Editorials: Leading Education in Times of Crisis: Perils or Opportunities?

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Introduction

Papers in this special issue of the Journal for Researching Education Practice and Theory (JREPT) is based on selected papers from the virtual conference on 'Leading Education in Times of Crisis' hosted by the Faculty of Education at the British University in Dubai on 29th May 2021. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic over two years ago, leaders across the globe have grappled to respond to the emergencies. Workable leadership practices, familiar models and theories and 'comfort zones' have been tested and stretched beyond their limits resulting in redefining what effective leadership is. Emergencies such as the pandemic bring unpredictable challenges, put leadership approaches to the test at all levels/sectors and force leaders to rethink and redefine their leadership approaches in order to adapt to the new realities (Dumulescu & Mutiu, 2021; Bagwell, 2020). At all levels of the education sector, leadership is considered as a crucial aspect to determine quality and success; more so, effectively lead in disruptive times. It is argued that most leaders in education have limited or no training in 'crisis leadership' or have very limited experience dealing with crisis of such magnitude as the pandemic (Mutch, 2015; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). However, going by the view that in a school situation 'crisis can be regarded as any urgent situation that requires the school leader to take fast and decisive action', school leaders daily routines are often confronted with such 'urgent situations' (Smith & Riley,

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2012, 58) although, at a much lesser degree or scale (Smith & Riley, 2012). Whitla (2003) provides examples of school-based crisis such as a number of students killed in a motto accident and a teacher committing suicide in school. Smith and Riley (2012, 57) describe crisis leadership in education as leadership in times of crisis that focuses on "dealing with events, emotions and consequences in the immediate present in ways that minimise personal and organisational harm to the school and school community". Nonetheless, the facts still remain that the pandemic presented an extremely challenging situation for school leaders that had influencing factors from beyond the school community. In the face of this unprecedented crisis, what are the challenges and opportunities for school leaders and what leadership model/s could leaders rely on to effectively lead in unprecedented crisis situations to minimise consequences?

Challenges

Leaders in education were confronted with a wide range of challenges at the heat of the COVID-19 pandemic – a pandemic that was at a global scale and underpinned by multiple players and multiple realities (figure 1). One of the main challenges presented by the pandemic was a complex, multi-layer and shifting situation in which at least four layers of contexts interacted in complex and unpredictable ways. The school and its local community, the national, regional and global policy and practice contexts presented contrasting and fast changing scenarios that required sense making and harmonisation by school leaders to deal with the local emergencies. Factors affecting the interaction of the various layers included political, cultural, strategic and operational guidelines. For example, in the UAE, school leaders in Dubai had to deal with the World Health

Organisation (WHO), UAE relevant national ministries, Dubai relevant authorities (e.g. Knowledge and Human Development Authority - KHDA) and its own local/school contextual dynamics. Given that many teachers teaching in Dubai schools live in other emirates and travel daily through other emirates to work meant that the different COVID-19 policy guidelines for the individual emirates presented challenges to teachers which required principals to deal with. Hence, the global had implication on the regional, national and local and vice versa; which created a complex terrain of political and technical requirements for school leaders at both the strategic and operational levels in real time (figure 1). According to Boin and Renaud (2013), one of the major challenges in leading in crisis is the gap between the strategic and operational levels. Casting this within the education sector, the strategic level is the decision making level by top leadership of the school which often refer to as the leadership team comprising the principal, vice-principal and other officers and stakeholders deemed as part of the management team. The role is to continually review the situation and make decisions about the way forward. The operational level is at the core of the issue and focuses on understanding or making sense of the situation, articulate orders and coordinate resources. This covers roles such as heads of department, year group leaders and relevant staff. In order to achieve a successful leadership through the crisis, a crucial factor is to build effective coordination between the strategic and operational levels which requires some sense making of the four interacting domains. However, two major factors constrain the effective coordination between these two levels – the technical factor which involves the capacity of the school as an institution and its policies to deal with the emergencies within its local context while the political factor involves contestation between different interest groups in and outside the school

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which often potentially affect the progress of school leaders to deal with crisis. The technical factor was responsible for a wide variation in the complexity of crisis and nature of school leaders' responses in many cases. For example, in a research finding by Kaul et al (2020), it was noted: "Attending to student and family wellbeing was most complex for principals working in high-poverty contexts. In one urban Texas school with a historically high student mobility rate (80%), the principal's first concern was "just being able to locate" students". According to Boin (n.d.), the interaction of these factors translate to five 'critical challenges': sense making, decision making, meaning making, terminating, and learning. Boin and Renaud (2013, 42) suggest that in crisis situations the normal bureaucratic process does not work and in the absence of such a process 'an "appreciative gap" can rapidly emerge and divide the strategic from the operational level'.

