group, the organization responsible for commissioning Bahamian national examinations, cancelled the sitting of I.G.C.S.E. examinations, this did not apply to the sitting of B.J.C. or B.G.C.S.E. examinations (Ministry of Education, 2020b). Keeping up with the momentum of content review and teaching examination strategies was challenging. When the final geography examination was rescheduled, during a late sitting in September 2020, only 52 students from the school wrote the examination, which was fewer than when school offered strictly face-to-face instruction. The other 39 students were either not in the country to write the paper, or decided not to sit the examination. Despite the low attendance, all 52 students received a passing grade, with over half earning an A grade, similar to non-pandemic years. As a comparison, in terms of the country's total school population eligible to write the examination, 435 students wrote the national geography examination in September 2020. This was 382 fewer students than the previous year (Ministry of Education, 2020a).

Conclusion

The impact of the pandemic on education was not just a “Bahamian ‘ting.” It affected children and teachers all over the globe. Children lost instructional time in a school setting. Teachers had to adapt to teaching remotely, and were not adequately prepared for digital teaching and learning (Schleicher, 2020). Many households were plagued with island-wide power and Internet outages, and were not conducive to providing a safe and peaceful learning environment. Some children struggled with the sedentary and online delivery method of instruction, only to spend more hours on a device in order to complete homework before the deadline; or were required to wait until the only family device was available for them to complete their homework, after sharing the device with other siblings or parents. Unfortunately, for some students, the devices that were donated from outside agencies and individuals or the ones they received from the government, were not compatible with the Ministry of Education's virtual learning platform.

Two years later, when schools reopened, many educators opted to continue using digital platforms, not as the main means of curriculum delivery, but as a place for teachers to upload resources for their students in order to reduce the amount of paper used in classrooms, and for students to complete and submit some assessments. However, this was not uniform across the islands in the country, its schools, or classrooms. Many teachers and students were pleased to return to their physical classrooms, but they continued to be concerned about the school's health and safety measures and available technical and emotional support. In 2020, when schools closed in The Bahamas amidst the global pandemic, almost 60,000 students were impacted. It was reported that 3,594 pre-primary school children, 29,504 primary school children, and 26,884 high school students were out of school (UNESCO, 2021). The Minister of Education in The Bahamas estimated that there were “almost 1,000 students fully absent from public schools for two years”

(McKenzie, 2022), contributing to the concern over long-term learning loss for some students. The pandemic exacerbated a learning crisis in the country, which may have long-lasting consequences on the country's economic performance in the future (The Nassau Guardian, 2022). Some education officials note that some older students dropped out of school during the years of the pandemic in order to find work to support their parents who were unemployed. Additionally, "parents of some children found themselves incapable of meaningfully assisting their children with virtual classes while the work schedules of other parents prevented meaningful, sustained supervision of studies" (The Nassau Guardian, 2022, para. 11).

In January 2023, the Ministry of Education partnered with Renaissance Learning Incorporated, an American-based company, to assess children in Bahamian public schools in order to "evaluate the extent of learning loss caused by the COVID-19 pandemic" (Bahamas Information Services, 2023, para. 2). The assessment tests and suggested remediation strategies proposed by Renaissance Learning Incorporated commenced in early March and are expected to conclude in June (Sweeting, 2023). Currently, the personal insights and experiences from educational stakeholders presents a limited scope surrounding the impact on students as a result of school closures during the pandemic. We will not fully comprehend the situation until the findings and recommendations from Renaissance Learning Incorporated are presented to the Ministry of Education in the near future.

While some individuals may look solely at the learning loss experienced by students in The Bahamas, others argue that there may be something to learn amidst the forced closure of schools for face-to-face instruction during the pandemic. Schools, teachers, and students were compelled to accelerate and embrace the use of technology in classrooms and schools. This opened up the possibility of new online platforms and global connections to be used in conjunction with traditional means of instruction in classrooms, helping to promote 21st century skills.

In August 2022, I transitioned from working at an independent high school to assume the responsibility as a teacher educator at the national university. I am now in a position to assist and influence pre-service educators to become more aware of alternative and authentic assessment strategies, which they can implement within their classrooms in the future.

While the modality of face-of-face instruction may have changed for teachers during the pandemic, what and how we assessed our students stayed the same. The national standardized examinations, including students' coursework reports, continue to take place at the end of each academic year. The culture and ethos of one independent school, including the high expectations of the teachers, students, parents, and members of the school board also remained the same as it was before the pandemic. Regardless of the circumstances, teachers are compelled, expected, and required to get their students through the national examinations with stellar results and earn national recognition for their achievements. Generally, the students have and continue to do well on the national standardized examinations, despite hurricanes, pandemics, and lockdowns.

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