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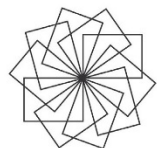
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**International Studies in Educational Administration (ISEA)**

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International Studies in Educational Administration (ISEA) aims to enhance the effectiveness of educational leadership, management and administration to support intellectual, personal and social learning in schools, colleges and universities and related educational, social and economic development in a range of national contexts. It publishes research- and scholarship-based papers within the broad field of educational leadership, management, and administration including its connections with educational/social policy, and professional practice. It focuses on the Commonwealth and beyond. It is strongly international in that, while it may publish empirical research or scholarship undertaken in specific national or regional contexts, papers consider issues and themes of interest that transcend single national settings. Papers offer new facts or ideas to academics, policy-makers and practitioners in education in varied national contexts ranging from advanced economies to the least economically developed countries. The journal aims to provide a balance between papers that present theoretical, applied or comparative research, and between papers from different methodological contexts, different scales of analysis, and different access to research resources. Editorial Correspondence and Books for Review should be sent to the Editors. Business Correspondence should be sent to the President or the CEO. ISEA adopts review procedures common to highly regarded international academic journals. Each paper is reviewed by the editors to judge suitability for the journal, and if accepted then undergoes a double-blind review process involving two international reviewers.

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# Editorial Note

## **Worldwide Educational Responses to the Pandemic: Issue Three of Four**

In these challenging times the Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management (CCEAM) is exploring ways to help support the education community to continue to do their important work. As one of the oldest journals in the educational leadership field, the academic journal of CCEAM, *International Studies in Educational Administration* is well placed to make an important contribution and so four issues of the journal have been devoted to focusing on responses to the coronavirus pandemic that is currently gripping our world.

As the editor, I invited short articles that either describe country or more local responses to education during the pandemic, or short articles that provide educators with knowledge to help them lead their educational organisations during this time. From more than 150 submissions, 60 papers were accepted for publication. The four issues will be published between July and September, 2020. Most of the papers are not empirical research papers, but rather informed opinion pieces documenting personal observations of local educational responses to the pandemic crisis, or about key leadership and management ideas that will help educators lead through the crisis and after.

Across the 60 papers there are 28 countries represented, including: Australia, Bangladesh, Barbados, Canada, China (mainland, Hong Kong and Macau), Cyprus, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Kenya, Liberia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, South Africa, Sweden, Thailand, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United States of America, and Vietnam. There are papers also focusing on the broader contexts of Africa, Arab countries, Asia, and the wider world. Conceptual papers include foci on leadership ideas to do with adaption, crisis and future education. The papers were not limited to any education sector and so there are papers focusing on pre-school, school, post-school, tertiary, and other education providers.

In this third issue there are again 15 papers. For this issue I have grouped the papers by geographical location, and a summary of the papers is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Summary of Papers for the Third Pandemic Special Issue

<b>Paper</b>	<b>Authors</b>	<b>Country Focus</b>	<b>Paper summary</b>
1	Scott Eacott Katrina MacDonald Amanda Keddie Jill Blackmore Jane Wilkinson Richard Niesche Brad Gobby Irene Fernandez	Australia	As part of a large school autonomy and social justice project, the authors have reflected on responses to the pandemic and they describe how these have uncovered inter-government tensions between the federal and state/territory governments, exposed issues with school autonomy, and further exacerbated inequities in access to quality education.
2	Paul Kidson Kylie Lipscombe Sharon Tindall-Ford	Australia	The authors argue that schools leaders and teachers are best positioned to inform immediate responses to the pandemic and to contribute to longer-term policy development. They note a renewed appreciation for the work of school leaders and teachers and the role of schools in society, and they suggest that the time is ripe for achieving excellence and equity in schools.
3	David Ivers	Australia	Ivers provides a description of how the Sydney Catholic school system was well prepared to support schools during the pandemic induced closures. Through consideration of the Sydney Catholic Schools Leadership Framework, he highlights the Religious Leadership lens and how this has helped faith development in schools during the pandemic crisis.
4	Jason Marshall Darcia Roache Rasheda Moody-Marshall	Barbados Canada	In a conceptual paper, the authors critically examine how educational leaders managed the initial phase of the COVID-crisis in Barbados and Canada. Providing clear directions, communicating effectively, working collaboratively and using adaptive leadership were important strategies for success.



5	Katina Pollock	Canada	Pollock uses information from focus group interviews with 17 Ontario principals to show how school leaders have been extending their roles around (a) safe schooling and setting the context for future schooling while (b) simultaneously extending their role of instructional leader to digital instructional leader.
6	Lewis Fogarty	England	Fogarty focuses on leadership in Early Childhood Education and Care in England and argues that through forming reassuring relationships, communicating clearly and inspiring continuous curiosity, all within an enabling environment, leaders can create the right balance between pedagogical and entrepreneurial leadership and encourage a focus on both education and care in their settings.
7	Claudio Girelli Alessia Bevilacqua Daniela Acquaro	Italy	Based on reports from two research projects, this paper describes Italy's educational response with the adoption of emergency remote teaching, and highlights adjustments, inequities and contextual considerations. Based on what has occurred, eight recommendations and priorities for future education are provided.
8	Peter Moyi	Kenya	This paper explores the Kenya Basic Education COVID-19 Emergency Response Plan. Whilst the government has been promoting the success of the plan, other stakeholders have been more sceptical and calling for more consultation regarding further implementation of the plan. Deficiencies in the plan include the lack of provision for students with special needs, responsiveness to local contexts and needs, and consultation with key stakeholders.
9	Oyetakin Akinrotimi Iyiomo	Nigeria	This paper explores cost issues associated with the move to remote and online learning in secondary schools in Nigeria. The paper highlights equity issues in the ability of

			students to access remote learning. Recommendations for increased government funding and gaining other sources of funding are made.
10	Theresa Stephen Gyang	Nigeria	Focused on primary schools in Nigeria, Gyang proposes a Community-Based Education Leadership (CBEL) model to influence active participation of all stakeholders in the provision of primary education during the crisis and beyond. The CBEL includes school, community and collaborative leadership to improve teaching and learning and student outcomes.
11	Pınar Ayyıldız Hasan Şerif Baltacı	Turkey	The authors provide evidence to support a favourable view of the Turkish educational response to the pandemic. Harnessing existing technological infrastructure, utilising TV broadcasts, and gaining parent support have been features of this response.
12	Neelofar Ahmed Prerana Bhatnagar Mohammad Shahidul Islam Sarah Alam	South Asia Bangladesh India Pakistan	The authors provide brief snapshot reports from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. They argue that inequities are not being adequately addressed, and that remote learning initiatives are not producing comparable results to pre-pandemic learning. They argue that to make education accessible, equitable, and to improve student learning outcomes, the countries need to invest in school leader capacity building, and strengthening of the technology infrastructure and resources.
13	Rebecca Stroud Stasel	Southeast Asia China Malaysia	Focused on the international school environment, Stasel considers the responses of educators in China (mainland and Macau) and Malaysia, and finds that whilst there has been an increase in acculturative stress and there have been financial impacts, there is also an increased sense of communal caring. Adaptive and creative leadership models are offered as future focused leadership views.

14	Pravindharan Balakrishnan	Southeast Asia Indonesia Malaysia Thailand Singapore	Using education department social media and general news media sites, Balakrishnan reports on the efforts of four South-East Asian countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore. The author found that whilst all of these countries pivoted to online learning during the initial stage of the lockdown, they also pushed to open schools as early as possible because of deficiencies in online learning related to effectiveness and inequalities.
15	Matthew Nelson Elizabeth Murakami	USA	Focused on the provision of schooling for students with special needs, this paper shows how the pandemic in the USA has exacerbated unequal and inequitable outcomes for students that may have been overlooked in the transition to remote and online learning.

One more special issue will be produced and I encourage you to also read this and the earlier issues. All special issues are freely available from [www.cceam.net](http://www.cceam.net)

**David Gurr**

*Editor of International Studies in Educational Administration*

September 16, 2020

# COVID-19 and Inequities in Australian Education – Insights on Federalism, Autonomy, and Access

**Scott Eacott, Katrina MacDonald, Amanda Keddie, Jill Blackmore, Jane Wilkinson, Richard Niesche, Brad Gobby and Irene Fernandez**

***Abstract:** The current COVID19 pandemic has forced major adjustments, often at short notice, on schools and schooling. Educators have been working in a constantly changing environment to continue to deliver for students, families and communities all the while maintaining the necessary supports for themselves and colleagues. In Australia this has led to debates concerning when and who can close schools, the authority of schools to enact context-sensitive activities, and amplified existing inequities. Informed by a larger Australian Research Council grant focused on school autonomy and social justice, we argue that the pandemic and responses to it have highlighted the idiosyncratic nature of Australian federalism, drawn greater attention to the role of school autonomy, and amplified inequities in the access to quality education irrespective of location.*

**Keywords:** Autonomy, federalism, access, equity, Australia, COVID-19

## Introduction

The large-scale closure of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic has raised many issues and concerns with the equity of school systems globally. It has challenged what we think of schooling, how it is currently and what it can be. At the same time, it has elevated questions such as who has authority over schools, where funding comes from, on what evidence decisions are based, and for whom schools serve. These questions have illuminated many of the nuances of inequities in our current school education systems.

With a specific focus on Australia, and informed by ongoing work as part of a large-scale Australian Research Council funded project investigating school autonomy and social justice (see: <https://www.schoolautonomyandsocialjustice.org/>), our attention in this paper is centred on three issues: i) the idiosyncratic nature of Australian federalism and its impact on schooling; ii) the autonomy of schools and/or school systems; and iii) the access to high

quality schooling regardless of location. While schools remain the constitutional responsibility of states/territories in Australia, the Federal Government has the fiscal capacity to influence policy. The oversight of schools is complicated by funding mechanisms that see the bulk of funds for public schools filtered through state/territory governments and Departments of Education while Independent and Catholic schools/systems (which comprise 11.45 and 18.48 percent respectively of Australia's 9503 schools) receive public funds (different to many other countries) directly from the Federal Government. The impact of school closures and continued accessibility to teaching and learning is not equally distributed across Australia or different systems (public, Catholic, independent). Put simply, the pandemic has amplified many of the inequities of Australian education.

Our argument is that the public health crisis that is COVID-19 has highlighted the multiple pathways and influence of schools and school systems courtesy of federalism and allowed different systems (e.g. public, Catholic and independent) to engage with government and the public differently – entrenching existing inequities. The autonomy to engage, or not, with government directives has varied greatly by sector and we focus in particular on equity issues of decisions regarding when to close and open schools. Caught up in all of this is the access to education for all students. This includes not only the availability of the technologies necessary for ongoing engagement with schooling, but also what types of engagement are considered acceptable for different groups of students and communities. In sum, our argument is that COVID-19 has brought to the fore the inequities that have existed in Australian school systems for some time. Prompted by the pandemic, this represents a significant opportunity to not only raise these issues but to advocate for those students and communities most disadvantaged.

## **The Idiosyncratic Nature of Australian Federalism**

Australia is a federation of six states and two territories and school education is arguably the 'oldest and deepest federalist artefact' (Keating & Klatt 2013: 414). Constitutionally, education is the responsibility of the states/territories however the primary source of funding is through the Federal Government as the collector of income taxes. In short, the Federal Government provides funds for schools through three main approaches: i) for public schools, constituting close to two-thirds of all enrolments, funds are granted to state/territory governments who then allocate through their budgets; ii) for the Catholic sector, the Federal Government directly funds the system (comprising 19.5% of students) which then allocates to individual schools; and iii) individual 'independent', largely faith-based, schools receive federal funds directly. The intricacies of this complexity remain somewhat hidden in public discourses but play out in a very specific way during a major (inter)national crisis as it enables different levers to be pulled. A prime example has been school closures.

School closures were, and remain, a common intervention since the initial spread of COVID-19. While the exact scale is still unfolding, UNESCO reports that over 140 countries and two-

thirds of all students globally have been impacted (see: <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>) and the OECD (2020) notes that some 1.6 billion children have been directly affected. In Australia, the Catholic and independent schools sectors were able to close in response to the initial outbreaks (with the most common action starting school holidays a week early) whereas public schools were forced to remain open. The intimate relations between schooling and the economy were emphasised with calls for schools to remain open to allow parents to continue working. The federal intervention here was to threaten withdrawal of funding for Catholic systemic and independent schools if they did not re-open. This re-opening was for the most part through the provision of remote learning, with students learning from home with content delivered via online platforms (e.g. Microsoft Teams) and/or printed packages and phone calls.

Throughout the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the handling and messaging resulted in public perception of state/territory governments growing in esteem compared with the Federal Government (Wilson, Pallant, Bednall & Gray 2020). However, school closures demonstrate how the financial power and policy reach of the Federal Government has expanded in apparently irreversible fashion despite its constitutional responsibility (Feena 2018). The Prime Minister and particularly the Federal Education Minister were publicly critical of state governments closing public schools. The latter even had to publicly apologise for critical remarks made about one state government's decision to close public schools as he had over-stepped on constitutional responsibility (No author, Federal education minister Dan Tehan apologises for 'overstepping the mark' in schools closure criticism of Victoria, *The Guardian*, May 5, 2020). Due to the idiosyncratic funding nature of Australian school education, the Federal Government encouraged independent and religious schools to re-open earlier than they had planned in exchange for an advance on \$3 billion of already committed funding. National statements such as the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration (Australian Government [Department of Education] 2019) and reform agendas such as the Gonski Report (Gonski et al. 2018) are potentially compromised by the urgency of decision making required by the pandemic and the fiscal powers of the Federal Government to pull policy levers on different sectors to different degrees. What the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore is the complex tensions arising from the demarcation of responsibilities for education across three systems and the six states/two territories, complicated by different political persuasions.

## **The Autonomy of Schools and/or School Systems**

The capability of independent schools and the Catholic system to close schools at a time when the Federal Government was stating that schools are safe introduces questions about the autonomy to enact such a decision. Australia has been a leading advocate of self-managing schools through the work of Caldwell and colleagues (e.g. Caldwell & Spinks 1992), but also home to some of its most vocal critics (e.g. Smyth 2008). This long and contested history (MacDonald et al. 2020) has raised concerns for social justice (e.g. Keddie, MacDonald,

Blackmore, Wilkinson et al. 2020) given the increasingly marketised context within which school 'autonomy' operates (e.g. Keddie, Macdonald, Blackmore, Eacott et al. 2020). Despite this, autonomy-based reforms have remained persuasive in policy and education discourse in their association with improving school outcomes.

Across all major international (e.g. PISA, TIMSS) and national (e.g. NAPLAN) testing regimes, Australia's performance is at best stagnant and in all likelihood, declining (e.g. Thomson, De Bortoli, Underwood & Schmid 2019). Increases in school level autonomy over the past few decades have coincided with increasing administrative workload for school leaders (Heffernan & Pierpoint 2020), less time for teaching and learning related matters (Thomson & Hillman 2019), and heightened stress and well-being concerns (Riley, See, Marsh & Dicke 2020). The pandemic has forced further administrative burdens and responsibility on school level educators as they reacted to fast changing situations to best protect staff, students and the community from the virus. The decisions (e.g. to close or remain open – even shifting to remote learning) have highlighted what schools have autonomy over (or not) and provide evidence for whom schools serve. During the pandemic's first wave in Australia, only public schools have been seen as serving the public interest (Wilson et al. 2020).

Australia has a very divisive school sector with battle lines often based on sectors – public, independent, Catholic (Eacott 2019). Major reviews such as Gonski (Gonski et al. 2018) have sought to introduce sector blind funding arrangements that are based on measures of (dis)advantage. These have however proven politically difficult to implement and currently growth in funding for the independent and Catholic sectors is out-pacing those to public schools (Chrysanthos & Carey, Growth in money for private school students outstrips public schools, *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 30, 2020). This funding distribution is part of a much larger social policy move playing out in schools through what Cranston, Kimber, Mulford, Reid and Keating (2010) describe as a shift from the public to private purposes of schooling (see also Smyth 2008). What the pandemic has done is to amplify these issues. Therefore, resulting from the class-based stratification of school systems (where access to different sectors is limited by the fiscal capacity of families to pay) means that education cannot escape issues of equity.

## **The Equitable Distribution of Quality Education**

Policy decisions during the pandemic have required a careful balancing of choices and implications across health, economic, social and education measures. No decision has been made without consequences for a significant portion of the population (e.g. the double burden of woman having to assume learning support roles for children at home while sustaining usual roles, therefore exacerbating existing gendered inequalities). What the pandemic has done is expose the many inequities in our education systems. These inequities have been widely recognised (e.g. Gonski et al. 2018; Halsey 2018; OECD 2016), with UNICEF (2018) noting Australia is one of the most unequal countries at the primary and secondary

levels reflected in a long performance tail and a strong correlation between social (dis)advantage and outcomes. School closures have brought these inequities to the fore. Some groups have sought to quantify the impact of school closures on students' learning, with the greatest impact on the most disadvantaged (e.g. Joseph & Fahey 2020), and the Prime Minister publicly argued that schools need to open to prevent children from falling behind while also freeing parents up to restart workforce participation. Two matters brought to the fore through COVID-19, and particularly school closures, are the inequitable distribution of resources to support learning and the acceptance of variable quality experiences for different groups.

In shifting from face-to-face instruction to remote learning, significant pressures were moved to families to provide the necessary resources for learning. Apart from the time and capacity to assist children with their learning, the pandemic amplified the digital divide in Australia. Based on Australian Bureau of Statistics data, 86 percent of Australian households have access to the internet. The distribution is however not even across all social groups, with 33 percent among the lowest income households not having access to the internet at home. While some schools/systems sought to loan laptop computers or iPads to families, the additional costs associated with devices, electricity, internet access and data charges combined with availability to assist students at home, means that the pandemic has exposed many of the enduring inequities in our school systems.

Not surprisingly, many of the calls to re-open schools (mindful that public schools never shut) centred on equity. The key claim was that by not physically attending school, students were having their education compromised. For a number of the reasons previously cited, this compromise was felt greatest by already disadvantaged groups. At the same time, these calls highlighted existing complicity with inequities. The Halsey Report (Halsey 2018), among many others, draws attention to the inequities of Australian schooling based on location – notably regional, rural and remote education. For those in many rural and remote communities, distance and online learning is the only way to access education and this has been achieved for some 100 years (e.g. Downes & Roberts 2015). If the claim is made that it is a deficit way of educating, what does this show about our acceptance of it for rural and remote students (Downes & Roberts 2020)? Therefore, while the pandemic has created challenges for educators, it has illuminated a number of the significant issues of education that have remained somewhat obscured for many.

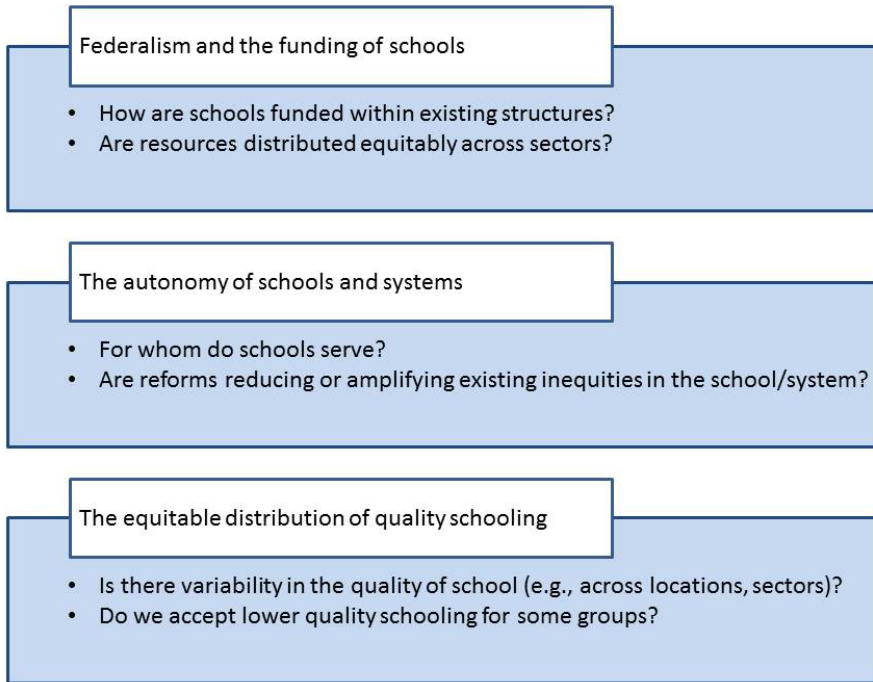
## Conclusion

Since the initial outbreak and subsequent international spread of COVID-19, many researchers, edu-preneurs and consultants have sought to capitalise on the opportunity by appropriating their work and linking it to the pandemic. Various models, adjectival approaches, or products have been advocated as the solution to the problems created by the pandemic and/or the best path forward. In this paper we have adopted a different approach. Finding stimulus in Anderson's (2009) call for problem posers not problem solvers, rather



than try and provide simple solutions (often mirroring those advocated prior to the pandemic), we have explicitly articulated some of the issues that the pandemic has amplified – at least in Australia, but arguably elsewhere (see Figure 1). In particular, we have raised issues of the politics of schooling (including relations to levels of government), the autonomy of schools and systems to respond, and the inequities of access and resources. If any ‘new’ form of schooling is possible post-pandemic, then confronting the challenges of education is arguably the only path. The insights provided in this paper, and the questions we raise, are one step in engaging in a conversation about the problems and possibilities of education. This is however not a one off, or individual endeavour. To that end, this is an ongoing project which we hope you will join.

