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COVID 19 – school leadership in disruptive times

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Introduction

Earlier this year, COVID19 slammed the door firmly shut on all aspects of everyday life. It interrupted international travel, it devastated economic growth, and it disrupted schooling globally. In just a few short months COVID 19 has been a ‘supernova’ (Azorín 2020) creating ‘undeniable chaos’ (Hargreaves and Fullan 2020) and shaking the very fabric of education. It has redefined learning as a remote, screen-based activity limiting most learners to on-line teacher support. According to UNESCO, 1.6 billion young people have been out of school during this crisis and as Zhao (2020) points out, ‘virtually all schools have been paused’ and teaching has been significantly re-organised.

In most countries, getting children back to into school has been an ongoing issue and a major flashpoint for heated debate. Schools that have re-opened have faced the considerable challenges of social distancing, intensive cleaning, and the careful orchestration of all movement around the school. Those schools that are about to open are caught in the media spotlight of whether it is safe or sensible to do so.¹ The discourse around the re-opening,² or indeed, the closing of schools³ is fraught, divisive, and largely inconclusive.

We do not know, long term, what the impact, effects and consequences of opening schools in the current pandemic might prove to be, but it is clear that the mental health of young people⁴ who feel trapped or isolated at home is very real issue and has the potential to become a greater problem than the virus itself. In this time of turmoil where quick solutions are required in a fast-changing world, the priority must be the well-being of leaders, teachers, learners, parents, and all stakeholders involved in the reopening of school life.

Yet in many respects, COVID 19 has exacerbated well-being issues and highlighted how education inequity profoundly affects those in society who have the least. For example, in the USA it has been noted that –

The pandemic has highlighted disparities in access to digital devices and the internet. When schools were closed, 15 percent of U.S. households and 35 percent of low-income households with school-age children did not have a high-speed internet connection at home. In early April, nearly 2/3 of leaders in high-poverty districts reported that a lack of basic technology was a ‘major’ problem. (Darling Hammond 2020⁵)

Similarly in the UK, COVID19 has revealed a stark digital divide with 1.9 million households⁶ having no access to the internet and tens of millions reliant on pay-as-you-go services to make phone calls or access healthcare, education and benefits online.

A World Bank report suggests that COVID 19 is likely to cause the first increase in global poverty since 1998. Estimates suggest that COVID 19 will push 49 million people into extreme poverty in 2020.⁷ The impact on young people will be immeasurable, far reaching, devastating and potentially irreversible.

School leadership

For school leaders working in these demanding and chaotic circumstances, the pressure is relentless, the options are limited, the sleepless nights are frequent. The staff meetings, coffee catch ups and corridor chats with colleagues, that made up a school day, have gone. All those informal, important, moments where social relationships are built, and leadership is enacted simply vanished overnight. Parents, students, and teachers now exist in a twilight education world either awaiting the return of normal service or hoping for some new normal that might offer stability, continuity, and reassurance. The stark reality is that neither is likely to occur anytime soon.

Meanwhile, school leaders are caught in the unfavourable position of being the pinch point in the system. They are reliant on guidance about COVID-19 responses, processes, procedures, and protocols from above. These can change, almost overnight, depending on how the virus develops. Simultaneously, school leaders are dealing with fluid and changing staffing situations meaning they are having to do much more with less. The social distancing of staff and students means extra work and extra pressure on those staff who can return to work. Every expectation either from above or below asks more of school leaders professionally and personally.

This is a perfect storm with imperfect leadership responses. As Netolicky (2020) notes: 'In a time of crisis, leaders must act swiftly and with foresight but also with careful consideration of options, consequences and side effects of actions taken'. This is certainly true, but no one can predict what might be the best solutions, the best actions, the side effects of any actions taken in this crisis. School leaders are walking a tightrope without a safety net. There are no precedents and no guides to leading schools in a pandemic.

There has been some early research, of course into the effects and impact of COVID 19 on all sectors of education. This work has helped to set down useful markers and some preliminary reference points. Aiming to capture the dimensions of such a colossal moving target, however, will require far more sophisticated research methodologies in the future, if the work is to move to more valid and generalisable findings (Fetters and Molina-Azorin 2020).

Despite a current lack of research on how school leaders are responding to the pandemic, there are some emerging insights about leadership within the COVID19 educational landscape. The following seven propositions are offered for consideration and possibly, in due course, empirical attention.