The psychosocial effect of the pandemic was another crucial challenge that school leaders were confronted with. The psychosocial aspect touches on the effects of the crisis on the wellbeing and health of staff which include such effects as fear, stress, mental health issues and uncertainties. Duckers et al (2017) argue that although the psychosocial effects of crisis on affected communities are enormous and requires appropriate response from leaders, literature on crisis management has paid very little attention to the psychosocial domain and in many cases fails to integrate crisis leadership into the psychosocial domain. School leaders faced the challenge of dealing with issues such as staff health and family wellbeing, employment uncertainties, stress and grieving staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in the UAE where a significant percentage of the education sector is private, the lockdown created lots of anxiety, stress and uncertainties among education staff

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particularly related to their health and safety and the future of their employment. Some staff had their health badly affected or lost their jobs and others had their remuneration reduced substantially; leaders had incredible challenge and responsibility to crisis manage the psychosocial effects emanating from the pandemic crisis.

Notwithstanding the fact that school leaders have some experience in dealing with emergencies at a lesser scale, the key challenges for them was that there was limited research evidence and in fact, policy guidance on crisis management (at such a massive scale) within the field of education that leaders could readily rely on to inform their strategies and practices as a starting point (Smith & Riley, 2012). There is currently growing literature on crisis leadership within the context of education (Smith & Riley, 2012; Mutch, 2015; Dumulescu & Mutiu; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021), however, before and during the pandemic, most of the literature and research on leading in crisis situation focused on large-scale national and international level crisis and disasters such as hurricanes (Hurricane Katrina in 2005) and terrorist attacks (September 11) (Boin et al, 2013). This was a major setback; in most cases school leaders relied on try and error and directions from the higher order with limited or no chance to input into the strategic and operational levels.
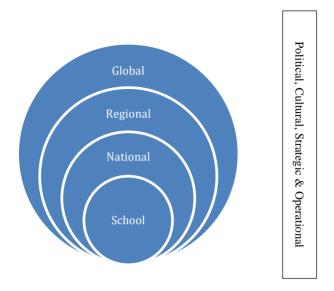
Figure 1: School leadership context in COVID-19 pandemic: Complex, multi-layer and shifting context in disruptive times

Opportunities

What were the opportunities in all these? How could school leaders draw on the pandemic crisis to improve their leadership competencies to lead in crisis? Despite the fact that the pandemic posed a significant challenge to school leaders in a number of ways, a number of learning opportunities have been identified. The pandemic provided opportunities for school leaders to identify the qualities in their leadership practice that worked better in dealing with crisis. For example, according Spyropoulou and Koutroukis (2021) research conducted during the pandemic shows that principals who had established a culture of trust among the school community had a stable leverage to facilitate effective support through the crisis. Citing from Brackett et al (2020), the authors explained, 'Maintaining strong connections with teachers, staff, students and parents proved to be crucial in managing

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through the pandemic' (Spyropoulou & Koutroukis, 2021, 4). Another practice that was identified as appropriate in facilitating effective handling of the crisis was staying connected with other principals. In a research report by Anderson et al (2020), the researchers stated that many principals explained how connecting with other principals helped them in their leadership during the crisis. Anderson et al (2020, 7) quoted a principal who explained: "The other principals in similar communities, who understood the problems I was facing and offered advice, were supportive and helpful. It made me feel like I wasn't in this alone.". Personal disposition of principals such as faith, optimism and empathy were highlighted as essential leadership qualities for crisis management in schools (Anderson et al; 2020; Spyropoulou & Koutroukis, 2021). School leaders' experiences leading during the pandemic could be described as a learning curve. It provided an opportunity for leaders to take stock of their practice, to identify practices that worked better in emergency situations and encouraged them to rethink and refine their perspectives and practice.

In the wake of the pandemic, emerging literature on educational leadership has proposed a number of leadership perspectives and models appropriate for times of crisis (see for example Dumulescu & Mutiu, 2021; Kaul et al (2020; McLeod and Dulsky, 2021; Anderson et al 2020; and contributions in this issue). Most of these literature have drawn on perspectives of school principals based on their experiences leading in the pandemic and from other disciplines mainly focusing on crisis leadership. Papers in this issue provide more perspectives on leading educational institutions in disruptive times.