**Figure 1:** Reflective Questions Raised by COVID-19 Pandemic for School/System Leaders



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# Co-designing Educational Policy: Professional Voice and Policy Making Post-COVID

**Paul Kidson, Kylie Lipscombe and Sharon Tindall-Ford**

**Abstract:** *The closing and re-opening of Australian schools during the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated educational inequities. At the same time, it brought into sharp focus the critical leadership role of school principals and teachers in providing responsive and contextually relevant educational continuity. This paper explores two related reflections: first, that school leaders and teachers are best positioned to respond effectively to community needs, and, second, that their professional knowledge and experience should assume greater significance to wider educational policy. More direct and constructive input by educational professionals to the newly formed National Federal Reform Commission (NFRC) can contribute to policy aimed at reducing inequity.*

**Keywords:** Educational inequity, professional empowerment, governance, policy development

## Introduction

In the midst of a crisis, priority is rightly given to survival responses. The recovery phase, however, invites evaluation of those aspects from pre-crisis life which might be retained, reformed, or irrevocably lost (Boin, Hart, McConnell & Preston 2010). The urgency of COVID-19 resulted in the establishment of a temporary National Cabinet comprising the Prime Minister, state Premiers, and territory Chief Ministers on March 13, 2020. One major question considered by National Cabinet was whether to keep school campuses open or to close them and switch to home and online learning. They were guided in this task by the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC), comprising the Commonwealth Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and each of the state and territory CMOs. National Cabinet agreed to a set of seven National Principles for School Education on April 16, 2020, based on 'the AHPPC health advice that "on current evidence, schools can be fully open"' (Morrison 2020b: n.p.). Differences emerged between jurisdictions, and government and non-government sectors, including whether schools should remain open, or, if closed, how remote online

learning was to be operationalised. These differences created confusion and highlighted again that structural inequities continue to constrain Australian education (Reid 2016).

Out of this confusion, however, has already come considerable good. When forced remote learning was finally implemented, the extraordinary skill, knowledge, and value of the teaching profession came to the fore. The social and community leadership of principals expanded as they daily translated the National Principles into lived reality for their school communities, all the while caring for increasingly exhausted and anxious teachers. Situational and relational knowledge of their community (Mutch 2015) highlighted the importance of principals' informed contextual decision making (Hallinger 2018). Thousands of teachers rapidly transformed curriculum, creating virtual classrooms, and developing novel ways to help students remain socially connected. These two crisis management responses can now inform and energise a post-COVID redesign of Australian education, one that is supported by the collective good will of politicians, yet is clearly informed and led by the education profession.

## Localising the National Response

Initial responses to COVID-19 were cooperative between the Commonwealth, state, and territory governments. The Commonwealth Government provided financial support to the states and territories for health services, restricted entry to Australia, imposed quarantine self-isolation, and, on March 5, 2020, 'activated the National Coordination Mechanism' (Morrison, 2020a: n.p.). The explanation for this was to establish a whole-of-government approach to managing the emerging crisis. In doing so, the Prime Minister effectively framed the growing response to the pandemic as a collective one, beyond normal political partisanship. The pandemic, and its potential health, social and economic impacts, warranted closer collaborative decision making in the national interest, and thus on March 13, 2020, the Prime Minister announced the formation of a National Cabinet. This response presumed that states and territories should not act alone in the face of the crisis to achieve the outcomes required to protect the nation, but rather should work in cooperation.

Unfortunately, this solidarity was not forthcoming for schools. Following the National Cabinet meeting on March 22, 2020, some state Premiers unilaterally 'broke ranks' (Tulich, Rizzi & McGaughey 2020). The Commonwealth Government, on the advice of health experts, strongly recommended schools were safe and should remain open, but Premiers from New South Wales and Victoria, and the Chief Minister of the Australian Capital Territory recommended students stay home, with early onset of school holidays and remote learning from home.

Confusion for students, caregivers, teachers, and principals was rife, deriving, in part, from Australia's idiosyncratic school governance architecture. Because constitutional authority for school education rests with the states and territories, operationalising the national principles fell primarily to state and territory education departments, a position further complicated by

the presence of a large non-government sector over whom state and territory education departments hold little direct influence. For example, in New South Wales, less than two weeks after the National Coordination Mechanism was activated, a group of non-government school principals met with the Secretary of the NSW Department of Education and the NSW Chief Health Officer (J. Baker, 'The messiest part': The inside story of how NSW schools responded to COVID-19, *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 29, 2020). Fissures were already appearing, with fears that non-government schools would pivot quickly to online learning, effectively closing their campuses, thus placing significant public pressure on government schools to do the same. Some non-government schools in Victoria also shifted early to remote learning, and pre-emptive home-schooling was rising (Creagh 2020), despite a consistent message that incidence of viral transmission among students was negligible. Principals publicly, and anecdotally to us, expressed growing anxiety amongst their staff, and complaints swelled about the impracticalities of applying physical distance requirements in schools (L. Hamilton-Smith, Queensland teachers say COVID-19 social distancing 'impossible' in crowded classrooms, *ABC News*, March 19, 2020).

## Localising Inequity

When finally enacted nation-wide, replacing physical attendance at school with home and online learning exposed compelling examples of Australia's increasing education inequity. Schools were left to find ways to minimise the effects of new modes of schooling for the vast majority of Australian students. Unsurprisingly, with many schools having little preparation, limited technology, digital pedagogical expertise, or technical support to deliver classes online, education experts warned of consequences based on these inequities (Graham & Sahlberg 2020). This was compounded for some school students who were digitally secluded with little to no access to technology, variable internet accessibility, and limited home support (Flack, Walker, Bickerstaff & Margetts 2020). Absence of online connection for one school resulted in even turning to radio broadcast technology (S. Cousins, Children in this Australian town don't have the internet, so their school has turned to radio, *SBS News*, May 2, 2020).

This was not unexpected. Independent research reports commissioned by the Commonwealth Government to inform National Cabinet's decision making (Brown, Te Riele, Shelley & Woodroffe 2020; Clinton 2020) highlighted significant concerns about remote learning for vulnerable groups including students from socio-educationally disadvantaged communities, linguistically diverse backgrounds, unsafe home environments, rural and remote communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and students who may have special learning needs. Consistent across the reports was that extended periods of remote learning would result in poorer educational outcomes for the most vulnerable Australians (Drane, Vernon & O'Shea 2020; Finkel 2020).

Structural and localised inequities further surfaced when discussion turned subsequently to student transition back to school. The Commonwealth Minister for Education raised the

spectre of altering funding arrangements for non-government schools if they opened campuses more quickly, a move that would likely pressure government schools over which the Minister holds no direct authority. It was suggested scheduled payments to non-government schools for July could be brought forward to June if non-government schools ensured half their students return by June 1, leading one Victorian non-government school principal to describe the offer as a 'bribe' (G. Hitch, Religious, independent schools offered \$3 billion in advance funding to resume face-to-face classes by June, *ABC News*, April 29, 2020).

## Empowered Professionalism

In the face of such challenge, however, what is also clear was the dedication, ingenuity, and professionalism of school leaders and teachers. While governments grappled with divergent needs and priorities, as well as confidence about clear messaging (Leask & Hooker 2020), principals and teachers pro-actively responded to best meet their students' learning and wellbeing needs. In doing so, they exemplified the pre-eminence of contextually relevant decision making (C. Peterson, Return to class is going to look very different from school to school, *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 22, 2020), despite, at times, feeling genuinely fearful for their own health (Wilson 2020). They worked to mobilise resources and partnerships immediately to create new realities of schooling. School leaders and teachers became responsible for two simultaneous methods of delivering learning: at school to students whose parents were essential workers or could not work from home, and remotely to the majority of students via online classes. School leaders and teachers needed to make decisions swiftly based on what they considered was essential to their students' learning, and how best to mobilise resources to teach both remotely and on campus. Concurrently, they supported the wellbeing and connectedness of students in their classrooms and provided support and resources to parents now schooling from home (Ziebell, Acquaro, Pearn & Seah 2020).

Publicly, and anecdotally to us, parents and the community shared how deeply appreciative they were of the humility, innovation, expertise, and sacrifices of school leaders and teachers (J. Baker, How COVID-19 exposed the fault lines in Australian education, *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 16, 2020). The new wave of cases which emerged during June and July indicates such localised and targeted response will remain for some time yet (Fitzgerald 2020), highlighting the need for ongoing care of educators' own well-being (R. Collie & A. Martin, Teacher wellbeing during COVID-19, *Teacher*, April 7, 2020).

## From Local to National Leadership

This responsiveness underpins our argument for greater direct inclusion of the profession in national policy development, not merely implementation. It represents hope, following the example of National Cabinet, that divisive partisan policy differences can be put aside in favour of an uncontested national good. Consonant with how governments looked to health



experts for guidance on school closures, the significant role and expertise of school leaders and teachers exemplified in this paper now commend a similar approach. Government responses to COVID-19 led to new modes of national leadership to address a major health crisis, and we argue these new modes of decision making and policy development should also inform how to address the ongoing inequities in Australian education exposed again through this pandemic.

Throughout COVID-19, National Cabinet consulted extensively with health experts, with all policy initiatives informed by the AHPPC. By contrast, it was to school educators that National Cabinet turned to implement, rather than develop, policy response. School leaders and teachers responded not with frustration and animus, but with ingenuity, creativity, and a total commitment to deliver the best education possible under the circumstances. Throughout this challenging period, school leaders exercised imperative autonomy, collaborating with teachers to deliver new ways of educating in unpredictable circumstances. As the pandemic shifts and reconfigures, school leaders and teachers are again responding to fresh challenges (Cahill, Shlezinger, Romei & Dadvand 2020; Department of Education and Training 2020), requiring nuanced approaches responsive to individual contexts, a mode of working that is often not possible within current education policy settings (Fitzgerald, McGrath-Champ, Stacey, Wilson & Gavin 2019; Savage 2016).

The perceived success of National Cabinet in handling the pandemic has resulted in a decision to consolidate it as an ongoing governance structure. The Prime Minister announced on May 29, 2020 that a new National Federation Reform Council (NFRC) would be established due to 'the success that has been yielded by the operation of the National Cabinet' (Morrison 2020c). On June 12, 2020, National Cabinet announced six national priority areas of reform: Rural and Regional Australia, Skills, Energy, Infrastructure and Transport, Populations and Migration, and Health, with each having a National Cabinet Reform Committee. It seems perplexing to us that education is not a priority area in its own right, given the substantial evidence that inequity continues to grow (Piccoli, Bonnor, Wilson & Kidson in press). We argue that education should be an additional priority area, given its essential contributions to most of the reform areas. Prioritising education would also indicate genuine commitment to reducing the inequities entrenched in Australian schools.

We posit it is the profession's expertise that should now lead national education policy through the NFRC. School autonomy policy typically originates centrally (Gobby 2013; McGrath-Champ et al. 2019), leaving school leaders to implement, rather than contribute to its design. We believe the NFRC is an opportunity to capitalise on a new way of co-operative national government working closely with experts. New education policy can be co-designed by practising education professionals thereby improving an education system that continues to manifest increasing inequity.

## Conclusion

The temporary shift to online remote schooling has awakened a healthy appreciation for the leadership of principals and teachers, as well as the social community-sustaining role of schools. Temporal urgency for national education reform might not seem as acute as responding to a global pandemic, yet the moral challenge to do so is no less significant. Voices calling for overhaul of a national education framework to reduce inequity are not new, yet elements of governmental response to the COVID-19 pandemic show that old ways of thinking and acting can change. We can move beyond the fallacy that change is unlikely because its scale is so great. The urgent reliance on non-partisan medical officers further exemplifies that professionally informed policy decision making can exist, if there is moral and political humility.

We must press these to the forefront of professional and scholarly discourse, harnessing the collective goodwill towards professional educators that has flowed from this pandemic. Sadly, the wider community has experienced first-hand how valuable principals and teachers are through having their direct contact forcibly removed for a brief time. Political discourse should now turn away from its ceaseless contestation and boundary protections, and focus on how we can best draw on the wisdom and moral purpose of professional educators, principals and teachers alike.

Australia has a newly iterated set of agreed educational goals which explicitly commit all Australian governments to 'promote excellence and equity' (Education Council of Australia 2019: 4); a door of possibility seems slightly ajar. We must push it open, bravely, and move beyond *promote* to *achieve*. This would be fitting acknowledgement that, as a nation, we have learned deeply from the profound lessons of COVID-19.

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# What Next? COVID-19 and Australian Catholic Schools Through a Leadership Lens

**David Ivers**

**Abstract:** *According to their website, Sydney Catholic Schools (2020) has a clear mission, 'to know and love Christ through learning'. For Sydney Catholic Schools, honouring this mission which sees the person of Jesus Christ as being central to our approach to learning, has been a challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic and the 'learning online from home' phase of the lockdown. The challenge was met head-on due to targeted professional development in areas such as eLearning over the last decade and a Sydney Catholic Schools Leadership Framework (SCSLF) that provided the agility required for the system and its schools to adapt. In the process, they were able to have thriving virtual Catholic communities that could excel in teaching and learning, albeit online. Using the Religious Leadership lens of the Leadership Framework, hope and faith became important, as teachers, students and parents navigated their way through the pandemic.*

**Keywords:** Student, teacher, online, religious, learning, relational, adaptive, strategic, leadership

## Introduction

Few would have thought at the end of January that the COVID-19 pandemic would be both a source of major disruption and, potentially, of major change. In Australia, as schools and businesses were locked down by the orders of governments, students had to quickly adapt to learning exclusively online. The adaptability and skillset of the teaching profession was put to the test. Many parents reported on social media sites that they had a new-found respect for the complex work that teachers do. For school systems, such as Sydney Catholic Schools, it has also been an opportunity to see how things could be done differently and to see how current policies and practices were able to support the task at hand. Sydney Catholic Schools is responsible for the running of 152 schools (primary and secondary), supporting 70,000 students. In this paper I consider the role of the Sydney Catholic Schools Leadership Framework (SCSLF) in supporting the system's pandemic response.

## Sydney Catholic Schools Leadership Framework

In March 2018, Sydney Catholic Schools adopted a new leadership framework, one which was based on a substantial body of research and was thought of as giving flexibility and support to an era of Catholic education in which adaptability was becoming a norm (Sydney Catholic Schools 2018). The SCSLF is designed to not just be for school leaders, but rather for all staff at all levels throughout the organisation. It recognises that support staff have a key role in the delivery of education to students, as do the teachers, middle leaders, those leading schools and those in positions of system leadership. Obviously, a leadership framework aims to give direction, coherence and alignment to the work of leaders throughout the system of schools.

Sydney Catholic Schools is dealing with significant shifts in the context of schools and schooling which impact on the knowledge, skills and capabilities required for contemporary educational leadership. Now more than ever highly effective leadership needs to focus on continual improvement and succession planning that prioritises our Catholic vision and mission. The Sydney Catholic Schools Leadership Framework provides a whole of system approach describing leadership as a collective and distributed undertaking. (Sydney Catholic Schools n.d.: Home page)

In developing the SCSLF, Sydney Catholic Schools was mindful that there were essentially two groups of staff, the educators whose work is associated with professional standards (Australian Professional Standards for Teachers and the Australian Professional Standard for Principals), and administration staff that were more closely aligned in work to similar positions in the public service. These would form the basis of capabilities for staff moving forward.

According to Sydney Catholic Schools (SCS), the Leadership Framework seeks to achieve four things.

The SCS Leadership Framework:

- Defines leadership within the mission of the Catholic Church in education.
- Aligns our understanding of leadership within the national educational leadership context.
- Provides a common language and shared understanding about leadership across our system.
- Informs and shapes decision making across the system on recruitment, identification of potential leaders, leadership learning and development, and succession planning. (Sydney Catholic Schools n.d.: About page)

To achieve this, the SCSLF looks at leadership through six complementary lenses: religious, learning, relational, adaptive, strategic and cultural.

One thing that the model highlights is the role that relationships and school/organisational culture have in the leadership of thriving Catholic educational communities. The religious

dimension of the Catholic school colours and powers every facet of school life. It presents a model of respectful and healthy relationships as seen through the life and times of Jesus. The religious dimension gives each Catholic school their distinctive flavour and culture. It very much encourages adaptive leadership through leadership of self, first and foremost through a healthy interior life. Being sure and grounded in yourself, allows you to be more adaptable to the winds of change blowing through the world of education. The strategic lens also derives from the religious dimension of the school. In managing strategy, the perennial questions are: 'What are we here to do? What is our purpose?' A clear purpose of Catholic schools is the intellectual and faith formation of all members of the community (students, parents and staff), and thus the religious dimension encourages students to pursue academic excellence in the Catholic intellectual tradition as typified by people such as St Thomas Aquinas, St Augustine, St Therese of Avila, and St Mary of the Cross McKillop.

The SCSLF is therefore borne out of a necessity for Sydney Catholic Schools to be an organisation that is true to its core, whilst being agile in the face of change. With that said and that background in mind, it should also be noted that it was never envisaged to be operating in a pandemic. One of the first things that Sydney Catholic Schools was able to do very quickly was to develop a multi-faceted strategy to ensure the students had continuity of learning, much of which would be online using platforms such as Zoom. Since 2009, when the then Prime Minister Rudd was rolling out computers to students in secondary schools, to ensure 1:1 Learning and the future of eLearning, Sydney Catholic Schools invested significantly in the development of a robust ICT network that would allow e-learning in almost any part of the school. With this came professional development programmes that ensured teachers had a sound grounding in teaching in the online environment. This foresight meant that teachers simply needed to be upskilled on the protocols of using a platform such as Zoom, whilst adhering to a range of system policies, including Child Protection.

## Religious Leadership and Religious Education in the Pandemic

As a participant within this framework, and as an employee of Sydney Catholic Schools with the responsibility at a whole of system level for religious leadership, it is perhaps opportune to be reflective of the framework in the face of a pandemic. The views expressed here are entirely those of the author and may not be those of the organisation.

According to the SCSLF:

**Religious leadership** in a Catholic context proclaims, lives and shares the Mission of Jesus, (which is the Mission of the Church) in partnership with the community for the formation, education and development of all.

Religious leadership is characterised by:

- Proclaiming, modelling and making relevant the traditions and teachings of the Catholic Church.

- Building and sustaining a faith filled community.
- Celebrating the sacramentality of life.
- Facilitating opportunities for faith formation of self and others. (Sydney Catholic Schools n.d.: Lenses>Religious Leadership page)

The challenge throughout the pandemic, one which school leadership teams were needing to address, was how you have a faith based educational community, when the community is no longer on site and the ability to practise religious rituals is heavily impeded by a ban on social gatherings. At a strategic level, Sydney Catholic Schools, via the Mission and Identity Directorate, writes in partnership with the other Dioceses, the Religious Education Curriculum for New South Wales, with the Stage 5 and 6 syllabus holding approval for certification purposes from NESA (New South Wales Education and Standards Authority). The pandemic then raised the question of authentic delivery of an approved Religious Education Curriculum. The Directorate also provides support to teachers teaching the NESA developed Studies of Religion syllabus to Year 11 and 12 students.

Consider the following fictional case study.

Kate (not her real name) is a middle leader in a Catholic school. Currently she serves as Year 12 Coordinator, and she teaches Studies of Religion and Modern History. In New South Wales, the first term of the Higher School Certificate (HSC) year starts in Term 4 of the preceding year. Kate is well organised and returns to the 2020 school year, mindful that for her own classes and the Year 12 cohort she has responsibility for, they will be sitting their mid-course exams just prior to the Easter / Term 1 holidays. Prior to the start of the school year, Kate planned a series of activities, including retreats for the Year 12 students, to ensure that the students have resources to help them navigate the journey through their final year of school life. Suddenly in early March, the Prime Minister identifies and warns of a coming pandemic and issues a raft of restrictions. Kate quickly realises that her students will need to be prepared to take their learning online. She starts to prepare her own classes so that the learning can continue seamlessly. An advocate of e-learning, Kate has been using a Blended Learning approach in both Studies of Religion and in Modern History. She is confident that her classes will be able to handle this change but raises with the Leadership Team of the school her concerns regarding the continuity of learning for all Year 12 students. Kate then uses the fortnightly Pastoral Care period to prepare her Year 12 students for learning exclusively online. A concern for Kate is how the Year 12 pastoral programme can be delivered online and how the 'lock-down' will change the dynamics of the cohort. Kate meets with her Pastoral Care teachers and they decide to touch base with the students in their Pastoral Care class throughout each week. Kate also decides to touch base with the parents of the students she has concerns about. Kate has a daughter, Jo, who is completing the Higher School Certificate (HSC) at another school. Her daughter is hopeful that she will still be able to study a Science degree. With a



very focused and disciplined approach to study at home and at school, Jo is finding the isolation from her peers disconcerting. It makes it more difficult to have the type of academically challenging conversations she would have with her friends. Kate is mindful of this and it gives her insight into what her students are perhaps going through. Having a structure to everything, including the online learning, would be key.