- (1) School leadership practices have changed considerably and maybe, irreversibly because of COVID19. As a result of the pandemic, school leadership has shifted on its axis and is unlikely return to 'normal' anytime soon, if ever at all. Research underlines that the principles of good leadership are a constant i.e. having a clear vision, developing others, managing people, building capacity etc. (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2020). The evidence also points towards the importance of context responsive leadership implying a shift in school leadership practices because of COVID19 (Harris 2020).
- (2) Most school leadership preparation and training programmes prior to COVID19 are likely to be out of step with the challenges facing school leaders today. In many cases, the existing preparation and training programmes, along with the models of leadership they espouse, will require a radical re-think and significant modification to remain relevant for aspiring and practising school leaders. It would be a mistake to simply re-configure or re-badge what was relevant before COVID19, as much of this training and development may no longer fit for purpose. New programmes will be required that fully and adequately encompass the leadership skills, practices and actions suited to the current, and potentially ongoing, COVID19 situation.
- (3) Self-care and consideration must be the main priority and prime concern for all school leaders. Leading a school through the changes and challenges that accompany COVID19 and post COVID19 will require school leaders who put their own health and wellbeing first, so that they will be able to help others. Increasingly, school leaders are managing the emotional responses of others to this crisis including anxiety, frustration loss, and anger. Consequently, self-care must be a priority for those leading schools at all levels.
- (4) The phrase 'connect to learn, learn to connect' (Harris and Jones 2012) describes the daily reality of students and teachers trying to work together in this pandemic. Hence, moving forward, school leaders will increasingly need to be technologically savvy and well informed. COVID19 has generated huge commercial opportunism with a pressure to buy technological solutions to contemporary problems. School leaders will need to be discerning therefore, about the digital products they choose and to be careful about striking a *balance* between technology and pedagogy in their school (Hargreaves 2020⁸). Ultimately, pedagogy is the key to effective learning and while technology has a part to play, it is the human dimension of effective teaching that makes the difference.

- (5) Crisis and change management are now essential skills of a school leader. Running an effective school in disruptive times will require more than routine problem solving or occasional firefighting. Instead all school leaders will need to be engaged in constant crisis and change management which will require support and collaboration from all staff. The speed of change in this pandemic is unprecedented, hence a high degree of trust will be needed, as the collective glue, to ensure that issues are addressed collectively as they arise.
- (6) Communities are a key resource for school leaders, as they host a wealth of additional expertise, knowledge, and local capacity. Forging stronger links with parent/community groups to support families, young people and children is now a necessity to deal with the many issues that COVID19 has generated particularly for vulnerable, marginalised, or isolated young people.
- (7) Distributed leadership has become the default leadership response in this current crisis requiring more school leaders, at all levels, to connect, share, learn and network their way through issues (Azorín, Harris, and Jones 2020). Through absolute necessity, rather than by design, effective school leadership is now connected, collaborative, creative and responsive. Most school leaders will be running on empty given the myriad of challenges that COVID19 has created for them, so distributed leadership is a necessity to survive.

Final comment

A new chapter is being written about school leadership in disruptive times that will possibly overtake and overshadow all that was written before on the topic. In a different time, in a different context, school leadership operated within known parameters, with clear patterns and rhythms to a school year, with set terms and set holidays, with clear lines of accountability and rules governing most things including examinations, INSET days and even snow days. COVID19 has changed all that and unpredictability and uncertainty are now the watchwords of all those leading schools.

A new leadership order has emerged which has no leadership standards, no preparation or development programmes, no inspection framework, no KPIs, no benchmarks. There are no precedents, no ring-binders, no blueprints to help school leaders through the current maelstrom that is COVID19.

In such disruptive times, school leaders cannot emulate the leadership practices they witnessed or enjoyed in a period of stability, continuity, and relative calm. Leading in disruptive times means being able to navigate a different course, to create new pathways through the disruption. School leaders on this journey are defined by their determination, their hope, and their unshakable belief that whatever happens, whatever the cost, whatever the scale of the challenge, they will continue to do everything in their power to safeguard the learning of all young people.

Notes

1. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-52771515>
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-51643556>
3. <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/03/does-closing-schools-slow-spread-novel-coronavirus>
4. <https://youngminds.org.uk/about-us/reports/coronavirus-impact-on-young-people-with-mental-health-needs/>
5. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/blog/covid-new-deal-education-top-10-state-policy-moves>
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/28/digital-divide-isolates-and-endangers-millions-of-uk-poorest>
7. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/impact-covid-19-coronavirus-global-poverty>
8. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2020/08/06/education-technology-students-will-need-wont-after-covid-19/>

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