This editorial highlights the relevance of the 'Adaptive Leadership' approach and its

potential to serve as a powerful model to effectively facilitate successful leadership through crisis. 'Adaptive leadership is the practice of mobilising people to tackle tough challenges and thrive' (Heifetz et al, 2009, 14). This approach emphasis on mobilising followers rather than applying authority. Adaptive leadership is considered as a branch of complexity theory which emphasises on collaboration and cooperation of individuals rather than relying solely on the leader to facilitate the process of change (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). The model is built on a number of assumptions which include the view that change process builds on past experience; focuses on change that builds the capability of the organisation to succeed; suggests that experimentation aids organisational change and potential of new adaption to reorganise/restructure old structures. Diversity, recognition and valuing followers' views are also considered as fundamental to progress in emergencies. It is posited that the adaptive leader is required to deal with three situational challenges: 1) technical challenges (challenges that are defined and requires expert input to deal with); 2) combination of technical (here challenges are defined but lack some clarity about the specific solution; requires some learning and expert/authority to deal with), and 3) adaptive challenges (challenges that are not clear and requires a learning process to deal with; not expert knowledge and leader's authority) (Northouse, 2016; Heifetz et al, 2009; Heifetz, 1994). To deal with these challenges, a number of behaviours are required of the leader, these include developing a clear understanding of the nature and complexity of situation through 'getting on the balcony'; identifying the challenges and differentiating between the adaptive and technical; regulate distress, that is, monitor people's level of stress at this challenging time and ensure that stress is within productive levels; maintain disciplined attention, that is, encouraging people to focus on the challenging task; avoiding over

directives and giving work back to the people; and 'protect leadership voices from below' which requires a leader to 'listen and be open to the ideas of people' in the periphery (Northouse, 2016, 271).

Whilst it is generally agreed that the theory of adaptive leadership is still at the formative stage, it presents a practical approach to dealing with crisis situation. The central strength for the adaptive leadership approach is that, in times of crisis, the adaptive leader challenges the school community to live up to the challenges, whiles providing the needed environment to develop and harness new learning through adapting practice to deal with the crisis (Northouse, 2016). The school leader quickly develops informed understanding of the complex and pressing circumstances, work collaboratively with the school community, draws on the database of learning experiences in dealing with crisis situations and effectively regulate the psychosocial challenges of staff as a result of the crisis. Its practical approach of building on past experience and its orientation to experimentation as well as the characteristics of the leader makes the adaptive leadership model a powerful model for school leaders.

The six papers chosen for this special issue resonate the main and other themes of the conference, indicating ways in which education is being dramatically impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Contributions provide interesting insights through the theoretical and empirical findings which has the potential to benefit educators, practitioners and researchers.

Oksana Chaika's contribution is based on a research study that explored the contrast between crisis management and leadership styles in organisational communication in higher education across Ukraine during the pandemic. The study presents the voices of 315 respondents through their feedback on organisational communication structure. The findings reveal a gap between best practices in theory and practice. It identified decrease in performance excellence in the times of pandemic in higher education and argues for a burning need for changing styles in leading educational institutions' teaching and learning modes. The study suggests tactical leadership coaching, situational and strategic leadership styles to deal with crisis. Latifah Alomair and Vanesser Fernandes report on a study that focuses on the attributes of school leaders in Saudi Arabia in times of crisis. They observed that much of the existing studies from abroad on leading in crisis have little relevance to middle-eastern contexts. An open-ended qualitative questionnaire was used to gather data from school principals in Saudi Arabia on leaders' attitudes in times of crisis. The finding indicates that the pandemic crisis had a strong influence on school principals' leadership attributes, for example, evidence shows that principals learnt to be calm, supportive, compassionate, emotionally intelligent and intuitive in order to lead effectively during the COVID-19 crisis. The study highlights leadership qualities required in times of crisis.

Khulood Alfalasi, Solomon Arulraj David and Rana M. Tamim explored the impact of COVID-19 on undergraduate students' (UG) academic stress in the United Arab Emirates. The study surveyed 191 UG students in a selected university in the UAE and conducted a focus group discussion with 7 UG students. The respondents indicated that workload, time constrain, online teaching and health concerns were top stressors. It was observed that the first year students were more stressed compared to others. The findings can potentially help

educators, educational psychologists to better understand students' needs in times of crisis. Rima Abou Khreibi examined the relationship between leadership style and personality attributes among leaders in two private schools in Dubai. A mixed method approach was used; combining a quantitative survey and a qualitative interview to generate research data. The findings indicate that transactional and transformational leadership styles had high positive correlation, while laissez-faire style had moderate correlation. The relationship between the degree of leadership styles and the magnitude of the personality attributes varied. Hima Parameswaran paper focused on a study about the ways organisations use leadership strategies to bring about effective change. The study surveyed 300 respondents in a randomly selected companies in the UAE on the outlook of organisational leadership strategies and styles. The study concludes that while responding to the rapid changes externally is useful, adapting a strategic management internally is crucial to effect real change. Khulood Shebib Hussain A. Khansaheb investigated the perspectives of educational leaders on the introduction and integration of technology in the learning environment during the times of crisis. The study surveyed 70 respondents from 8 private schools in Dubai. The research found that, integration of AI and ICT in the learning environment had a positive impact on learning and teaching. The paper concludes that such efforts will prepare students for a competitive world.

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