In this fictional case study, we can see that Kate, perhaps drawing on her experiences with her daughter, is trying to find ways in which the students can maintain the sense of community they had at school, when they were physically present to each other. The Mission and Identity Directorate in the meantime rearranged their internal staffing to have as many expert teachers in Studies of Religion working on the development of key resources that would support the teachers and allow the students to meet the requirements of the syllabus and thus be prepared for their exams in November. The resources are designed to support teachers such as Kate who has seen her work increase tremendously, as the school transitions from face-to-face learning to online learning.

Anecdotally, in conversations I had with teachers and parents from Australia, Canada and New Zealand via the Twitter platform, some key themes surfaced. Discussions around mental health and well-being of students emerged as a concern, yet it was also noted that students can potentially be more collaborative in the virtual environment, as they seek to build a virtual learning community for themselves. In this regard, student voice and democracy in the virtual classroom was named as a way forward. There was concern expressed for the 'cope-ability' of younger students, especially infants, in the virtual learning environment. The other theme that emerged was for educational authorities and schools to give serious consideration to what assessment and authentic learning looks like in this virtual space. From the lens of religious leadership, it could also be suggested that an authentic online life amongst peers may be worthy of further exploration.

More than ever the religious leadership referenced in the SCSLF is important. Why? The students have a real opportunity to form a virtual community of students that share a common religious tradition and spirituality. The ability to take time to meditate and to be in touch with their own inner life could well sustain their own adaptive self throughout a year of upheaval and change. COVID-19 serves to remind everyone that life is sacred and worth caring about and that our own personal development and the development of others around us is an important growth point for students, teachers and parents.

What is absolutely essential, especially in the context of religious leadership, is the need for students to have hope. Neuroscience researcher and educator, Dr Eric Jensen, highlights the importance of hope and optimism to success.

How much hope and optimism your kids feel at school is more important for boosting achievement than IQ or overall talent. Without the everyday feeling of hope, every other strategy you use at your school will fall flat. (Jensen 2011: 6)

This would suggest that during the pandemic, online learning needs to touch base from time to time with hope. This potentially addresses the anecdotal concerns around student mental health and well-being that some teachers and parents raised with this author. Hope also comes in the knowledge by students that assessments are still doable and marks achievable. It also allows the opportunity for assessments to be grounded in the real-world, or classified as authentic. This may also lead to collaborative work and collaborative assessment occurring in the virtual classroom.

Gibson and Barr (2013) found that a sense of optimism and hope is created through the creation of certain conditions in the physical classroom.

- A welcoming environment
- An atmosphere of respect and safety
- An emphasis on success
- Communitywide celebrations
- An emphasis on the positive
- High expectations
- Coordination of community services. (p. 46)

The Gibson and Barr research echoes the thoughts of the teachers and parents that spoke with me anecdotally over Twitter, and even conversations with my colleagues in Sydney Catholic Schools. Catholic schools, as no doubt every school does, want students to be safe and engaged with their learning in a respectful environment that celebrates achievements, has high expectations and can accentuate the positives, whilst building a vibrant community of learners and of faith. It does however require practice, and most likely professional development, for teachers to engage with the students using authentic e-learning pedagogies. To expect teachers across the country to move into an exclusively online learning environment, in some cases over the course of a weekend, is a big ask and does a disservice to the teachers and the students. Over time, systems will need to ensure the continuation of this type of professional development, if e-learning is to become more mainstream. Systems like Sydney Catholic Schools, that have maintained a focus on this aspect of teacher development, will find this transition relatively easy. In the Religious Education space, Sydney Catholic Schools has experts in e-learning within Religious Education, supporting teachers in the online classroom as they share with their students the academic and the faith dimension of their studies.

The work from 2009 in the eLearning space has enabled Sydney Catholic Schools to refine the use of online learning and blended learning to a point where the conditions outlined by Gibson and Barr could be captured in an online learning environment via staff in a Catholic systemic school in Sydney, especially the teachers in the secondary schools where much of the Professional Development has been concentrated.

## Conclusion

If nothing else, the SCSLF encouraged those leaders that could, to take a 'back-seat' to the teachers on the front-line, and provide them with as much support as possible to do their work. It was leadership that unleashed the initiative and capacity of the teachers delivering Catholic education exclusively in a virtual world. The framework appears to have provided the agility needed to respond in a respectful, timely and agile manner. In the process there will always be a need to take the time to reflect on what was done well and what could be improved. As agile as we are, if a vaccine is not found soon, we could be revisiting this scenario again later this year and perhaps even the next. Through the lenses of the SCSLF, especially the Religious lens, Sydney Catholic Schools is preparing our students for an unknown and uncertain future.

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# Crisis Leadership: A Critical Examination of Educational Leadership in Higher Education in the Midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic

**Jason Marshall, Darcia Roache and Rasheda Moody-Marshall**

**Abstract:** *The hallmark of a great leader is courageous leadership during a crisis. COVID-19 plunged educational leaders into an unprecedented calamity. The situation required strong, decisive, and courageous leadership. Worldwide, universities decided to take the classroom online to facilitate emergency remote teaching. For many educational leaders, this was uncharted territory. Apart from the ambiguity surrounding COVID-19, higher educational leaders were confronted with the magnified issues of equity, access to technology, teacher training, resources, financing, and the well-being of students and staff. This conceptual paper will critically examine how educational leaders managed the initial phase of the COVID-crisis in Barbados and Canada. We will emphasise the leadership strategies that were used to address myriad challenges that emerged during this time. The authors will also examine the lessons learnt and important implications for education leaders on how to lead during a crisis.*

**Keywords:** Crisis leadership, educational leadership, COVID-19 pandemic, leadership, technology, remote teaching

## Introduction

Education has changed! The year 2020 brought great expectations for teaching and learning. Many people ushered in the New Year with excitement about what the new decade would bring. Globally, educational leaders were projecting various departmental improvements. However, this zealous anticipation was brought to a sudden halt by something that few could have predicted – the emergence of a new pandemic, COVID-19.

In a concerted effort to contain the spread of the virus, leaders from various sectors had to make tough decisions: businesses were closed, employees were laid off, projects were left

incomplete, among many other drastic changes. Yet, amidst this chaos and uncertainty, and in the face of this life-threatening virus, education was expected to continue, albeit in a virtual modality. According to Yukl and Mahsud (2010), managing this crisis and keeping education buoyed in these challenging times requires strong, astute, adaptive, and innovative educational leadership.

As people across the globe acclimatise to a new virtual world, many would assume that it may be easier for educational leaders to deal with this transition as they simply must get their staff to teach online and students to access their classes virtually (Bilyalova, Salimova & Zelenina 2020). The reality is that it is not that simple. Digital transformation takes time. In fact, COVID-19 further exposed myriad educational issues that existed pre-COVID. Issues of equity, access, teacher training, and infusion of technology are just a few examples of what educational leaders are grappling with (Aksyukhin, Vyzen, & Maksheneva 2009), but this situation is different, very different. Educational leaders must address these issues during a pandemic that gave them no time to prepare.

While this pandemic has affected education in all countries across the world, this conceptual paper will take a comparative look at leadership in Higher Education Institutions in Barbados and Canada during the onset of the virus. The two countries provide the opportunity to comparatively analyse the response of educational leaders in two distinct cultures and educational contexts. We use a critical lens to consider educational leadership in these countries during the COVID-19 crisis. We will not only examine the plethora of educational issues that have come to the spotlight because of COVID-19, but we will also explore the type of crisis leadership skills that educational leaders need to practice to effectively address these issues (Leadbeater & Wong 2010).

## **Educational Leadership During the COVID-19 Crisis: The Cases of Barbados and Canada**

The high degree of uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding COVID-19 challenged higher educational leaders in both Barbados and Canada with pressing questions and tough decisions. Questions such as: How would university continue? What strategies would be used to teach? When would in-person teaching resume? How would issues of equity and access be addressed? The leadership response to many of these questions during the crisis will be discussed throughout this paper.

With the arrival of COVID-19 in Barbados and Canada, teaching at all levels was brought to a screeching halt for almost an entire month. Educational leaders had to plan and strategise how they would continue the semester. The reality is that some educational leaders were unprepared for the immediate transition to online teaching; this was uncharted territory. They needed time to develop effective strategies; this time was limited.

In Barbados and Canada, the action of educational leaders was decisive. On notification of the first cases of COVID-19, the leadership teams at the universities took the immediate

decision to suspend in-person teaching and begin the transition to emergency online teaching. During the lockdown period, strategic planning was implemented prioritising thorough preparation for online delivery and assessment (Loriggio 2020). Various subcommittees were established (including health committees) to assist with managing the crisis.

Higher education systems continue to be impacted by the pandemic as learners and educators seek refuge in ‘online webinars, instructional videos, live learning experiences, and free resources for teachers, parents and students’ (Osmond-Johnson, Campbell & Pollock 2020: 1). While this approach is acceptable, Barbadian and Canadian universities encountered problems such as training of some faculty and students to navigate the online environment, Wi-Fi access in some rural areas, transitioning to online classes, and financial challenges.

To facilitate this transition, training sessions were organised for students and staff to prepare them to navigate this new virtual modality of teaching. They were exposed to training in synchronous and asynchronous online modes such as Blackboard Collaborate and eLearning. In addition, structures were put in place to ensure that students were effectively assessed online without compromising the integrity of the examination process. Students were also given the option to defer their courses without fear of academic or financial penalty. Despite these initiatives by universities (in Barbados and Canada), students are rethinking their enrolment due to the monetary impact of the pandemic, as well as concerns over limited support and the comparative quality of remote learning (Loriggio 2020).

## **Evidence of Crisis Leadership in Barbados and Canada**

The above initiatives and challenges call for a critical examination of educational leadership in times of crisis. This view is supported by Gurr and Drysdale (2020) who stated that:

As teachers at all levels are being asked to use technologies to provide remote learning experiences, we have been drawn to consider how leadership can help prepare educational organisations to respond well to unanticipated future events in the short and long-term. (p. 24)

COVID-19 compelled higher education leaders in Barbados and Canada to implement drastic changes in the teaching-learning process. Perhaps, more importantly, how the immediacy of this change is managed will reflect the quality of leadership during this crisis in both countries. There are certain leadership traits and practices that are more effective during times of uncertainty. On examination of the decisive decisions made by educational leaders in Barbados and Canada, we see these traits and practices in action. We will examine four key leadership behaviours that are critical during a crisis that were also exhibited by educational leaders in Barbados and Canada; these include:

1. Providing clear direction
2. Communicating effectively

3. Working collaboratively
4. Engaging in adaptive leadership

## Providing Clear Direction

In times of crisis, a vision is needed. Stakeholders feel reassured when their leaders have an effective plan to manage and navigate a crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, students, teachers and other stakeholders were searching for direction. When would classes recommence? How would classes recommence? Will student and faculty safety be prioritised? These were the primary questions that educational leaders in Barbados and Canada had to address. With the physical closure of universities, innovative strategies had to be implemented to reach both students and faculty. To facilitate the continuation of education, a clear direction had to be established.

Gurr and Drysdale (2020) state that setting direction is an important leadership quality in which strategic risk taking is placed at the forefront. When we examine this in the context of COVID-19, it is recognised that educational leaders from Barbados and Canada took strategic risks. For example, emergency remote teaching meant that these leaders took the risk of possibly leaving students behind who had issues with technological access and competency. However, it was evident that educational leaders in both countries pre-empted these risks by implementing effective strategies to accommodate students who fell into these categories as issues of equity arose. This was clear from the number of accommodations made for students (e.g. additional time to complete assessments and the removal of academic penalty in the event of student failure). Overall, the decisions made were strategic and in the best interest of all stakeholders affected by the virus.

It is important to note that for leaders to set a clear direction, they must engage in sense making. This involves the ability to make sense of confusing situations (Gurr & Drysdale 2020). Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, not only do educational leaders have to grapple with educational uncertainties but also the conflicting information about the spread of the virus and methods of protection. This added a layer of complexity to the decision-making process that they had to navigate. What is clear in both Barbados and Canada in many cases is that educational leaders acted carefully and decisively even with ambiguity surrounding the nature of the virus. This decisiveness along with their clarity and efficiency in communication enabled them to address myriad challenges effectively.

## Communicating Effectively

Effective communication is imperative during a crisis. Crises increase the demand on leaders and cause their role(s) to become more complex, expansive, and time-sensitive (Jahagirdar, Chatterjee, Behera & Mohapatra 2020: 81). It also makes effective communication more challenging to accomplish in chaotic periods. Despite the complexity and uncertainty associated with crises, leaders should communicate clearly during challenging situations.

This is one way in which they acquire the support for their vision and the direction that they have set, especially in capricious environments. With reference to the COVID-19 pandemic, at a higher education institution in Barbados, leaders made a concerted effort to communicate with stakeholders frequently. There were several e-mails and meetings with staff and student representatives to keep stakeholders abreast of and involved in the direction that the university set out for the recommencement and continuation of classes.

This reinforces the importance of frequent and transparent communication; it is key to providing reassurance and a degree of comfort to stakeholders during periods of ambiguity and heightened anxiety. During turbulent times, communication must be clear and timely. This approach garners respect and support for leaders and fosters a sense of comfort among stakeholders that every effort is being made to manage the situation effectively. More importantly, it sends the message that they are valued.

## **Working Collaboratively**

Leadership should seldom be a lonely endeavour. Leaders need to take a collaborative approach to leading during crises. This viewpoint is supported by Fernandez and Shaw (2020) who state that 'academic leaders should distribute leadership responsibilities to a network of teams throughout the organisation to improve the quality of the decisions made in crisis resolution' (p. 1). In Barbados and Canada, this collaborative approach was evident, especially with the numerous committees that were established to tackle the diverse issues that emerged given the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is through collaboration in a crisis that leaders can tap into the varied strengths and expertise among their team members to help guide effective decision making. What is sufficiently evident from the Barbadian and Canadian educational response to COVID-19 was that, through collaboration, educational leaders were adaptive in their approach to leadership and addressing the challenges that arose.

## **Engaging in Adaptive Leadership**

The reality that COVID-19 has thrust upon us is that unplanned change and unpredictability make us vulnerable and, in many cases, creates a great sense of discomfort, unease, and dissonance (Fernandez & Shaw 2020). Therefore, the fluidity and uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 virus necessitates a leadership approach that is malleable. Educational leaders need to be prepared to abort and modify plans with immediacy if required. They must be willing to embrace unpredictability and have the foresight to pre-empt issues before they arise and be prepared to implement contingency plans if required.

Reluctance to change and firmly holding on to tradition (e.g. solely delivering classes in-person) can thwart the advancement that education so desperately requires, and that the pandemic has provided us with the opportunity to achieve. More importantly, in the context of COVID-19, it can cost lives and livelihoods. The planning, the safety measures



implemented, and the adjustments made at higher education institutions in Barbados and Canada reflect the concerted effort of their senior leadership team to be adaptive while trying to carefully navigate the sensitive issue of lives and livelihoods as education forges forward in the midst of this pandemic. As higher institutions continue to grapple with what some have coined the 'new normal', this adaptive approach to leadership will need to be at the forefront of decision making.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Considering the common challenges that higher education leaders must navigate during the COVID-19 pandemic, several recommendations are put forward in this section.

First, when faced with complex situations, leaders must encourage all affected stakeholders to embrace change. More importantly, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, educational leaders must convey the message that 'a culture of change consists of great rapidity and non-linearity, on the one hand, and equally great potential for creative break-throughs on the other. The paradox is that transformation would not be possible without accompanying messiness' (Fullan 2007: 169).

During this time of uncertainty, educational leaders may feel bombarded by numerous questions, comments, and criticisms from students, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders about various concerns such as their health, new methods of instruction, and their finances. This is a normal expectation because there has been a change in the modes of operation related to teaching and learning; most people were not ready for this shift. Within this context, effective leaders remind everyone that the constant threats they face each day should be overshadowed by 'determination, solidarity, strength, shared purpose, humanity, kindness, and resilience' (Koehn 2020: para. 6).

Aligned with the sentiments above, the next step is to establish a sense of urgency and create a guiding coalition – a group of individuals who represent the stakeholders (Kotter 2014). It is important that the group discusses and develops a vision inspired by the current anxiety and confusion that everyone may be experiencing, but to keep in mind that 'the best way to "manage" change is to allow for it to happen' (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand & Lampel 1998: 324). The leaders and their teams must acknowledge the fears among everyone and move forward by encouraging resolve and resilience (Koehn 2020).

The new vision can then be used to develop a needs assessment guide to diagnose the impact of the challenges within the specific context. The findings can be used to generate strategic goals, objectives, and next steps. Understandably, to implement the new strategies successfully, the people involved must feel included at all levels. 'It is critically important to emphasise the key role that each person involved in the operation plays' (Koehn 2020: para. 12), therefore, everyone must be informed, trained and well-equipped for expected tasks.

Effective leaders confront challenges with confidence and collaboration. COVID-19 has caused a great degree of uncertainty especially in relation to the reopening of schools for

in-person teaching. Faced with this challenge, educational leaders should constantly reflect on the fact that these processes and experiences are not linear; change, especially when forced by a crisis, is very complicated. Strong leaders successfully navigate crises by quickly getting comfortable with ambiguity, by committing themselves and others through the turbulence, adjusting, and improvising as situations change and new information emerges (Koehn 2020).

Accordingly, as education leaders across the world grapple with the new logistics and protocols required for the reopening of schools, they must get comfortable with the fact that mistakes are inevitable, and they will need to be resilient. This will require 'a mind-set and action set that are constantly cultivated and refined' (Fullan 20017: 171), innovatively and in a timely fashion.

In the preparation and the management of the re-opening of schools, educational leaders in Barbados, Canada, and beyond must apply the principles of effective leadership. They will need to provide clear direction, work collaboratively, communicate effectively, and be adaptive in their approach to addressing new issues as they arise. Their leadership will continue to be tested during these uncertain times, but its success and part of their educational legacies will be determined by how well they navigate this crisis.

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# School Leaders' Work During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Two-Pronged Approach

**Katina Pollock**

**Abstract:** *The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the nature of school principals' work. Today, principals are expected to be exceptional managers and excellent leaders in a time where the pace of change has increased exponentially. Preliminary data suggest that principals in Ontario, Canada are pivoting their work: They are engaging in a two-pronged approach to lead public schools during the pandemic crisis. They are extending their roles around (a) safe schooling and setting the context for future schooling while (b) simultaneously extending their role of instructional leader to digital instructional leader. This paper, informed by preliminary focus group data, poses thought-provoking questions that principals are wrestling with in their practice around creating conditions for students to learn and teachers to teach, while at the same time seeking out new ways to support online learning and the operations of public schooling through what they call 'extensive digital instructional leadership'.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, school principal, safe schools, digital instructional leadership, virtual schooling, equitable access

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered school principals' work across the globe. In Canada, the impact on principals' work depends on where their school is located: Each province/territory is responsible for their own public education and as such there is no national Canadian education system (Pollock & Hauseman 2015). Presently, provincial and territorial governments are working to ensure public school systems continue to function; throughout Canada, these governments have explored several options with varied start dates. For example, in June 2020, the province of Ontario announced that, depending on the public health situation, it was exploring three possible scenarios to reopen schools in September 2020: (a) normal school day routine with enhanced public health protocols but regular class sizes; (b) modified school day routines with an adapted delivery model, including smaller

class sizes and potentially alternate day or week delivery; and (c) at home learning, which would include remote/synchronous learning (Ontario Ministry of Education 2020).

Each of these potential scenarios will require a different approach to school delivery. Today, principals are expected to be exceptional managers and excellent leaders in a time where the pace of change appears to have increased exponentially (Pollock & Wang 2019, 2020; Wang & Pollock 2020). Principals and other educators are now considered the ‘other first responders’ (Osmond-Johnson, Campbell & Pollock 2020) in this current pandemic. School leaders are now expected to not only draw on their current skills and knowledge to meet the challenge of schooling students during the pandemic, but to also do so while developing new knowledges and skills and pivoting some of their current roles.

The need for new knowledges and skills arises from several factors, with the two most prevalent being the unknown nature of the SARS-CoV-2 and the need to consider alternative ways to successfully educate students amidst this outbreak—both requiring principals to carry out their role in different ways. To better understand the impact of COVID-19 on the work of school principals, we conducted a virtual pilot with 17 Ontario principals as part of our federally funded study on principals’ work. Preliminary data from this virtual pilot focus group suggest they are engaging in a two-pronged approach to lead public schools during the pandemic crisis. They are extending their roles around (a) safe schooling and setting the context for future schooling while (b) simultaneously extending their role to include being a digital instructional leader. This paper, informed by the aforementioned preliminary data, is intended to pose thought-provoking questions and considerations that Ontario—and, undoubtedly, global—principals are wrestling with in their practice around creating conditions for students to learn and teachers to teach while at the same time seeking out new ways to support online learning and the operations of public schooling through what they call ‘extensive digital leadership’.

## **Prong I: Safe Schooling and Future Schooling**

Ontario school principals’ duties include being legally responsible for the health and safety of all students. Jurisdictions expect principals to connect with representatives from other government agencies in an effort to better meet student needs or provide student support services. Principals are also expected to report any child welfare concerns to their superintendent and appropriate government officials and to notify the appropriate authorities of any outbreaks of infectious or contagious diseases (Pollock & Hauseman 2015). Building on their existing responsibilities for a safe and healthy school, principals now must also develop a comprehensive understanding of COVID-19, including causes, symptoms, public health protocols, and preventions. They also need to do so in a media environment permeated with misinformation, in which they must sort and filter information to find the most up-to-date and accurate information as new details about the disease are discovered rapidly. Principals, along with teachers, are now part of the public health effort to prevent the

spread of disease and they will do so within very different local contexts. What will this mean for schooling in the near to immediate future? Collateral issues will also influence principals' work: lockdowns, quarantines, self-isolation, physical distancing, and economic turmoil have also presented other health and safety issues for students, parents, teachers and school principals themselves that impact public schooling. What will principals face during the various phases of schooling over the coming months? These questions can fall into several categories: prevention, intervention, and the health and well-being of students, staff, and principals themselves.

### **Prevention**

When we think of prevention, we think about stopping something before it happens. During the COVID-19 pandemic, principals are being tasked with trying to prevent the spread of the coronavirus among their student and staff populations. Prevention concerns centre around physical aspects of schooling and the practices that need to be introduced ahead of time. Considerations associated with physical aspects of schooling can include how best to use physical space for physical distancing, whether or not to use plexiglass on each desk, the cost of installing hand sanitizer dispensaries in each classroom, whether or not to provide masks for individual students and how to dispose of them, and the cost of and risk associated with hiring of additional custodial staff—to name a few.

Preventative school preparation will be futile, however, if modifications to school delivery and practices are not introduced before schooling begins. One way to communicate preventative practices is through curriculum modifications that specifically target infection prevention. Principals may need to consider how professional development around these curriculum additions will be delivered, and by whom. Organizationally, will schools run in shifts? Will there be recess, and, if so, will it also be staggered? Principals will have to consider how applied courses with tactile experiments and limited resources will take place. All these considerations will impact the bottom line and principals will be faced with new budgetary decisions and considerations.

### **Intervention**

Inevitably, preventative planning can only go so far as it is impossible to control the behaviour and practices of all students and staff inside and outside the school premises. For this reason, interventions need to be in place for schools to continue to function. Principals will need to ensure that there are effective communication processes in place. There will need to be new explicit protocols and communication strategies not only with parents and the local communities but also with public health authorities to relay information about infection and subsequent procedures enacted to contain the spread. Implementing interventions means hot spots and clusters have popped up in local schools and communities; principals will need to think about temporary school closures while learning continues. What impact will future

school closures have on student learning, especially for students who are already struggling with engagement?

### **Health and Well-Being of Students, Staff, and Self**

With a slowed economy and increased job loss, many families are struggling. In this environment, principals will need to consider the emotional and social well-being of their students. The pandemic is having a psychological impact alongside the physical symptoms for all those affected (Zhou et al. 2020). The emotional consequences of the pandemic vary from students being anxious about catching the virus, to students experiencing loss of loved ones, to others whose families are struggling financially because of the economic fall. All of which can have an impact on students' capacity and will to learn. The well-being of teaching staff and paraprofessionals associated with the school is also a concern as many face health, family, and financial issues related to the virus.

Principals' own wellness while leading through the pandemic must also be a consideration. Pre-pandemic, school leaders across the globe were experiencing work intensification (Pollock & Wang 2019, 2020; Riley 2019; Wang & Pollock 2020). How the stress of leading and managing schools through a pandemic will influence principals' wellness remains to be seen, but chances are the consequences of school closures and reopening—and, in some cases, re-closure—will do little to ease work intensification or principals' stress and burnout.

## **Prong 2: Digital Instructional Leadership**

Pre-pandemic, principals' leadership was influenced by several factors, such as local context, policy, and program reform. Although these factors continue to exist today, changes in the structure of schooling during the pandemic have turned principals' attention to online learning and leading schools virtually. It should be noted that although online, virtual schools and networks of schools existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Gurr 2006), employees were hired specifically to work within these online, virtual contexts. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools and school systems have engaged in virtual, online learning to varying degrees, and in the majority of these cases few educators or students had any control over the delivery of virtual public education. Essentially, entire school systems abruptly converted to some form of virtual or distance education with many educators and leaders given next to no preparation. This abrupt structural change poses many questions about leading and supporting learning in a digital/virtual/online work environment.

### **Supporting Online Learning**

Pre-pandemic, there was substantial investigation in the use of information communication technology (ICT)/Advanced communication technology (ACT) in principals' work (Gurr 2000; Lanctôt & Duxbury 2017; Pollock & Hauseman 2018). The use of ICT/ACT and social media has grown exponentially now that schools are physically closed, and learning has been

moved to virtual engagement. What is the most appropriate way to deliver schooling online? As instructional leaders, principals are responsible for supporting and ensuring that effective pedagogical practices and successful student learning happen. Now they are to do this using technological media supported by web applications and platforms. In this rapid process, teachers in some jurisdictions are being asked to deliver learning programs online. Online teaching and learning is not merely taking a face-to-face program and delivering it via a web-based conference platform (Ben Jaafar 2020). Considerations for students include the hardware and software issues (e.g. WiFi accessibility, learning devices such as tablets, laptops and smartphones) and also the skills required to navigate software and new knowledge on how to interact on such platforms. These considerations are also not exclusive to students but also include teachers and school principals themselves as well.

Key findings from a recent National Association of Elementary School Principal survey about the COVID-19 pandemic (NAESP 2020) reported that scaling up education technology was a concern for principals, with 82 percent of respondents indicating that they were unsure how their district plans to scale up education technology to deliver curriculum and instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. School principals also raised concerns about creating equitable learning opportunities for all students. These concerns included internet access at home; access to learning devices such as laptops, tablets, and smartphones; and limited instructional capacity for online learning, to name a few. These concerns, although US-based, were also echoed in the recent virtual pilot focus group with Ontario principals.

### ***Leading and Managing Virtual Schools***

Pre-pandemic, there were emerging academic debates around whether or not leading in a virtual world used the same practices with altered communication skills or if it required different approaches to leadership (Gurr 2006; Pulley & Sessa 2001; Pulley, Sessa & Malloy 2002). Preliminary findings from the Ontario virtual pilot group indicate that although many principals are engaging in similar leadership practices, how they go about it and the nature of this work has changed. When asked if their work had changed, the majority indicated that their work has pivoted: the priority list has slightly altered and, in terms of time allocation, what they spend their work time on has shifted. In terms of managing their work, principals will need to think about which shareable document platforms should be used and the complexities surrounding their use (e.g. ease of use, data protection, etc.).

When thinking about leading virtual schools, principals in the virtual pilot sessions stated that their role had also pivoted to concentrating on supporting educators, students, and parents in transitioning to a different way of schooling. This supporting role also included being an active information mobilizer and policy interpreter as new rules and regulations were at one point being released on a daily basis with little to no warning. In a virtual world, school principals need to consider matters such as managing the physical distance between school members, establishing effective communication strategies, motivating staff, and establishing trust (DasGupta 2011).



## **Proactively Reducing Issues of Access**

The pandemic does not exist in a silo. The pandemic has brought many of the unresolved inequities in our public education systems (and society in general) to the forefront. Principals indicated in the virtual focus group session that they were concerned about how pre-existing inequities were being exacerbated and new issues were arising around access to quality education for students and parents. For example, some students do not possess the technology to participate in online learning. Others may have the technology, but where they live does not have accessible WiFi. Still others may have the necessary requirements but not the physical space that is conducive to active learning. Other students may be disproportionately affected by COVID-19 because family members are essential workers, or because they have ill family members, or a myriad of complex factors that influence their ability to learn during the pandemic. Principals are being asked to help address these issues.

## **Conclusion**

The pandemic has provided an opportunity for a global case study that responds to the question Avolio and Dodge (2000) identified two decades ago: 'The question is not whether to study e-leadership but where to start' (p. 633). Studying e-leadership during a pandemic will require researchers to consider: 'What conditions need to be in place for students to learn and for teachers to teach, and how will leaders across the system adapt to support these conditions?' (Osmond-Johnson et al. 2020: n.p.), but more importantly we as education researchers can also take this opportunity to think outside the box and consider how this might be a unique chance to change public education to create more equitable school systems in the long term. In closing, a good place to start is to consider two crucial questions that Netolecky (2020) posed:

1. What is it that we've missed that we want to bring back into schooling and education?
2. What is it that has been removed that we do not want to return to?

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# Leading in the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in England During a Pandemic: Reality, Relationships and Ruminations

**Lewis Fogarty**

**Abstract:** *Leading in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in England has been challenging for many years, before this pandemic and associated struggle. The sector has battled synchronous funding shortfalls and increased expectations from central and local government, as well as from parents. Leaders are therefore faced with the complex challenge of leading a team of individuals through this new reality that threatens to exacerbate pre-existing difficulties. I propose that leaders in ECEC, and beyond, can embrace a specific framework when navigating this reality. Through forming reassuring relationships, communicating clearly and inspiring continuous curiosity, all within an enabling environment, leaders can create the right balance between pedagogical and entrepreneurial leadership and encourage a focus on both education and care in their settings. This is important for all stakeholders now more than ever.*

**Keywords:** Pedagogical leadership, entrepreneurial leadership, early childhood

## Introduction

This paper is written by a leader in education, for leaders of education, drawing on recent literature and a range of experiences of the reality of leading in the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector during a pandemic. This sector has already been weakened as a result of a perpetuating hostile policy context in England (Hoskins, Bradbury & Fogarty 2020), contributing to a myriad of issues facing leaders on a daily basis. After discussing these, some challenges for leaders caused by the pandemic will be discussed in relation to ECEC, followed by a framework that has enabled me to maintain positive and productive relationships with my team and families throughout. This has provided encouraging signs for the sustainability of my provision. This paper will conclude with some reflections and ruminations on this

framework and how it could be adopted by leaders across the educational sector, to not only survive but thrive, as we begin the gradual global return to the new normal.

## **ECEC in England**

The ECEC sector in England is unlike most comparable sectors in developed countries. The government in England has continued to nurture and stimulate a childcare market, providing education and care for 0-5-year-olds, for more than 20 years. This market has been stimulated through a range of policy initiatives that have largely focused on increasing access to ECEC for more disadvantaged children (Lewis & West 2017). In the past, there have been other policies stimulating a focus for leaders to raise the quality of provision. Whilst this was a welcomed development from the previous narrow focus on quantity of places, often at the expense of quality, it has contributed to the continued tensions around the purpose of, and pedagogy in, ECEC provisions. Alongside this, there is a maintained part of the sector relying solely on government funds, typically providing education and care disproportionately located in areas of deprivation, and referred to as the 'jewel in the crown' of the sector (Hoskins et al. 2020).

## **Challenges for Leaders in ECEC in England**

With this in mind, leaders in ECEC in England are faced with many ongoing challenges, several of which will be considered now. Firstly, there is high staff turnover, which is often attributed to the lack of qualifications, low pay and poor benefits for those working in ECEC (Nutbrown 2012). This is part of a wider issue of a lack of professionalism in the sector. Secondly, there is an uneven playing field fuelled by flawed funding and regulatory frameworks. West and Noden (2019) offer a thorough overview of the historical funding processes in England to date. They show that over the past 25 years, the government in England has made continuous tweaks and adjustments in order to provide more funded places for children in ECEC provisions. The caveat here though is that this rate of funding is not commensurate with the costs associated with providing this provision, and other sources of funding are also under threat from government inertia (Powell 2019). This is an alarming fact that is yet to be addressed in government policy, despite recent literature highlighting these concerns (Hoskins et al. 2020). Regulatory frameworks, operated mostly by OFSTED in England, have been similarly criticised for their lack of parity and sustainability. There have been consistently different expectations on different providers, in terms of ratio requirements and staff qualifications amongst other elements (West 2006), despite accessing the same funding rate through schemes outlined previously.

There are also competing discourses of play and school readiness as the suggested focus of pedagogical activity in provisions and the two have been largely considered incommensurable (Kagan & Lowenstein 2004). Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury (2016) capture part of this by saying that school readiness is a focus on preparation for adult life as potential

human capital, as part of a global education race that starts in pre-school. In contrast, there is strong evidence highlighting the importance of play and advocating for more play in ECEC (Palaiologou, 2017). Rogers and Lapping (2012) suggest that policy documents' construction of play is erroneous and has a too narrow focus on being ready for their next stage of education, sacrificing essential time for young children to play. Consequently, leaders are left with a dichotomy to navigate, considering the regulatory ramifications of not heeding to the school readiness agenda which is rife in policy documents and often in-line with parental expectations. Ultimately working against the innate desire and need for children to be given abundant time and freedom to engage in self-directed play.

Consequently, there is confusion throughout the sector about what they should be doing and how they should be doing it, leading to a range of inconsistencies. The funding shortfall, along with these other factors, has led to numbers of providers in the sector falling, most notably childminders and maintained provisions, two parts of the sector offering essential education and care for families who need it most (DfE 2019).

## **Responses to the Pandemic: Four Pillars of Pedagogy**

There was a mixture of ECEC responses to the pandemic across England. The government had a clear desire for places to remain available for 'key worker' children, although there was a lack of clarity around who were 'key workers' and the published government list was itself open to interpretation, as well as criticism. Consequently, some settings scrambled to seek out these children to be able to remain open, others decided to close their doors awaiting further information or indefinitely. Some, including my own provision, tried to adopt a hybrid of key worker care and learning packs for those at home, trying to maintain connections with our families as far as possible.

This new uncertain reality left many, already under funded and weakened providers, wondering if they would remain solvent. This was exacerbated further by a highly publicised government u-turn regarding essential funding for the sector. As reported in April by the Early Years Alliance (2020), the government backtracked at the last moment on their previous statements confirming that ECEC providers could access essential funding. The Early Years Alliance (2020) described this as 'a "kick in the teeth" for the sector and warning that it is likely to lead to nursery closures and threaten the long-term viability of the sector' (p. 1).

This combination of factors led many providers at the beginning of the pandemic, myself included, to move through a stage of panic, pause and pivot. The initial thought running through my mind was that of, how can I support my team and families if we cannot operate in a safe way and, ultimately, may be forced to close? There were no clear support measures in place by the government yet, and any information emerging was muddied by concerns over previous false statements and inconsistencies. When support was announced, through a range of schemes, it allowed me time to pause. I was therefore able to reflect and consider what matters most. This is, of course, the safety and happiness of the children in our care and

the staff that provide it. Then came the pivot, how do I adjust our structures and processes to support the staff and families in our care in a thoughtful way?

I remained grounded and focused during this troubling time by the approach embodied by my team and wider nursery community on a daily basis, the **four pillars of pedagogy**, which I will now turn to focus on. The four pillars of pedagogy are centred on the notion that education and care are needed, in equal measure, throughout education. This is founded on the idea that if students are not happy, they are not engaged, and if they are not engaged then they are not learning. With a more balanced focus adopted by educators, children and students of all ages can feel supported to be the best they can be, in the broadest possible sense.

Relationships are essential at all levels of education, between all stakeholders. Therefore, the **first pillar** is **reassuring relationships**. These relationships facilitate more shared understanding within teams and communities that lead to a more supportive and open environment. This was pivotal in the early days of the impending pandemic. Particularly when combined with the **second pillar, clear communication**. This applies to all communications and we have received excellent feedback for offering timely, concise and informative communications. These included a level of candour and empathy that conveyed genuine care and respect for our nursery community.

The communications between stakeholders often naturally lead to curiosity, an eagerness to learn more. This forms the basis of our **third pillar, continuous curiosity**. Being in isolation can impact on everyone differently, as we are in the same storm but in very different boats. This pillar has been particularly pertinent in the success of our response to this pandemic, as we have been able to stimulate a broad range of professional conversations around how we can use this time to develop ourselves and continue to develop the children. The nursery team has regularly been encouraged to learn new skills and try new activities, like one-to-one coaching through video call and reading a wider range of books. Alongside the more obvious benefits of professional development with these activities, there has been undoubtedly improvements in well-being through regular engagement and checking-in.

These three pillars together contribute to an **enabling environment**, which is the **fourth pillar** of pedagogy. Whilst everyone's environment is different during lockdown, technology can allow us to enter and improve our community's environment and this has been readily embraced in our nursery community. This is something we hope to continue to do beyond when we return to a sense of normality.

## Leadership Ideas

None of these pillars should seem radical to leaders and they should allow ample flexibility for them to encompass the nuances that exist across the diverse globalised education sector. However, by drawing on this framework, leaders can consider a broad range of elements to inform their leadership approach in such an unrepresented time. Most notably, this framework

promotes a broader sense of what educational leadership constitutes. For me, this is summarised in a balance between entrepreneurial leadership and pedagogical leadership.

Entrepreneurial leadership, is described by Campbell-Barr (2014) as an economic model that sees parents as purchasers, more aligned with business enterprise and financial priorities. In the context of a pandemic, this relates to concerns around sustainability of the organisation, marketing, communications with customers and ensuring resources are in place for reopening. That is not an exhaustive list, but it is easy to see how the four pillars of pedagogy are a useful framework to adopt to work through those concerns. For example, the entrepreneurial leader needs to be curious about what information to act on and which to filter out to their community. They also need to be aware of alternatives when it comes to marketing and purchasing avenues, particularly in light of many suppliers capitalising on the situation and inflating their prices.

Pedagogical leadership, can be defined in several different ways, but common features are captured by Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) who suggest it is being connected with effective communication and collaboration, and the development of children's learning. In the context of a pandemic, this relates to issues around ongoing education for children, working with families and other professionals, and ensuring regular developmental communication. Again, in this is not an exhaustive list and the benefits of referring to the four pillars of pedagogy are evident. For example, the reassuring relationships the team has with children have been, and will continue to be, essential to providing appropriate educational activities. Also, in order to collaborate effectively with others, rapport needs to have been established and communication needs to be clear. This will lead to a more enabling environment for children to learn in and for professionals and parents to collaborate within.

## Conclusion

The pedagogical and entrepreneurial elements of a leader's focus are inevitable, particularly in ECEC in England, where there is a competitive childcare market and a hostile policy context to navigate. Leaders also need to be able to articulate their purpose and pedagogical approach to parents and staff members and support its continuous implementation. The four pillars of pedagogy, successfully utilised by my nursery provision, may well support other leaders to have the confidence in the potential benefits of adopting this approach in their organisations too. Founded on the imperatives of education and care in equal measure, I hope it will result in a more realistic perspective of education and more secure relationships between all stakeholders. Ultimately it contributes to a more enabling environment, with engaged and happy children and students throughout education, two essential pre-requisites for learning and development.

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# COVID-19: What Have We Learned From Italy's Education System Lockdown?

**Claudio Girelli, Alessia Bevilacqua and Daniela Acquaro**

**Abstract:** *In what can only be described as one of the most unanticipated catastrophes to sweep through the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought nations to a standstill; none quite the same way as Italy, the world's first nation to succumb to the deadly virus outside China. Amidst the unfolding crisis, Italy's Ministry of Education immediately set up a taskforce to determine how it's 12 million students could continue to have access to education as the nation was forced into lockdown. Informed by the preliminary findings of two research projects across all levels of education, this paper documents the educational response that transformed Italy's education system as the nation quickly shifted to emergency remote teaching. The findings highlight the adjustments made at the time, the inequity experienced, and the complex contextual considerations that must be considered as the nation launches into a new scholastic year faced with the reality of coexisting with the virus.*

**Keywords:** Italy, emergency remote teaching, distance learning, e-learning, online teaching

## Italy's Swift Shift to Emergency Remote Teaching

February 2020 will be long remembered in Italy as the nation descended into panic and uncertainty becoming the epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic following China. The world watched on as Italy, once a thriving nation of 60 million people, bustling with tourists and commercial activity, went into full lockdown. With deaths surpassing 35,000 and confirmed cases close to 250,000, sadly, Italy did not have the benefit of hindsight nor the possibility to learn from other nations.

By the 4<sup>th</sup> of March, Italy was thrust into a complete national lockdown across all sectors, including the suspension of educational activities until the end of the scholastic year in June. For its 12 million students, COVID-19 hit in the middle of the scholastic year forcing early childhood, school and tertiary closures with little warning or preparation. At a national level, the Ministry of Education immediately developed guidelines for distance learning activities (MIUR 2020d) autonomously implemented by each educational setting based on the level of

schooling offered, its territorial context and the professional needs of its educators regarding the use of e-learning in teaching. The timing of school closures required swift decisive action by the Ministry of Education which committed one billion euros towards school upgrades and the employment of an additional 50,000 new teachers.

Access remained a significant issue across Italy with some students lacking the necessary Internet to engage in e-learning. Italy sits amongst the less advanced European countries in the Digital Economy and Society Index, with more than half of the country's population lacking basic digital skills (Guerrini 2020). To combat this, individual school districts created learning resources for students, making them accessible for parents to collect, or delivering them directly to students' homes in an attempt to continue teaching and learning where e-learning was not possible.

The nation was required to take a pragmatic approach to finalising student results given the sudden disruption to the school year. Substantial changes were introduced to the nation's usual practices (MIUR 2020d). For end-of-school assessments and evaluations, which would have otherwise taken place in June, elementary and junior high school teachers finalised results using predictive assessment measures, looking back on how students were progressing prior to the COVID-19 related disruptions. Additionally, they were asked to consider the activities carried out during the e-learning period and individual student learning needs, with a view not to penalise students but rather create individualised plans which would determine the learning focus for the new scholastic year to commence in September. For high stakes examinations for final year junior and upper secondary school students, the Ministry adjusted the structure of the proposed examinations either through a reduction or modification of exam questions, or changes to the composition of examination panels.

The Ministry of Education developed a National Education School Plan 2020-2021 (MIUR 2020d) for the resumption of the new school year in September. The plan stipulates teaching and learning guidelines for all early childhood centres, and elementary and secondary schools, outlining health measures to ensure the safety and wellbeing of students and educators. Particular emphasis has been placed on small group instruction, with special attention to early childhood settings (0-6) (MIUR 2020c) and to students with disabilities (MIUR 2020b), and a provision for distance learning in tandem with face-to-face learning for secondary school students if needed.

Throughout the school closures, many initiatives aimed at supporting remote learning have been promoted both at an institutional level (MIUR 2020a) and by private companies with the aim of supporting teachers and students through the development of teaching materials for online learning and the creation of learning management systems for the provision of online learning. Italy's universities have paid particular attention to the needs of its neighbouring educational settings providing necessary professional development to ensure the basics of e-learning. What has become clear in this sudden shift to distance learning is the difference

between online learning which is carefully developed and purposefully structured for online delivery as opposed to emergency remote teaching (ERT) which requires alternate delivery modes in a temporary shift of instructional delivery (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond 2020). In this sense, it is important to note that the pedagogy utilised in Italy throughout this period has not necessarily been reflective of online distance learning, but more about emergency remote teaching, as a result of limited preparation, knowledge and resourcing.

## **Educational Research During the Lockdown**

Throughout Italy's lockdown phase, various research projects were carried out in order to identify and understand the emergency remote didactic practices implemented in this period. Although the results are preliminary, findings from two researcher projects are reported below as they are noteworthy and can serve to inform other nations.

### **Didactics at the Time of COVID-19**

Research entitled *La didattica al tempo del Covid-19 (Didactics at the time of Covid-19)* (The Editors 2020; Mortari 2020), led by Professor Mortari, involving 955 early childhood, primary and secondary school educators in Verona, highlighted that distance learning was viewed by educators as an emergency solution in an unfolding crisis. Mortari and colleagues (Il Baco del Seta 2020) found that educators view face-to-face teaching and learning as indispensable and irreplaceable, and that effective teaching and the motivation to learn is seen to be fostered through a student teacher relationship lived in person. The lack of interpersonal contact during the emergency remote period, and the difficulties that this causes, is one of the most significant findings highlighted. Emergency remote teaching has allowed educators to continue to teach, offering children and young people an opportunity to meet, but it is not considered enough by teachers.

Further findings relate to how e-learning afforded teachers the opportunity to develop greater partnerships with parents and carers. Teachers took care to carefully and respectfully enter into the family home, with a constant but not intrusive online presence. Conversely, parents committed themselves to collaborate, reinforcing the school-family partnership necessary for successful teaching and learning.

The research also found that distance education led educators to rethink the profession, requiring them to reconceptualise their practice in a remote teaching environment. Many teachers have experimented with new teaching and learning tools designed to stimulate the involvement of students, as well as encourage a perception of closeness despite the distance. On the one hand, an absence of digital preparation has created significant challenges for educators required to shift to distance learning overnight. On the other hand, the compulsory move has forced upon educators the need to develop a new set of skills and capabilities which will no doubt enhance their practices into the future when face-to-face learning becomes possible again. Distance learning has also made it necessary to rethink assessment and

evaluation practices, which by and large have remained unchanged for decades, requiring elementary and secondary educators to assess students at the end of the scholastic year in numerical marks out of ten (from 0 to 10).

Furthermore, the research found that insufficient emphasis has been placed on the added pressure and workload faced by teachers in an already difficult social and emotional context. COVID-19 has increased teacher workload without sufficient professional development or resources to meet their needs. The increased workload, in addition to heightened bureaucratic requirements, has burdened teachers so that there have been complaints about their lack of the right to disconnect. For many teachers, working from home has obscured the work-life balance, with the demands of the job invading their private space and family life. Some teachers talked about the physical fatigue caused by the many hours spent in front of a computer screen, and for some, the initial enthusiasm gradually gave way to fatigue.

Findings also suggest that distance education has exacerbated and in some cases created challenges in terms of equity. The researchers suggest that there has been an increase in educational inequity resulting from the shift to emergency remote teaching which has made it particularly difficult for children with special educational needs, creating an even greater learning gap. Inequity was also further exacerbated by those who possess access to digital technologies and those who do not, and similarly, between those who are supported and those who are not supported by their families or carers.

Finally, the research identified that politics has also been perceived as too disconnected from reality with early childhood and school educators reporting that they have been subjected to top-down decision making with little understanding of the contextual difficulties, poor resourcing and insufficient professional development necessary to make teaching and learning truly effective in remote delivery. In addition, the lack of clarity of ministerial directives and the consequent increase of the sense of precariousness felt by Italian schools who do not receive government funding (but rely on fees) has translated into low morale and uncertainty about the future for educators.

## **Distance Didactics**

Research entitled *Didattica a Distanza – PRO DAD (Distance Didactics)* (Perla 2020) conducted by the Italian Association for the Promotion and Development of Teaching and Learning in Universities (ASDUNI) explored the experience of 720 Italian university academics nationally (Perla 2020). This research was carried out following university closures with a focus on didactic intervention and assessment. For Italy's tertiary educators, COVID-19 has created possibilities to engage with and adopt online resources as part of their teaching repertoire where this would not have otherwise been done. University educators redesigned or reshaped programme content into video lessons and shifted from teacher centred approaches to interactive online student centred modes of teaching and learning. Furthermore, the research found that they were engaging in problem solving, flipped

classroom delivery, case study analysis, simulations, role-playing and group work activities. The research found that whilst emergency remote teaching did not afford university educators the same control, communication, feedback or experience they had in a face-to-face classroom, it has created greater flexibility, and increased student attention, participation and interaction.

Additionally, educators reported an increase in their digital literacy, more focused planning, improved content sharing, and impetus to review materials and resources. Like early childhood and school educators, tertiary academics also expressed concern about digital access, student engagement and interaction, and the reduction of practical activities.

Furthermore, in terms of assessment, this research suggests that university educators were most concerned about academic integrity, reporting that it is impossible to verify student performance in a remote teaching mode. Educators also reported difficulties in relation to technological tools used in written tests, with only 10 percent of educators reporting the use of peer-to-peer and self-assessment.

## Priorities and Recommendations

The results of the research outlined above not only serve to document what transpired during Italy's education system lockdown, but more importantly to acquire data needed to support early childhood centres, schools and universities as they plan for the new academic year. The following provides a snapshot of priorities and recommendations:

**Face-to-face teaching and learning:** Priority must be placed on commencing the scholastic year in classrooms. To prevent ad hoc measures experienced during the emergency remote teaching period, educational settings must invest in necessary social distancing and hygiene measures to make this possible (D'Auria 2020).

**Complexity:** It cannot be assumed that the new scholastic year will bring about a return to what was considered 'normal'. The educational urgency experienced at this time requires transversal skills, interdisciplinary dialogues, greater emphasis on student and teacher 'voice', and high degrees of school autonomy to respond to the complex demographic needs of each educational setting (Guerra 2020).

**Experimentation:** A shift to emergency remote teaching forced educators to explore alternative online resources, many of which can continue to be utilised towards a new 'different' future in education (D'Ascenzo, 2020). Educational leaders and educators need to be visionary and broaden their gaze to think in creative ways and to make meaning for this new time (Guerra 2020).

**Assessment:** Throughout emergency remote teaching in Italy, assessment was particularly challenging, often resulting in subjective evaluations of the 'performance' of students, considered weak from a theoretical and methodological point of view. Assessment should instead be considered as a tool for regulating teaching and learning based on feedback, aimed

at giving form to teaching through judgements based on measurements, observations and analysis of processes and products (CRESPI 2020).

**Social geographical context:** The experience of COVID-19 highlighted the importance and centrality of educational settings. The Ministry of Education School Plan identifies a shift to lessons in public spaces, indoors or outdoors including theatres, cinemas, parks and museums to ameliorate the overcrowding experienced due to social distancing measures (Iori 2020). It is necessary for educational settings to have the autonomy to invest in territorial educational alliances involving various services to support students and educators (D'Auria 2020). This will require local administrators working with educational settings to find spaces in their local areas.

**Care:** Periods of crisis can give rise to new approaches in education, but we must ensure that new approaches must be underpinned by a philosophy of care primarily to ensure the safety of all but also ensure educational relevance. Any educational ministerial directives should consider both the economic and social needs of the country and the possible impacts on its students.

**Equity:** The shift to emergency remote teaching has highlighted educational inequity. The educational sector cannot respond with siloed disciplinary approaches but rather there needs to be a reframing of learning, focused on the individual learning needs of students through differentiated pathways (D'Auria 2020).

**Professional development:** In the face of this crisis, in-service teacher training has become essential to respond to the new teaching demands, and to support students and families with remote learning. Mortari (2020) suggests that careful planning and preparation is necessary if educators are to be prepared for further unexpected change. Understanding educators' professional needs and responding to these will ensure inclusive education for all.

## Conclusion

As Italy makes plans for the commencement of the new scholastic year, educators, students and parents wait anxiously to experience the Ministry's School Plan with a revised educational framework and health safeguards. Where educational settings were once charged with the primary function of 'education', they are now the centre of a divisive political debate which has many criticising the government's plans to reopen schools fearing this will lead to a class-based educational system between the 'haves' and 'have nots'. What is certain for Italy is that, unlike the events that unfolded in February rendering school and university buildings idle for over six months, the nation now has a research base from which to understand best practice as they embark on the next chapter of coexistence with COVID-19.

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# Out of Classroom Learning: A Brief Look at Kenya's COVID-19 Education Response Plan

**Peter Moyi**

**Abstract:** *The first COVID-19 case was reported in Kenya on March 13<sup>th</sup> 2020 and the cases have risen steadily and spread throughout the country. Like most countries, Kenya went into a lockdown; closing all schools and colleges. The abrupt closure of schools separated over 15 million primary and secondary school students from their teachers; this is the first time in Kenya that learning has been disrupted countrywide with schools closed until the beginning of 2021. To ensure minimal interruption to learning, the government developed and is in the process of implementing the Kenya Basic Education COVID-19 Emergency Response Plan. The aim of the plan is to (i) ensure continued learning for all students by expanding distance learning opportunities; (ii) produce online teaching materials; (iii) provide professional development opportunities for teachers; and (iv) provide psychosocial support to students and teachers. The government has been bullish about the success of the plan while education stakeholders have been sceptical of the plan and its efficacy. Teacher unions and the head teachers' associations are calling for wider consultation before the plan can be fully implemented.*

**Keywords:** Kenya, education, schools, policy implementation, COVID-19

## Introduction

The government of Kenya has for a long time been building the image of the country as Africa's digital hub. Kenya's Vision 2030 development plan has technology as one of its pillars including the Konza Smart City dubbed the 'silicon Savannah'. Kenya is a pioneer in mobile money transfer systems (M-Pesa), and crisis reporting through the Ushahidi platform that was developed to report the 2008 post-election violence, and it has one of the highest internet penetration rates on the continent (Statista 2020). The pandemic put Kenya's investment in technology and its image to the test.

The first COVID-19 case was reported in Kenya on March 13<sup>th</sup> 2020 and the cases have risen steadily and spread throughout the country. On March 16<sup>th</sup> 2020, the Kenyan government closed schools nationwide to curb the spread of COVID-19, disrupting learning for about 18.2

million pre-primary, primary and secondary school students (Government of Kenya 2020). This is the first time there has been nationwide closure of schools due to a crisis. In the past, schools in parts of the country have been temporarily closed due to fire, drought, floods, and ethnic and political violence. The COVID-19 crisis and the closure of schools happened as the government was dealing with two other crises, severe flooding and the swarms of desert locusts. The desert locust invasion has been described as the worst in 70 years (FAO 2020). The three challenges put a severe strain on the government's limited resources.

The 2010 Constitution of Kenya stipulates the right to education for all children in Kenya, hence the government moved forward with a plan to ensure that all children continued to receive instruction from home. Schools in Kenya not only offer instruction, but also provide safe spaces, health information, basic healthcare, and nutrition via school meals. Further, the government was concerned that the closure of the schools would 'exacerbate rates of child labour, sexual exploitation, pregnancies, early marriages and incidences of violence within their living environment' (Government of Kenya 2020: 1). These problems are likely to worsen for orphans, refugees, children from low income households, urban slums, rural areas and those with disabilities.

To ensure minimal interruption to learning, the government developed and implemented the *Kenya Basic Education COVID-19 Emergency Response Plan*. The government has been bullish about the success of the plan, while education stakeholders have been sceptical of the plan and its efficacy. Teacher unions and the head teachers' associations called for wider consultation before the plan is fully implemented. This is unfolding in the backdrop of the new constitution of Kenya that calls for more democratic decision making within the institutions of basic education, and the education sector as a whole. This paper briefly examines this plan and the education stakeholders' response to it. Is this an opportunity, as some stakeholders argue, to chart a new path for education in Kenya?

## **Policy and Politics in Kenyan Education**

Before we examine the plan and the response to it by education stakeholders, we need to briefly look at past policy development and implementation in Kenya. Researchers have found that political expediency has in the past superseded planning in the education sector (Amutabi 2003; Cooksey, Court & Makau 1994; Mugo, Moyo & Kiminza 2016; Nkinyangi 1982; Sifuna 1980; Somerset 2009). Amutabi (2003) argued that the politicisation of education policies has frequently undermined policy implementation in the education sector. For example, in 1985, under President Moi's leadership, Kenya introduced the 8-4-4 system of education (8 years of primary, 4 of secondary and 4 of university) despite critics highlighting its numerous flaws.

The COVID crisis brought to the fore another education policy that was also driven by political expediency, the one laptop per child policy. Back in 2013, the then Presidential candidate, Uhuru Kenyatta's key manifesto pledge was that all Class 1 pupils would receive

a laptop. The project hoped to equip these children with computer skills from an early age. President Kenyatta pinned his legacy on the project. Previous presidents have chosen education legacies as well. In the 1980s, President Moi provided free milk to primary students to supplement their diet and developed the 8-4-4 system of education. In the 2000s, President Kibaki reintroduced free primary school education. Unlike his predecessors, President Kenyatta faced significant obstacles to the laptop project. The laptop project failed to materialise for economic and political reasons including corruption during the tendering process, cost of device, lack of electricity, lack of teacher training, theft of the devices etc. (Igunza 2016; Valentine Obura, How Uhuru's sh24.6 billion laptops project collapsed, *Daily Nation Newspaper*, February 26, 2019; Waga, Makori & Rabah 2014). Waga et al. (2014) argue, 'this is more of an ego project since the leaders are basically trying to outdo their opponents by showing that they can meet whatever promises they had made to the electorate' (p. 194).

With the failure of the laptop project, the government developed other innovative programmes, like the Kenya Education Cloud (KEC) and the Digital Literacy Programme (DLP), that have been crucial to the government's response to the COVID school closure. The KEC hosts digital content for remote learning. The DLP introduces primary school children in Kenya to the use of digital technology in learning. Under the DLP, 1.1 million digital devices were installed in 97 percent of primary schools, over 218,000 teachers were trained to deliver digital content, and over 22,000 primary schools were connected to a source of power (Government of Kenya 2019).

## **Kenya Basic Education COVID-19 Emergency Response Plan**

The government through the Education in Emergencies (EIE) Working Group developed the COVID-19 response plan to mitigate the adverse effects of the school closure and prepare for school reopening. The plan sought to expand digital learning through the KEC, provide learning materials for children in remote areas, and infrastructure development in preparation for the reopening of schools. The Kenya Basic Education COVID-19 Emergency Response Plan will be implemented over one and a half years at an estimated cost of USD\$ 24 million (Government of Kenya 2020).

The plan was aimed at all students in the country; however, it identified those who were most vulnerable. These included children living in remote areas, especially girls, ethnic minorities, orphans, children with special needs, children in poor urban informal settlements, internally displaced children, and refugees. Throughout the plan there is language that emphasised the need to provide services to these children to ensure quality, equitable and inclusive education. The Kenya Basic Education COVID-19 Emergency Response Plan has the following objectives:

1. Prevent the spread of COVID-19 by providing information
2. Provide access to quality, equitable and inclusive education to learners during and after the crisis

3. Facilitate production of online teaching and learning materials, and expand access to existing distance learning programmes
4. Train teachers and education officers to effectively support distance learning
5. Develop programmes for the marginalised and most vulnerable students
6. Provide psychosocial support to students, teachers, and other education officers.

The response plan aims to minimise the disruption to schools by providing learning through the KEC, live streaming of lessons, and radio and television programming through the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD). At the same time, KICD was required to provide offline teaching and learning materials for children from poor and marginalised areas and build the capacity of teachers to provide interactive remote learning for their students. During the closure, the government planned to disinfect and fumigate schools, especially those used as isolation centres, refurbish school facilities, and monitor compliance of school infrastructure to health and safety standards. For psychosocial support, the plan was to equip teachers with the capacity to offer guidance and counselling services and disseminate messages through the mass, print and social media.

Even as the response plan was being rolled out, the government acknowledged the financial challenges of implementing the plan, the limited availability of technology, the absence of materials for children with special needs, and the lack of teacher preparedness with online class delivery. On close examination, the proposed interventions appear to be based on a number of assumptions about the students, teachers, and the education system as a whole:

1. Students (and teachers) have access to radio, television, and smart devices like phones and tablets.
2. Students have access to the internet.
3. Students have access to a reliable electricity supply.
4. All stakeholders have been consulted and agree to the programme.
5. Teachers are trained to provide distance learning and the psychosocial support for the students to be successful.

However, immediately the plan was launched it was opposed by teacher unions, the head teachers' associations, and other stakeholders.

## **Kenya Basic Education COVID-19 Emergency Response Plan: The Reaction**

The Kenya Basic Education COVID-19 Emergency Response Plan was implemented immediately schools were closed in the country. The aim was to ensure uninterrupted learning for the children. The KICD started to transmit radio and TV lessons through its channels and additional content was made available through KEC. According to the Education Cabinet Secretary, learning was taking place remotely: 'To the best of government

ability, the children are getting online learning’ (Nation Team, After schools were shut, learners also closed their books, *Daily Nation Newspaper*, April 24, 2020). However, the government optimism was not felt by parents, teachers, unions, and other stakeholders, to the extent that some accused the Ministry of Education of being out of touch with reality (Gabriel Oguda, Prof Magoha should give our children a break...and laptops, *Daily Nation Newspaper*, April 25, 2020). It is likely that the closure of schools and the move towards remote learning reminds Kenyans and policy makers of the failed laptop project (Augustine Odour, Jubilee laptops project that failed Kenyan child, *The Standard Newspaper*, April 28, 2020). This may have implications for the government implementation and the response to the policy.

There were several issues facing the response plan. First, the plan did not offer any learning materials or services for children with special needs. The Special Schools Heads Association Chairman noted, ‘We have children with hearing impairment, mental challenges, handicaps, autism, deaf children and those who are blind – these learners cannot access online materials’ (Ouma Wanzala, What about us? Learners with special needs ask, *Daily Nation Newspaper*, April 24, 2020). This is not surprising given that the government of Kenya has long neglected children with special needs. Before the pandemic, less than 25 percent of children with special needs were receiving any type of educational services (Moyi 2017). At the same time, the government has not released 2020 funds to special needs schools resulting in staff going for months without pay (Ouma Wanzala, What about us? Learners with special needs ask, *Daily Nation Newspaper*, April 24, 2020). Children with special needs continue to carry an even greater burden during this pandemic despite the 2010 constitution guaranteeing these children the right to free and compulsory education.

Second, Kenya’s education system is centralised, hierarchical and bureaucratic, making it inefficient and unresponsive to the needs of students (Republic of Kenya 2012). There is evidence of lack of clear communication from the Ministry; one sub-county director of education when asked about government guidelines responded, ‘so far, we have not received any official communication from the ministry on how to proceed’ (Nation Team, After schools were shut, learners also closed their books, *Daily Nation Newspaper*, April 24, 2020). Further, the teacher unions, the Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT) and the Kenya Union of Post Primary Education Teachers (KUPPET) have called for the government to consult with education stakeholders. The unions felt that teachers had been excluded from the response plan. The Kenya Secondary School Heads Association (KESSHA) also questioned the government use of 460 schools as isolation centres without prior consultation with the heads of schools. With the government insisting that online learning was taking place, local media argued that the Ministry of Education was out of touch with the reality facing Kenyan households (Nation Team, After schools were shut, learners also closed their books, *Daily Nation Newspaper*, April 24, 2020). It is clear that online learning is not taking place. A parent interviewed highlighted the challenges facing the plan such as illiterate parents, lack of computers and smart phones, cost of internet, household chores, and lack of adult supervision at home making it difficult for online learning (Nation Team, What learning? There’s no

network here; I don't have a radio, let alone a phone, *Daily Nation Newspaper*, April 24, 2020). It is unclear if the government had planned or anticipated these difficulties.

However, it is important to note that the one child laptop project collapsed for these same reasons that the online learning is failing. It also raises questions about the DLP; what happened to the 1.1 million devices that were distributed and installed in the primary schools? There is evidence of the increased investment in radio, TV, and other online materials made available by KICD but there is nothing about the computers. According to the government, there is digital learning content for primary and secondary school students and 97.7 percent of primary schools have digital devices. And with over 200,000 teachers trained on developing and teaching this content, it is not clear why students have not been able to make use of these devices. Kenya has made great strides in digitising education, however, we should question whether the government did enough to prepare Kenyan children for remote learning. Stakeholders are questioning: What happened to learning devices that were distributed to the schools? What happened to the teacher devices that were distributed, or the 218,000 teachers who were trained to deliver digital content?

Despite the failure to offer remote learning for Kenyan children, the government has built the infrastructure necessary to ensure that children have access to technological literacy. Previous good policies have not benefited Kenyan children because of the lack of implementation or political baggage the policies carry (Moyi 2017; Mugo et al. 2016). The DLP, if implemented with fidelity, has the chance to provide Kenyan children the foundation they need to be technologically proficient.

The paper shows that learning has not taken place since schools were closed. On July 7, 2020 the government announced that the 2020 school year had been cancelled and classes would resume in January 2021 (Ouma Wanzala, When Covid-19 took school away from Kenyan children, *Daily Nation Newspaper*, July 8, 2020). The students will repeat classes when the schools resume in January. According to *The New York Times*, Kenya is the only country in the world to completely cancel the school year (Abdi Latif Dahir, Kenya's Unusual Solution to the School Problem: Cancel the Year and Start Over, *The New York Times*, August 5, 2020). However, on August 25, 2020, the Cabinet Secretary for Education, citing data that showed a flattening of the curve, indicated that the government would be willing to reopen schools before January 2021 (Caleb Kingwara & Paul Okembo, Schools may reopen this year, after all, *The Standard Newspaper*, August 26, 2020). The impact of the COVID-19 school closure will likely be felt for years to come.

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# Managing the Costs of Online Teaching in a Free Secondary Education Programme During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria

**Oyetakin Akinrotimi Iyiombo**

**Abstract:** *During secondary school lockdowns in Nigeria due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Nigerian government attempted to provide compulsory remote learning means through television programmes and online teaching to the students. Adequate support for online teaching in a free secondary education programme calls for a critical analysis of the attendant direct and indirect costs, especially in an emerging economy where financial inequities can limit education participation. Recommendations are given for government and other funding to support free secondary education during and after the pandemic.*

**Keywords:** Financial balance, free education, COVID-19, online teaching, remote learning, lockdown, pandemic

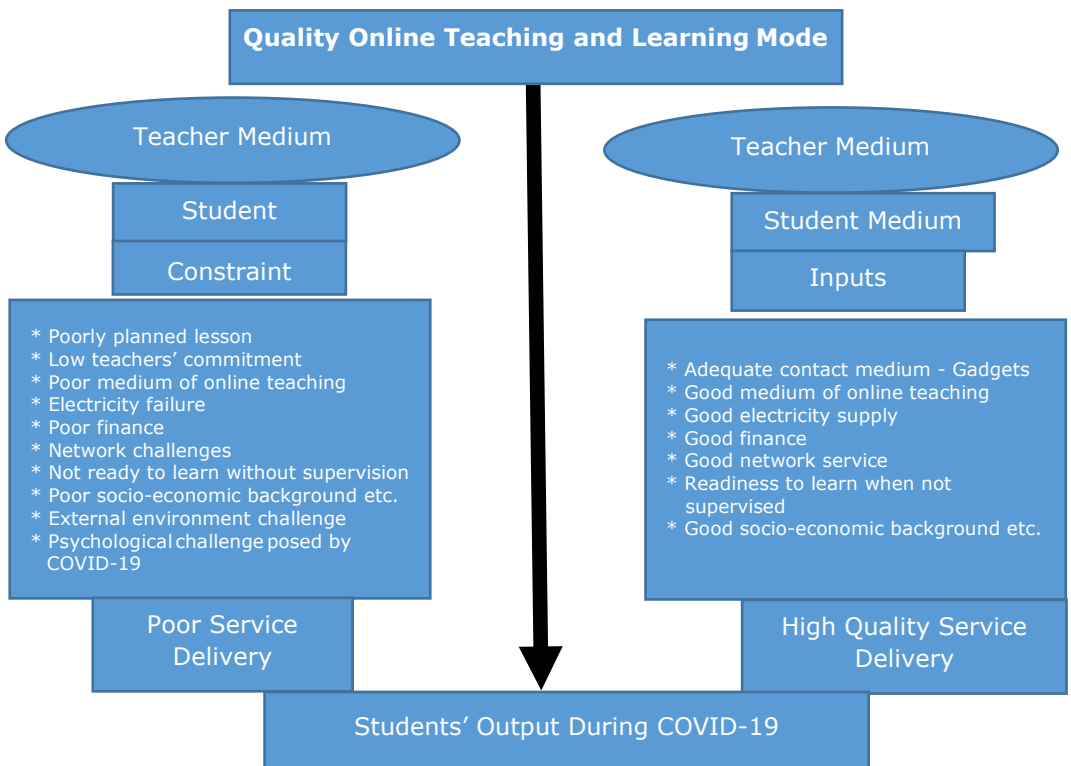
## Introduction

Nigeria, unfortunately, confirmed its first case of the coronavirus on 27th February 2020. Since then, we have seen the number of confirmed cases increase. In order to protect the lives of Nigerians and residents living in the country, to keep the livelihoods of workers and business owners and, also, to curtail the spread of the virus, all educational institutions in the country were completely shut since March. It has been a challenge for various institutions to construct a complimentary service delivery, and this is true for Nigerian secondary schools. This has seen a move to compulsory remote and online teaching of secondary school students amidst a gamut of cost and service delivery challenges. The lockdown situation has exposed problems in the efficiency and effectiveness of school resources. In public education (free education), inequalities in the distribution of wealth exist within levels and between schools, resulting in an imbalance in access to benefits from the remote and online process of teaching during the pandemic period.



In order to provide remote learning services to the students, schools began utilising available technologies, such as audio connections (i.e. telephones), videos and television and the internet to conduct the normal class learning as off-school activities. There are many challenges with this related to the suitability of the curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and feedback and whether the teachers have sufficient skill to provide effective remote learning. Perhaps one of the most difficult challenges is the full control and supervision of teachers handling online teaching. Although some state governments and internet network providers in Nigeria gave ad hoc instructions to teachers on how to do online teaching, there does not seem to be adequate supervision and quality control. The support for online teaching goes well beyond the teacher sitting at home doing justice to curriculum delivery. Even the students' linkage with the teacher raises concerns. The online teaching method used by most secondary school teachers seems not to be as interactive as expected, and most students do not participate fully and so there are concerns about the quality of the service delivery. It is imperative to know the procedure for ensuring quality online teaching and learning in Nigeria as demonstrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** The Model of Online Teaching During COVID-19



The arrow in Figure 1 suggests the interactions for the purpose of achieving the educational goals during the pandemic. If there are good inputs (the right hand side), this can lead to a high quality service delivery and good student learning and other outputs. However, if constraints are encountered, the quality of the service delivery will be compromised and student outcomes will suffer. The model indicates that for good service delivery on the part of the teacher, there is a variety of internal and external school infrastructure issues that need adequate resourcing, as well as attitudinal issues on the part of teachers and students.

## **Cost Implications of Online Teaching and Free Secondary Education**

In 1974, in Sokoto State, General Gowon made mention of the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in Nigeria with effect from 1975. According to Ajimoko (1976), the UPE scheme was envisioned as an expansionist strategy to correct the age-long imbalance in the spatial distribution of educational opportunities and provision in the country. The introduction of UPE in 1976, and its subsequent collapse in the early 1980s due to inadequate funding (Yoloye 1998), was because the UPE programme is capital-intensive, requiring large amounts of funds for procuring the needed school plants and facilities for its effective implementation. Free education is a programme of equity, and since the collapse in the 1980s, the search for a way out of this predicament led the Federal Government of Nigeria in September 1999 to revise the UPE and replaced it with the Universal Basic Education (UBE), which includes free and compulsory primary, junior secondary and nomadic education. The UBE is for equipping people with knowledge, skills and attitudes up to junior secondary school in Nigeria. As the school population continues to increase, so too does the cost and this requires some financial engineering to support the expansion.

With the impact of the pandemic, there are additional costs to provide remote and online learning and this calls for consideration of who should fund the online mode of learning. Poor parents have been crying for help to support the learning of their children. Whilst UBE should provide free compulsory education, the reality is that there has been a huge private cost burden on the parents who are supposed to be free from such cost. For example, Oyetakin (2008) found that in Lagos State where secondary education is free, parents paid an average private direct cost of 76.68 percent of the total unit cost, while average social direct cost was 23.32 percent between 1999 and 2003. From 2004 to 2006, the average social direct cost rose to 56.16 percent, while the average private direct cost was 43.84 percent. All said and done, the above analysis reveals that secondary education in Lagos State, which is richer than other states in Nigeria, is not free in absolute terms, and this has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

The economic chaos caused by the pandemic has seen upsurge of interest in the growth and development process by poor and developing nations. Whilst these countries have tried to match the moves to remote and online learning of more developed nations, they have done so without a corresponding match or preparedness for the cost implications. For example, the

provision of ICT gadgets has been classified under capital expenditure by the government, while maintenance goes under recurrent expenditure in most budgetary provisions, due to the high cost of procuring the online teaching and learning gadgets (Oyetakin 2015).

Many students in the public secondary schools are from families with poor backgrounds who during the pandemic lockdown found it difficult even to feed themselves. This invariably hinders them from providing the phones or gadgets required by their children to connect with the network. Even where television and radio were used to teach, electricity failure during the period of teaching is common in most areas. Most homes do not have a generator to supplement public electricity, and where generators are available, it was difficult to fuel the generator because of cost and supply issues.

As well as these income and public infrastructure issues, there are other issues such as the lack of suitable study spaces which have sufficient privacy, and protecting study time so it is free from the need to perform household errands. These are indirect costs hindering a proper service delivery of the online mode of teaching.

Nigeria is facing a high degree of the debt burden, low investment, poor infrastructural development and cultural impediments, which confirm the reality of the African political economy (APE) model propounded by Samir (1974 as cited in Oyetakin 2016) and which focused on how political and economic forces shape the contexts within which secondary schools carry out their primary function of teaching. In a context where there is insufficient school funding already, the theory helps to explain the realities of the specific political, economic, and social environments that impact on Nigeria's debt burden, and which produces consistent relative cuts in government expenditure, further exasperating the funding crisis in schools during the pandemic.

## **Economic Reality of Online Teaching in the Pandemic Era**

The quality of teachers and materials needed for a child-to-child approach are lacking in most of the developing economies that are currently facing the harsh economic situation caused by COVID-19. This is on the premise that children will gain more from their development if they are active participants in the development process rather than passive recipients. This position of child-to-child approach requires a sound well trained teacher who is also equipped with the modern infrastructures for training the learners in the remote learning category.

The change brought by the hard economic measures during the pandemic necessitates compensation to the less privileged so that they are willing to accept the change of compulsory online teaching and learning of the secondary school students locked down at home. The welfare economics, according to Anderson (2008), focuses on what happens to individuals who are richer and poorer, or better or worse off than others, due to a change in the quantities of the economic situation. Hence, with the remote learning during the

lockdown, induced by COVID-19 for some particular set of students, should not be to the detriment of other students who do not have similar opportunities.

The economic problems of developing countries are not in their totality uniform. But their basic characteristics transcend the boundaries of individual countries. These are the problems of a fundamental disequilibrium of the economy with the attendant features of stilted economic growth, an adverse balance of payment problems, low capital formation, iniquitous distribution of income, price level instability, severe unemployment, youth militia, human trafficking among others (Isgogo 2014). Most African leaders have failed to provide their people with the basic necessities of life; some are still using the infrastructures inherited from their colonial masters. Ironically, corruption, embezzlement and mismanagement of public fund have become the order of the day with the resultant effects of the continuous decay in infrastructure and manpower needed for the implementation of free secondary education. The rich are getting richer, the poor, poorer, the growing mistrust and disaffection between those in governments and their subjects is obviously not a good scenario for a growing country in need of growth and sustainable development.

Hence, the education policy of a compulsory online service delivery to secondary school students which improves the learning situation of some should not make others worse off. According to Sundaharam and Vaish (1985), real change involving loss of satisfaction to some and gain of satisfaction to others could be declared as a unanimous improvement in total welfare if those who gain by the change, after compensating the loser for their losses so that they are willing to accept the change, feel better off. Thus, no one is worse off as a result of the change in compulsory online teaching and learning in a free secondary education programme induced by the COVID-19 pandemic in the country.

## **Managing Online Teaching and Free Secondary Education**

The free secondary education programme is focused on a holistic human capital development strategy. According to Okojie (1995), human capital development can be seen as the process of acquiring and increasing the number of persons who have the skills, education and experience that are crucial for economic growth and development of a country.

The justification for the provision of free secondary education for human capital development is based on the fact that the financial challenge for students in Nigeria is immense. Many students can't pay school fees, let alone afford to buy a phone or a computer and then be able to connect this to a data network. And so, they are left out of an online learning process. Whilst this is an enormous and concerning issue, it shouldn't stop development of digital/virtual learning. This will need to be well planned, structured and accessible to all students who are currently enrolled in secondary education. Willover (1984) poses that the indices of good quality secondary education within a school system with exemplary houses of learning, and productive and civil places where students can grow intellectually and socially, requires huge capital outlay in providing the facilities needed. Thus, Samuel (1987)

recommends that the people, government and the society who derives benefit from education should pay for it, and it is a significant reason that would set the tone of contributions of beneficiaries of free secondary education to fund their studies especially at this critical economic challenge on all stakeholders caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In managing the free secondary education programme, the consumption by an individual should agree with the market voting system, whilst preference and ethical value from education consumption, in terms of quality and measure, depend on the societal value. On the part of the government, providing free education makes it a public good that supports an economic good anchored on social demand. Management of the online teaching and learning should be backed-up with an increased financial allocation from the government, since a free secondary education programme remains an inalienable right of the beneficiary. However, Salau (2003) remarks that a totally free education programme at any level does not exist and taking this argument, the government and parents will both bear the cost of educating the students in the lockdown period.

It seems, however, that given the wealth disparity in Nigeria, and the significant number of people that live with very limited financial means, government funding of the rising costs of online teaching in the COVID-19 is important. Indeed, it is likely to be a great social and moral goal of 21<sup>st</sup>-century Nigerian social reforms during and after the pandemic to reduce the financial burden of remote teaching so as to promote economic emancipation, and increased efficiency and effectiveness of the free secondary education in Nigeria. This will help ensure that family circumstances do not preclude a child from gaining a worthwhile education and contributing in a substantial way to society.

## Recommendations

It has been realised that for free secondary education to be more rewarding during and after the pandemic, the following recommendations are made:

1. The pattern of budgetary allocation to the free education programme should be improved and there should be flexibility within this to respond to crises, such as the pandemic.
2. The government should prioritise and formalise areas of cost cushioning between it and beneficiaries of the free secondary education programme.
3. Philanthropic associations focused on free education (PAFE) should be formed to look into the cost of online teaching in order to cushion the cost through donations of palliatives that will give learners from a poor background the opportunity to join the online mode of learning.
4. Economic-stimulus that could assist the financial strength of the government and parents should be prioritised during and after periods of crisis, like the pandemic. For example, with increased joblessness during the pandemic, there should be a

considerable effort by the government to generate employment or ease the lockdown so that low-income earners/artisans can return to work.

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# Educational Leadership Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis in Nigeria

**Theresa Stephen Gyang**

**Abstract:** *This paper examines educational leadership in primary schools in response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in Nigeria. The Nigerian primary education system has experienced a total shutdown and school leaders have experienced helplessness. A way for school leaders to address the far-reaching repercussions of school closure is through the adoption of a Community-Based Education Leadership (CBEL) model. This model involves the use of school leadership, community leadership and collaborative leadership to address the complex issues of remote learning. The paper recommends that the education leadership response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in Nigeria requires the use of the CBEL model to influence active participation of stakeholders in the provision of primary education in the current uncertain and complex situation. This model will be useful for responding to other crises that may happen in the future.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, pandemic, educational leadership, community-based education leadership, Nigeria

## Introduction

Perilous moments, such as what the world is facing today as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, exert threats that are unimaginable to human kind. The situation has altered almost every aspect of lives including the educational system. The worldwide impact in the educational system as at April 27<sup>th</sup> 2020 has forced more than 1.725 billion learners out of school due to school closures in response to the pandemic (UNICEF 2020). Many countries adopted abrupt changes in ways of running governance, education, business and other essential endeavours. How the educational system can be sustained requires the adoption of a dynamic leadership approaches for quality delivery amidst the turbulence.

Undoubtedly, effective leadership is seen as a lever in transforming the educational system. Educational leadership is a social process that influences and directs people to willingly act towards achievement of set targets in schools (Matthew 2017). It is a systematic pragmatic function that coordinates and guides practices useful for attainment of goals. A complex and sudden change in safety as a result of the COVID-19 crisis has rendered school leaders confused and helpless in tackling education matters in Nigeria. Most schools are completely locked down and attempts to set new approaches for pupils' learning in the primary schools are mostly handled by the State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB) through the use of

radio and television, but these appear to have limited impact. My observations suggest that most pupils don't get access to learning during the shutdown of schools for obvious reasons. For instance, the poverty level in Nigeria is alarming to the extent that most people rarely get sufficient food to eat and they lack access to social services during the lockdown. This makes it difficult for children from such families to access radios and televisions for teaching.

Nigeria seems to lack the political will, resources, operating skills, leadership skills and infrastructure (like a steady power supply) to effect teaching and learning during the pandemic crisis. The effect is commonly noticed in public primary schools as they lack the digital gadgets and materials for effective teaching and learning online; and most teachers lack the technical knowhow to operate eLearning (Akpa & Gyang 2018). Regrettably, a cursory look will show how primary school leaders in Nigeria are redundant in the process of distant learning during the pandemic crisis, while the pupils remain at home without schooling. Consequently, the anticipated far-reaching repercussions of out-of-school children for the educational system, and the entire society, have triggered a growing sense of urgency for new models of education in Nigeria.

Community involvement in the leadership of primary schools could influence the remote learning platforms for students. Community leadership is conceptualised as an opportunity for members of a community to lead innovative education actions at the grassroots (FritzGerald & Militello 2016). It focuses on addressing underlying challenges to community collaborative efforts. The school leader becomes the linking agent between the school and the community through informal and formal strategies to model a shared vision and encourage stakeholders at the community level to participate in promoting education. In this paper, I propose that a community-based leadership model is important in this time of crisis and going forward. After a brief exploration of primary schools and principal leadership, the model will be explained.

## **Primary Educational and Principal Leadership**

Primary education principals perform their leadership functions by directing people towards desired goals and objectives. The leader influences the interpretation of events, the choice of objectives and strategies, the organisation of work activities, the motivation of people to achieve objectives, the maintenance of co-operative relationships, the development of skills and confidence of members, and the enlistment of support and cooperation from people outside the organisation (Yukl 2002 as cited in Maicibi 2017). Primary educational leadership involves teamwork where collaborative efforts are made with shared responsibilities among members (stakeholders) at different levels. Through innovative and visionary approaches, the leader translates policies into workable actions, behaviours and beliefs to achieve intended goals.

Primary education in Nigeria is for children from age 6-12 years old, and is aimed at laying a solid foundation for future learning to take place. Its administration can be traced to the



Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme policy which was launched on the 30<sup>th</sup> September, 1999 at Sokoto State. UBE aims to provide a universal education that is free and compulsory for nine years; six years of primary education and three years of junior secondary education. One of the major objectives of UBE that is connected to this study is 'catering for young persons who for one reason or another, have had to interrupt their school as well as other out-of-school children/adolescents through appropriate forms of complimentary approaches to the provision and promotion of basic education' (Federal Government of Nigeria 2004: 3). The UBE law vested the responsibility of primary education by structuring it in such a way that the government welcomes the participation of other stakeholders, such as, local communities, voluntary agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGO), international communities, donor agencies and individuals of good will.

Despite the laudable policies set for the promotion of quality education in Nigeria, primary education has not been in operation due to the COVID-19 crisis. With the closures, principals have tended to lack focus on how to ensure effective teaching in schools. Consequently, many communities seem ignorant of their involvement as decision makers in their primary schools.

Principals and other school leaders need to be creative in developing leadership skills that can involve the community at local levels to solve education problems that are complex. Some indicators essential for building a strong school-community partnership identified by Gyang (2017) included: being committed to fostering increased integration between school and community; in-depth knowledge of the community and resources available; involving stakeholders in decision making; having a transformational leadership style; using internal and external networks; developing a shared vision, creating new ideas, and being willing to take risks; and, taking into consideration the culture of the community. A way to incorporate these ideas into primary school leadership is through a community-based model of leadership.

## **Community-Based Education Leadership Model**

The Community-Based Educational Leadership (CBEL) model refers to collaborative leadership that involves the participation of stakeholders at the community level where the schools are situated. It is more of a pragmatic and adaptive leadership view where every stakeholder is involved in practical decisions and actions that are useful in the practice of educational activities. Community based leadership can be hinged on Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) (Keene 2000; Onyx & Leonard 2011; Uhl-Bien, Marion & Mckelvey 2007). The principle of this theory suggests that leadership should be seen not only as resting in position and authority but also as emergent and susceptible to the interaction of various dynamics. It identifies three types of leadership:

1. Administrative leadership that is hierarchical and controlling;
2. Enabling leadership that encourages creative problem solving, learning, and adaptability; and
3. Adaptive leadership that is dynamic and empowers change.

Adaptive leadership emerges from interactive changes and can be used especially for dealing with problems which require learning new behaviours and innovations, all of which are relevant processes to the development of grassroots innovations (Seyfang & Smith 2007 as cited in Martiskainen 2017). Onyx and Leonard (2011: 503-505), in their analysis of five communities, identified seven elements of successful community leadership, namely:

1. Leaders were embedded in the formal and informal networks of the community;
2. Decision making was shared with the community;
3. Leaders were operating in an open system, engaging with others;
4. Leaders had a vision about the future of the community;
5. Leaders had practical management skills;
6. Leaders had planning in place for their potential successors; and
7. Leaders had commitment, persistence and energy.

In like manner, Drysdale and Gurr (2017) provided a model that contains seven domains and associated capabilities that are useful for navigating complex times. The seven domains include setting direction, developing people, developing the organisation, improving teaching and learning, influencing, leading self, and understanding the context. These are key factors that guided the formulation of CBEL in this study. The CBEL model is meant to respond to problems and uncertainties that affect teaching and learning like the situation of the COVID-19 crisis and the elements are shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** Community-Based Education Leadership (CBEL) Model

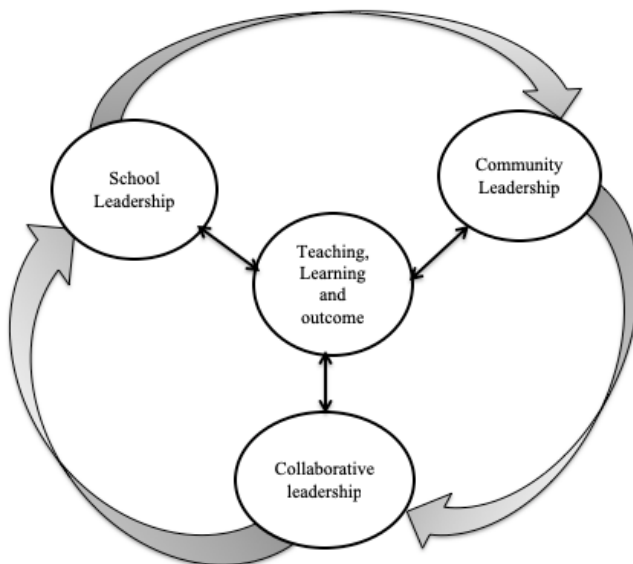


Figure 1 shows the cycle of the CBEL model with four segments, namely; school leadership, community leadership, collaborative leadership and the centre stage is teaching, learning and student and school outcomes. School leadership sets the school vision, mission and goals, interprets the policies to the understanding of teachers to ensure that the curriculum is not deviated and plans for remote educational platforms that could be accommodative in complex problem situations. The leader then sets the institutional response by directing the teachers and setting plans of action together with them. Evaluation is conducted to determine the strengths and weaknesses of plans.

The community leadership operates through school-community relationships with the guidance of the school leader. The leader enlightens the community members through the chiefs, ward heads, clergy, youth leaders, women representatives, illustrious sons and daughters, alumni, Parents Teachers Association (PTA), School Based Management Committee (SBMC), and internal and external agencies. The leader sets the strategies for sensitisation and mobilisation of the community members to create awareness of the challenges that led to the changes, and the necessity for community participation in the provision of education. The school and community advocate for finances, resources and services from within and outside the community. Since Nigeria still has a high level of illiteracy with many parents that are ignorant about the education of their children, community leaders have the task to organise and control such parents to understand the need for sending their children to school and to comply with the guiding rules for teaching and learning amidst the turbulence.

Collaborative leadership implies embracing adaptive leadership skills to connect the tasks of the school leader and community leaders to face the new problems and the need for change and innovation, and the behaviours of people to respond well to these changes. The school leader influences shared leadership and decision making to support innovative leadership and the achievement of school goals. Based on the remote educational platforms planned by the school leader, members of the school and community set remote learning strategies whereby teachers teach their pupils through the platforms in small groups depending on situations and availability of resources. For instance, in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, where the leader, teachers and pupils have to stay safe, the strategies will involve liaising with parents or guardians on the platforms and schedules for teaching their children while observing social distance and hygiene requirements. To attract high commitment, staff should be motivated by appropriate remuneration, and teachers and pupils should be provided with protective items such as sanitisers, masks and gloves. The leaders monitor and evaluate activities to determine the extent of quality delivery and set cycle plans to improve on strengths and correct the defects identified.

Primary education leaders can use the CBEL model to direct appropriate teaching in complex problem situations by engaging community participation. The leader sets the pace for meaningful collaborative leadership that would make the best out of the ugly situation using innovative tactical leadership skills to influence people. The approach involves taking risks

in known and unknown situations and searching for unintended consequences to ensure successful teaching without jeopardising students' outcome.

## Conclusion

The education leadership response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in this paper focuses on use of the CBEL model to address ambiguity and the complex challenges faced to promote effective teaching and learning in the primary school system. The school leader is the stronghold for building school-community relationships for the active participation of stakeholders in the provision of education in turbulent situations. School leadership, community leadership and collaborative leadership are connected with the tactical skills of the school leader to develop innovative remote education platforms for effective teaching and learning amidst unusual challenges in society.

From the foregoing the following suggestions are made:

1. A suitable response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in Nigeria requires the use of the CBEL Model to influence active participation in the provision of primary education.
2. The CBEL model can serve as a framework to create opportunities for children from low-income background to have access to education, and even through distance learning programmes.
3. Government and community stakeholders should prioritise safe practices to enable effective teaching and learning.
4. School leaders in Nigeria should be trained to obtain relevant skills in the use of learning technologies to address the complex and ambiguous challenges of the educational system.
5. School leaders must stimulate positive change through proper mobilisation, strategic and critical thinking, and make efforts to mitigate change consequences in the school system within communities.
6. The Nigerian Government should rethink the educational sector to improve the quality through the provision of adequate resources and set up collaborative leadership at the grassroots (community) level for primary education.

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# Hold on Tight Everyone: We're Going Down a Rabbit Hole. Educational Leadership in Turkey During the COVID-19 Pandemic

**Pınar Ayyıldız and Hasan Şerif Baltacı**

**Abstract:** *This paper takes a closer look at the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and educational decisions, particularly those taken in Turkey by the authorities for K-12 learners. It appears that the Ministry of National Education and the related directorates have hitherto been successful in managing the crisis and in providing the necessary academic and psychological guidance. With the help of the existing technological infrastructure and through TV broadcasts, thousands of learners have been reached. It seems that education has not come to a halt in Turkey due to the pandemic. Moreover, parents as education partners have been contacted by teachers and counsellors during the process. In conclusion, looking at the decisions and acts of the Turkish authorities, it would be fair to state that they have been effective.*

**Keywords:** Educational decisions, crisis management, distance education in Turkey, COVID-19, pandemic

## Introduction

Down, down, down. Would the fall never come to an end? (Carroll 1865/2008)

As many others around the world would attest, we are going through extraordinary times and experiencing sudden fear and chaos. No miracles have been spotted on the horizon, creating uncertainty as to the future and causing considerable stress. It is well-known that 'crises can have substantial consequences for the well-being, functioning, and health of those affected by them' (Dückers, Yzermans, Jong & Boin 2017: 95).

Little Alice, in Lewis Carroll's (1865/2008) *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, in a very much surprising fashion, goes down the rabbit hole, a hole almost as famous as the characters and the book itself. Afterward, she enters into a somewhat psychedelic world where consciousness regarding time, being, and place is totally lost in a strange manner. This 'rabbit

hole' analogy is helpful to be able to make some sense of what we are living through in the year 2020: a time causing worry. Millions share more or less the same feelings amid the pandemic and enduring responses, such as being kept under lockdown. While this worldwide crisis has significant societal impacts, it is also a time of opportunity as 'nowadays, a crisis is understood as a certain test of organizational readiness and a chance to apply creative approaches to reach required goals' (Hošková-Mayerová 2016: 851) and this may tell us something about the existence of sunlight at the end of the 'falling' mentioned above.

## Education During a Pandemic

Considering the inherent and inevitable 'interconnectedness between education and society', and that educational systems always remain open 'to social, and economic conditions that shape the mission, structures, curriculum, and instructional practices of educational institutions at the national and global levels' (Jean-Francois 2015: 1) education is one of the areas that is affected to the greatest extent by what is going on.

Countries, in different ways, have tried to respond educationally to this recent crisis. Turkey has more than 18 million students receiving formal education at kindergartens, primary schools, secondary schools, and high schools (National Education Statistics Formal Education 2019), and has a very cosmopolitan population. To illustrate, there are 684,919 Syrian refugee students (Republic of Turkey Ministry of National Education 2020). The diversity in students in terms of socio-economic and ethnic background means it is a complex education system. Like in other countries, there are students with special needs in Turkey, and as the phrase herein suggests, they need even more and (more) special care, particularly during a pandemic. Not only are there many students in need of exceptional support, but there are also national high stakes exams administered regularly every academic year. These aim to determine the students who are eligible for entering certain high schools and higher education institutions. Such exams can conceivably deepen the need for urgent action to support students during the pandemic.

## Educational Decisions Targeting the Pandemic Conditions

'Educational goods enrich the lives of those who have them, enabling them to live emotionally healthier, and more fulfilling, lives' (Brighthouse Ladd, Loeb & Swift 2016: 13). Even though it is both challenging and demanding work to sustain educational operations more or less as they are, coping during the pandemic is vital for the future of students and society.

Looking through the lens of educational administration, the pandemic literally calls for successful crisis management. It goes without saying that effective crisis management entails careful planning, data-driven decision making, and taking calculated risks. Being capable of accomplishing these is related to owning salient skills that belong to differing leadership styles. In conjunction with this, the backbone of the successful management of such crises has been reported to date in the relevant literature (Meisler, Vigoda-Gadot & Drory 2013) as

staying calm and being logical. That being said, according to March (1991), '[d]ecision making is a ritual activity closely linked to central Western ideologies of rationality' (p. 108). Thus, it is especially crucial during the pandemic that educational leaders, authorities, and policymakers act in humanely sensible and rational ways. They need to be able to prevent the neglect of disadvantaged groups and act in both for immediate and long-term support. In light of the countless parameters that come into play during times of crises, decisions involving customised precautions would definitely emerge as more meaningful. In addition, for countries like Turkey which at times suffer from economic and social instability, the 'one-size-fits all' conception cannot be suitable; this way of thinking can even turn out to be an absurd one. Besides, crises cannot accommodate trial-and-error kind of decisions that may or may not pave the way for yielding desired outcomes at the end. All in all, countries and, specifically, the developing ones, should take into consideration their own characteristics and be cautious in making decisions during crises like the pandemic, when 'understanding crises and developing crisis management skills have never been more important' (Shrivastava, Mitroff & Alpaslan 2013: 7).

## **The Situation in Turkey**

So as to shed light on the series of events and actions taken in Turkey since the beginning of the pandemic crisis, providing a summary of these within the framework of education might be a good idea. Since it would otherwise be almost impossible to touch upon all of the major issues, we concentrate solely upon the instruction offered for the students at primary schools, secondary schools, and high schools during the lockdown.

First, as of March 16, 2020, it was announced that all the schools countrywide would be closed and that the distance education services provided by the Republic of Turkey Ministry of National Education would be in effect as of March 23, 2020. The aforementioned distance education is given by means of a medium called the Education Informatics Network (EIN), which is already a part of a previous project and has been in use for more than four years. The distance education given via EIN is offered by the Directorate-General for Innovation and Education Technologies of the Ministry through two means: an Internet platform and specified TV channels owned by the state. The internet platform consists of level-appropriate video recordings of teachers teaching the course content, digital games, documentaries, and other materials of a pedagogical nature. The TV programmes are generally in the form of video-recordings of instruction or in the shape of live classes.

Earlier in the manuscript, it was suggested that a more humanistic approach was needed for this crisis. In compliance with that, the Ministry of National Education has tried to maintain a humanistic stance so far. To begin with, the Turkish Minister of National Education appeared on TV on the first day of the distance education programme, and via honouring his psychological counselling experience in his earlier career, made a brief speech about the design and content of the education programme that was planned to be delivered. He



emphasised continuously that ‘there is no need to be anxious’. From time to time, the Minister appeared again and informed both the students and the parents about the processes, at the same time trying to calm them down and also sharing the possible scenarios and plans for separate groups of students taking the distance education courses. Additionally, at the Minister’s behest, parent-teacher meetings were organised through videoconferences across the country. During these virtual meetings, the following were concentrated upon: ways to support students psycho-socially; parents’ role in motivating students; establishing and maintaining a good rapport among all the stakeholders; expectations of all the involved parties throughout the process; the issue of preventing technology addiction during the pandemic; importance of participating in the distance education programmes provided for students; developing study skills; information on the possible scenarios about the lockdown and education; and a review of the study tips for the national high stakes exams to be taken at the end of the academic year. Aside from these, counsellors working at the Counselling and Research Centre of the Ministry made phone calls to students and their families. To cite another example of the humanistic route taken and the pedagogical methodology adopted, the case with the candidates of the exams can be shared. For these groups, additional types of input, together with both academic and psychological support, were given. Accompanying these efforts, the work of volunteers has been important. Teacher volunteers around the country support the candidates by helping with questions about the subjects they teach on social media. Some instructional websites have started to disclose their content (trial exams, teaching videos) online for these groups of learners. Also, it has been announced that there would not be grade repetition for anyone for the 2019-2020 academic year because of access and uncertainty issues related to learning.

In addition to these, there have been inclusive approaches insofar as circumstances permit, focusing on the essentially disadvantaged. For instance, the existence of TV broadcasts as an alternative to the internet platform (despite not being a direct equivalent to it) made it possible for the students without computers and/or internet connection at home to attain the available educational sources. Furthermore, the internet grant packages to aid with internet access indicate that the authorities preferred to ‘adopt a more human approach by developing solidarity and new support systems for students in need and their families’ (Vergeti & Giouroglou 2018: 10).

When it comes to Syrian students, who have been a part of the system for almost 10 years, they also receive distance education through a European Union funded education project entitled ‘Promoting Integration of Syrian Kids into the Turkish Education System’ (PIKTES) (Sulukcu & Savas 2018).

To support students with special needs, the Directorate General for Special Education Guidance and Counselling Services of the Ministry have designed and implemented several initiatives. The authorities have established a call centre in each city of Turkey to aid communication about issues coming up. On top of that, an application that is free of charge and that is ‘special to’ and ‘special for’ students with special needs has been developed by the

Ministry (Directorate-General for Special Education Guidance and Counselling Services 2020). It is crucial to note at this point that this group (i.e. learners with special needs) is composed of hearing-impaired individuals, individuals with visual disability, intellectually-disabled individuals and students with autism spectrum disorder as well as learning disability, along with students with special gifts and talents. The aforesaid software presents videos that target cognitive and social domains, the development of literacy skills, mathematics, daily life skills, and communication skills. It also has all the teaching and learning resources exclusive to special education, and it comprises a number of educational activities and daily schedules, and provides some important information for parents in addition to interactive programmes. One notable feature of this application is that it is continuously updated, and contributions (educational videos, materials, and the rest) from the stakeholders are welcome. Technical support is given to the users too. It has been put forward that 'there are various educational settings to meet the educational needs of individuals with special needs' (Gül & Vuran 2015: 170) and it is apparent that this application can situate itself amongst the most common and established ones: special education schools, special classes in normal schools, and mainstream classes (Batu, Kircaali-İftar & Uzuner 2004).

Lastly, to enable good access for all students, sections of the Internet platform for distance education operate and become active during pre-determined and proclaimed periods for numerous groups. This prevents the system from being overwhelmed.

## Conclusion

A crisis is usually defined as 'a situation that threatens the high-priority goals of the decision-making unit, restricts the amount of time available before the decision is transformed, and surprises the members of the decision-making unit by its occurrence' (Hermann 1972: 13). The distance education opportunity created by the Republic of Turkey Ministry of National Education is full of good intentions and it has been a quick response to the crisis, even though it has inescapable shortcomings. Nevertheless, these pitfalls can be studied within the scope of other studies. Remembering Lewis Carroll (1865/2008), when the 'events were hammered out, and the tale is done', all countries will most probably be evaluating the effectiveness of what they have done through a retrospective reflection. Nevertheless, collection of feedback will be important to further develop current responses. Thus, gathering feedback from relevant parties is important as 'decision-making requires participation by relevant stakeholders and information that will help all who are involved' (Kaufman, Graham, Picciano, Wiley & Popham 2014: 338). But, at least for now for Turkey, there are sunbeams promising daylight at the exit of the 'rabbit hole' for education.

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# COVID-19 and Unconventional Leadership Strategies to Support Student Learning in South Asia: Commentaries From Bangladesh, India and Pakistan

**Neelofar Ahmed, Prerana Bhatnagar, Mohammad Shahidul Islam and Sarah Alam**

**Abstract:** *With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers and policymakers began to pay attention to the expected number of out-of-school children and emerging learning crises in developed countries, where self-isolation, social distancing, and access to education through technology are possible on a wide scale. Within the region of South Asia, and among the impoverished communities of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, this situation is quite the opposite, where millions of people still live below the poverty line, and technology-driven education is not yet a privilege. Despite the utmost commitment to provide free and quality education to all, the three nation-states prioritised healthcare over other businesses, delaying the policy response to the educational and learning crises. In this paper, the authors examine the policy responses from each country and conclude that inequities are not being adequately addressed, and that remote learning initiatives are not producing comparable results to pre-pandemic learning. The authors suggest that to make education accessible, equitable, and to improve student learning outcomes, the countries need to invest in school leader capacity building, and strengthening of the technology infrastructure and resources.*

**Keywords:** Pandemic, South Asia, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, school leadership, student learning, social inequality, digital divide, COVID-19, pandemic

## Context

Although South Asia is not one of the most impoverished regions of the world, it has some of the worst human development outcomes worldwide, where the socio-economic imbalance accelerates inequalities in various walks of life (World Bank 2014). Education plays a vital role

in the development of society as it leads to holistic changes by spreading awareness on issues pertinent to one's daily life. South Asian countries such as Bangladesh, India and Pakistan are facing massive health challenges, with hundreds of thousands of people falling prey to the pandemic. On the other side, economic difficulties are mounting up. In such a situation, education has not been prioritised, with academic institutions closed for an indefinite period with no distance learning options, unlike developed countries where governments have adopted uniform policies to support distance learning for students.

The most recent global COVID-19 pandemic reports show that world education is facing a crisis. The World Bank (2020) reports that as of March 24, 160 countries have ordered some form of school closures impacting at least 1.5 billion students the world over. The South Asian countries, with an already increased number of out-of-school children in addition to extended school closures, face both short-term and long-term implications for its educational sector, which will further exacerbate existing inequalities within the education system. Through the paper, the authors attempt to identify the existing gaps in knowledge provision in these countries while acknowledging the ongoing initiatives by school leaders who have emerged as transformative leaders to support distance learning through the use of technology during this global crisis.

The authors, who originally hail from South Asia and are University of Toronto students, relate their lived experiences to reflection on country responses to the pandemic from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan to the pandemic. The country responses rely on secondary sources of information. In the latter segment of the paper, the authors provide recommendations for policy development to address the current and future educational needs of these South Asian countries.

## **Bangladesh**

In Bangladesh, the education ministries responded to the pandemic by enacting its online teaching platform through the 'teacher' portal, a platform with over 400,000 registered users who are mainly school teachers (ShikhhokBatayan 2020). This online platform offers digital content for the entire school curriculum (K-12). This platform has been revitalised to cater to the online teaching and learning needs of the students as well as the teachers. In addition to providing digital textbooks, the teacher portal offers approximately 300,000 open source contents.

To broaden the reach of online teaching, the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) has dedicated Parliament Television to broadcast lessons that are delivered by renowned teachers and experts. This television has a nationwide terrestrial transmission capacity and does not require a cable TV connection. It was otherwise used only to broadcast parliamentary sessions. All lessons aired on this TV channel are co-produced with Bangladesh Open University and ministries of education. In addition to public arrangements, a hugely popular online teaching platform in Bangladesh is the Robi 10 minutes school

(<https://10minuteschool.com/classroom>), which is similar to Khan Academy in the USA. The Parliament TV and Robi 10 minutes school contents are also available on their respective YouTube channels.

Bangladesh has made tremendous strides to increase school enrolment over the past several decades and has achieved 98 percent net enrolment in primary schools (DPE 2020). Despite achievements in access to education, improvements to the quality of education in Bangladesh remain a challenge. The essential measure of quality in a school system is whether its students are learning the foundational skill for all future learning: reading and mathematics. A student's reading trajectory begins in the early primary grades, and in Bangladesh, available data show that most early primary children are not mastering reading fluency and comprehension. The government's 2015 National Student Assessment revealed that less than 25 percent of fifth-grade students could read at grade level and with knowledge in Bangla (DPE 2016). A similar scenario in math skills also demonstrates low achievement.

With these inherited challenges, it is difficult to claim that children will be able to learn and demonstrate their learning competencies with their full potential. Moreover, many students do not have access to television or YouTube content that is only available through internet-enabled smartphones. Although there are no official statistics available, it can be assumed that people with low-income status will be left out of the online teaching facilities. It will be a significant challenge for South Asian countries to keep the momentum of school enrolment and completion of the children of the parents who will be financially impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## India

India aligns itself to the United Nations (UN) commitment of Education for All (EFA) through Article 21-A of its constitution. It declares free and compulsory primary education as a fundamental right for all children between the ages of 6 and 14 years (Chopra 2019). The education system divides into government-run public schools, a large number of high and low-fee private schools, along with International, faith based, NGO-run, and Open schools which operate under different school boards across the country.

While India has made immense progress in improving gross primary school enrolments to 112,960,000 as of the year 2017 (UNESCO 2020), the National Sample Survey Office and other annual studies reveal that 32 million Indian children have never been to any school (ASER Centre 2018). Over 50 percent of class 5 students are unable to read an introductory text or solve basic arithmetic problems (Chopra 2019). With the burden of existing structural inequalities like poverty, child labour, low-income status, scarcity of resources, educational inequity, and a widening rural-urban divide, the Indian government provisioned remote learning, subsidised internet connections, and cancelled end of year exams in some states. The sudden lockdown thrust both private and government-run schools into an emergency remote teaching situation as pre-primary/nursery school admissions, entrance tests of various

universities, and competitive exams are all held during the period when the pandemic spread in India (Wadia 2020). While the digital transition in teaching and learning has mainly benefited private schools, it fails to penetrate down to the grass-root level (Choudhary 2020), leaving children belonging to low-income groups finding themselves thrown out of the education system (World Bank 2020).

As quarantine methods became operational, education ministries attempted to address the situation by creating effective digital learning platforms to help students, teachers, and parents maintain continuity of education and navigate through the challenges of the pandemic (Erpula 2020). The Government of India and the Ministry of Human Resource Development have adopted a multimodal approach of new e-learning, online and distance-education solutions amidst the crisis (Erpula 2020; World Bank 2020). One such initiative is the SHAGUN Online junction (<http://seshagun.gov.in/about-us>), a website developed by the Ministry of Education, which includes three e-learning platforms:

1. National Repository of Open Educational Resources (NROER) provides access to e-libraries, e-books, and e-courses for self-learning along with online events and content in Hindi as well as English;
2. The DIKSHA portal offers online classes with resources like videos, lesson plans, worksheets, etc. that span across all states in India aligned to the school curriculum in multiple languages;
3. E-pathshala (e-school), is a web-portal for students from grades 1 to 12 where they can get books, video, and audio lessons in regional languages.

Likewise, several virtual learning tools are created for higher education students, including a television-based education program to reach a wider audience – the Swayam Prabha, a set of 32 direct-to-home channels open to students across the country (World Bank 2020).

With the help from partner organizations like Alokkit, India, school leaders have prioritized weekly group calls to discuss implications of COVID-19 and developed action items to focus on the most marginalized students and communities (Global School Leaders 2020). However, few private schools have succeeded in adopting online tools, and school leaders struggle to implement them in other school sectors. In these challenging times, the online shift in education has resulted in a digital divide that has affected underserved students the most and may be marginalizing them further.

## **Pakistan**

In Pakistan, primary and secondary education is provided through public, private, NGO, and Madaris (faith-based public and private schools functioning with the support of donations and the local community, under the society act) schools. The schools in Pakistan bifurcate into urban and rural public, high, medium and low-fee private, and NGO or charity-based schools functioning across the country.



As a sovereign nation-state, Pakistan adheres to the UN's resolution that everyone has the right to education and provides free and compulsory basic education to children aged between 5 and 16 along with the textbook (Government of Pakistan 2018). However, within the region of South Asia, Pakistan has the highest ratio of about 22.5 million children out-of-school (OOSC) with a low Net Enrolment Ratio (NEP) in marginalized communities across provinces who are reported to be living below the poverty line with limited access to necessities including clean water, electricity, hospitals, etc.

With the outbreak of COVID-19 and lockdown inception, the provincial ministries of education decided to close schools considering the challenges of social distancing and a lack of appropriate hygiene support in most private and public schools. The Federal Ministry of Education initiated a television channel entitled 'TeleSchool' through the government's broadcasting network on April 1, 2020, to provide online learning to students from grades 1 to 12 (K. Abbasi, Teleschool goes on air today to compensate for academic loss, *DAWN*, April 14, 2020). While the situation was evolving, the public schools remained closed until September 15, 2020, whereas the private schools continued the academic session through on and offline virtual education modules. There has been little policy guidance provided by the federal and provisional ministries, and the local stakeholders are left on their own to navigate best practices to meet the learning needs of their students.

To report the experiences of school leaders, we had informal telephonic interviews with private, NGO/charity based, and public school leaders. Our conversations reveal that despite unpreparedness, private schools' leaders took less time to initiate technology-driven learning and lesson plans as they had autonomy and resources. It was easier for them to create and connect virtual learning communities since the students already had electronic devices to access online resources. The NGO/Charity based schools took more time to respond, as the school principals had limited authority to locate digital resources for themselves and teachers. Homework was usually given with extended deadlines and using an offline mode of learning. In both situations, the school leaders, while realising the unprecedented nature of educational disruption, supported their teachers who were not technologically trained to make online classroom lessons and interactive pedagogies. Moreover, they created *WhatsApp* groups to reach teachers and parents to support them in operating online free applications such as *Zoom* and *Google Classrooms*.

Although public schools remained closed, the school leaders were challenged with the policy guidance and technology support from their respective district/provincial ministries. This situation is troubling for far-flung rural areas where teachers and students cannot afford electronic gadgets due to low socio-economic status. The inception of TeleSchool is a way forward amidst the existing challenges and choices. However, its visibility in remote areas, quality of the lessons, and the nature of non-reciprocal learning raise concerns about whether it would meet the objectives of the 21st century or further marginalize disadvantage communities through this digital divide.

## Comparative Commentary

It is evident that South Asian countries, with all the resource constraints and challenges, have firm national commitments, but are struggling to deliver quality education for the children. While these three South Asian countries vow to provide accessible and quality education to all, the commitment requires robust investment in education. Explicitly, the COVID-19 pandemic has warranted these countries to further invest not only in technology and infrastructure, but in improving the capacity building of teachers.

This study has shown that while the pandemic has restricted access to education and disrupted learning among millions of children in South Asia, the crisis underpins the dire need of a policy shift to enhance public expenditure in education. Despite that the three countries are the most populous within the region, the GDP per capita expenditure on education is below the worldwide average for each country, with Bangladesh below half of the worldwide average (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.XPD.TOTL.GD.ZS>). With large numbers of children out of school and substantial adult illiteracy rates in these countries (UNESCO 2020), it is important for the governments to invest in education. This is more so given the concerns about a COVID-19 learning crisis.

The pandemic has demonstrated that within these three countries, due to a lack of infrastructure, digital content, and access to electronic gadgets, the existing technology platforms were in no way close to the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning. Distance education, online classes, and broadcasting lessons through television, radio, and the internet have been in effect in this region for quite some time now. However, the quality of these lessons, relevance, and visibility in remote areas has always raised concerns. The governments in these three countries need to stop being complacent and take adequate measures to meet the varied needs of the population. While the digital divide within the states has shown a gap between social classes, it will eventually create a broader division in the global landscape if appropriate national responses are not taken promptly.

## Recommendations

The findings of this study reveal similar and inherited socio-economic and educational challenges within the region, which have resurfaced due to the COVID-19 crisis and call for policymakers' attention. There is a likelihood that the learning of marginalized students studying in rural public schools will suffer the most as compared to their urban private school counterparts. The findings also highlight that despite each government's efforts to broadcast educational material through television and radio, the outcomes of the non-reciprocal teaching modules are least identical to the pre-COVID-19 education system. One way to make education accessible, equitable, and to improve student learning outcomes is to invest in the capacity building of the school leaders and strengthen the technology infrastructure and resources to overcome the global, regional, and national digital divide.

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# Learning to Walk All Over Again: Insights From Some International School Educators and School Leaders in South, Southeast and East Asia During the COVID Crisis

**Rebecca Stroud Stasel**

**Abstract:** *The COVID pandemic has hit every person and organization by storm. In international education, stakeholders are diverse, bringing complex needs and considerations. Institutional responses to the pandemic are not amenable to broad replicability due to the contextualized nature in which international schools are situated, yet they are nonetheless of interest, particularly regarding the development of effective practices in times of pandemic. This paper explores some reflections of educators and leaders at international schools in south, southeast, and east Asia, in some of the first geographic areas to be affected by COVID-19, as they continue to face this crisis from personal and professional standpoints. The effects include higher levels of acculturative stress, but also the presence of hope and resilience. One education hub organization provides a medium-term visionary response, which is practical and potentially beneficial to multiple stakeholders in international education, as educational organizations consider best practices in terms of adaptive leadership in response to a pandemic.*

**Keywords:** Acculturative stress, adaptive leadership, educator acculturation, international schools, COVID-19, pandemic

## Introduction

I am an emergent researcher of educational leadership and policy at a Canadian university. I am also a Canadian-certified secondary school teacher with over 20 years of teaching experience in four countries. My first overseas teaching position took place when I was an early career teacher. I accepted an offer to teach in a Canadian-accredited matriculation program in Malaysia. I view this as the single best professional decision that I have ever made,

because of how that time in Malaysia transformed me personally and professionally, but also because it began imparting in me a deep curiosity about the world, which fomented a lifelong fascination about living in cultures other than one's own, and the rich learning that ensues. When I was engaged in professional activities abroad, I noticed things about acculturation (Berry 2005) and indeed sometimes experienced episodes of culture shock (Oberg 1960), yet culture shock theory has significant limitations, such as its deficit orientation and its singular trajectory. Since Oberg's seminal work, understandings have developed significantly, but still need development based upon more focused inquiry. The representation of international teachers in acculturation literature is lacking. Interestingly, despite the high probability that international teachers will experience culture shock (Roskell 2013), teaching abroad offers many short-term and long-term benefits, as well as challenges, and some initial acculturation challenges can be transformed into personal and professional strengths, such as the development of cultural competencies and self-leadership capacity.

Today, educators in international schools, especially where there is significant growth, may experience ameliorated professional development (PD) and leadership opportunities in comparison with opportunities in their home country. However, these same educators face a plethora of personal executive decisions and have to organize their teaching practices in culturally responsive ways appropriate for the host culture. This is something they have yet to learn about upon arriving in the host country, and can be a source of acculturative stress (Berry 2006). I have been interested in how educators teaching abroad make a strong start as caring leaders when they are suddenly faced with hundreds of executive personal decisions. This paper situates teachers, PD trainers, and school leaders as organizational leaders because both are charged with the responsibility of care and growth of other people. My qualitative study, begun in 2019, examines K-12 educator acculturation in the context of teachers and school leaders who work at international schools in southeast and east Asia. It aims to illuminate self-leadership and school leadership influences upon educator acculturation. Self-leadership, which involves one's internal work to develop capacity for thriving is not only beneficial on an individual level, but it also increases one's capacity to lead others (Houghton, Neck & Manz 2003). The timing of the COVID crisis has coincided with the last phase of my data collection. In this paper, I review some of the impacts of experiencing the COVID crisis as a sojourner in another country, as well as to share observations of how the educational communities in which my participants live and work have been managing the COVID crisis. From an adaptive leadership stance that challenges the traditional unidirectional notion of leadership as an interactive one (DeRue 2011), a response of one organization that is situated in Malaysia is briefly discussed.

## Context

While people who live and work in another country are often referred to as expatriates and face many cultural adjustment challenges (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer & Luk 2005), I propose that international teachers become sojourners while living abroad. A sojourner is a

'between-society culture traveller' (Ward, Bochner & Furnham 2005). The necessary negotiation between the cultures involved may include negative experiences, such as culture shock (Oberg 1960), and may also lead to increased chances of professional and personal flourishing, by augmenting other capacities, such as cultural competencies (Ward, Leong & Low 2004) and self-leadership (Houghton et al. 2003). While not all expatriates may view themselves as sojourners, there is always that opportunity for creating new learning spaces. The learning space of the sojourner is an interstitial one; it draws from facets of one's personal identity and culture as well as from the host culture, including the organizational culture, which may differ radically from organizational structures in one's home country, but it is in the interstitial spaces that hybrid identities and learning can form which can create novel and adaptive ways of thinking and being.

Roskell (2013) argued that culture shock is ubiquitous with teachers in international schools. Berry (2006) used the term acculturative stress to indicate the often-painful challenges that cultural newcomers face. For leaders, this latter term is more useful, because it indicates a difficult challenge that can be met, and when it is, a successful outcome (acculturation) ensues.

The COVID crisis has shocked the world, and created urgent, large, and complex challenges for all those working in leadership roles within their organization. According to Blanchard and Broadwell (2018: 120), 'addressing adaptive challenges requires new ways of processing information and making decisions: experimentation, innovation, and changes in attitudes, values, and behaviors'. Unfortunately, leaders around the world had very little time to develop their leadership plans for this crisis, and those in east and southeast Asia had the least time. It may seem to leaders around the world that they are learning how to walk all over again, while simultaneously showing the way to others in this new world reality.

Regardless of whether one is acculturating while living in another country or not, adapting to COVID may involve many experiences similar to Oberg's (1960) culture shock theory. Oberg understood culture shock to be an occupational malady that involved four phases: known as *euphorie*, or the honeymoon phase, *regression*, or the rejection phase, *anpassung*, or the adjustment phase, and finally *erholung*, or the recovery phase. While this theory has been understandably criticized for being too prescriptive and generalizable, it can be useful, especially in terms of developing leadership that will assist sojourners to move from the most painful stage, which is the stage that gives rise to the term culture shock, to a successful outcome, which is a healthy adjustment. Berry's voluminous work on acculturation (e.g. Berry 1970, 2005, 2006, 2011; Sam & Berry 2006), which spans four decades, is helpful, as it uncovers many areas of complexity and nuance regarding this phenomenon.

I will first share how the COVID crisis has affected some educators who are living and working in south, southeast and east Asia, how the crisis has affected an educator who provides professional development (PD) to sojourning professionals, and then will discuss how school leaders have engaged in adaptive leadership in order to provide realistic,

compassionate, and timely support for the immediate future while moving forward through this crisis.

I travelled to Malaysia in November, 2019 to meet most of the participants in my study and begin interviews and school visits. Since that visit, participants from Macau and mainland China have joined my study. I was to return to Malaysia, Macau, mainland China, and Thailand from February through March, 2020 to conclude data collection, but this last research trip has been put on hold due to the COVID crisis. We have kept in touch virtually during this time, and I have had to revise my data collection plan so as to finish this study virtually.

Participants in my study have been some of the first ones to experience regional and national isolation measures. Some have reported that this crisis has exacerbated acculturative stress (Berry 2006). At the same time, these educators are working in schools that are adapting fairly well to the crisis, perhaps because they are in schools that are already well plugged in to virtual technologies. There may be regional infrastructures that are implicated as well.

## Heightened Acculturative Stress

Prior to the global pandemic, the earliest theme that jumped out from the first phase of data collection was high self-leadership capacity among the participants in my study. The participants are unanimously highly self-efficacious, confident, and able to self-propel themselves in the absence of supports.

However, the COVID crisis has taken a toll on personal well-being globally. Reports of anxiety are widespread throughout the world, including those in this study. Since the schools shifted to remote learning and distancing orders were implemented in cities, participants began reporting sentiments of anxiety, both about their professional expectations, and about their personal way of life. One participant wrote: 'I feel like this quarantine introduced a new level of acculturation for me, and a level of adaptation for everyone in my community' (Sean). Another participant, whose motivation for taking the overseas position included abundant travel and cultural opportunities, was saddened that he had an extended holiday coming up and was restricted to staying within the metro area in which he lived. This teacher, who embodied servant leadership, being dedicated to student growth and energized by the exchanges during in-person classroom interactions, shared that 'teaching online is exhausting' (Jake). Another participant mentioned that she didn't know what the local protocol was in the event that she developed virus symptoms. Another teacher mentioned, before the schools closed, but after cases had been reported, that many of her students came to schools wearing masks, which made her ever aware of the threat of the virus. Another participant, after working tirelessly to upload weeks of instruction online, then departed the country to return to her home country before borders were closed, essentially enacting a *midnight run* (T. Archer, *Breaking your contract in China: New consequences for pulling a 'Midnight Run'*, *eChinacities*, Jan. 2, 2017). And yet another participant was vacationing in



another East Asian country when the shutdown began, which led to her spending a month in that country, teaching remotely with limited access to technology. Several participants felt overwhelmed with work demands, which essentially involved rapidly transitioning to an online model. Some were unsure of legal protocols should they have developed symptoms of COVID-19. All participants demonstrated a strong devotion to their students. From a leadership perspective, the burden of responsibility in this *new normal* is palpable. One educator, who is also a school leader, spoke of rigorous, time-sensitive directives from higher up, while recognizing the need to lead the group and keep his staff calm throughout.

### Financial Impacts for Self-Employed Educators

As mentioned earlier, international teachers may enjoy rich professional development (PD) opportunities. These are being redirected from educator-directed PD to crisis-related PD, and for obvious reasons, the medium has shifted to a virtual one. One educator who is not in my study, but who has assisted me in working with education gatekeepers in India, trains sojourning professionals in India through workshops using mindfulness and art-based practices. His work is purposefully *unplugged*; he noted that his line of work is virtually impossible due to travel restrictions, which require a quarantine period each time someone moves from one state to another. There are blockades in some cities that also prevent movement. The effect has been the cancellation of all such workshops. Unless this educator moves to an online medium, financial sustainability is jeopardized.

### Heightened Sense of Communal Caring

While the participants in this study may be feeling heightened anxiety, they are also noticing acts of compassion around them. For instance, in all three countries in which these participants live – Malaysia, China, and Macau – there is a perception that regional and school leaders are responding in adaptive ways. One participant shared:

The way Chinese people have responded to this situation is remarkable, and the statistics back up their resolve. What I have noticed is that people are nicer to each other – people patiently waited in line to collect their scarce produce, asking and providing masks for those without them, and rarely complaining about the heightened security and travel measures. Sometimes now, I see that people stare at me and wonder if I just entered the country, and they tend to keep their distance. (Sean)

Another participant explained that the area was managed by the police ‘to ensure no crowds and that people are abiding by the rules [...] we are getting through the challenges [...] and I feel it is mostly positive’ (Pat). Pat also shared that a social committee at school created a staff challenge while in isolation, that included:

... various exercises, challenges like reading books, learning new things, meditation challenges, all sorts of things. They are very aware that some staff live alone and may feel some negative effects from being isolated by themselves for a month or more.

## **Adaptive, Creative Leadership**

At the very highest level of leadership within one education hub in which my participants live and work is a clear, visionary, well-planned, adaptive leadership model. The leadership team understands that the crisis may be with us for a while, and is predicting declining enrolments. Around the world, students in higher education may be repatriated home, and stay in a limbo-esque holding pattern, while the race for a cure or vaccine is on. Some of the leaders in this education hub cited futurist leadership models, envisioning and quickly moving to develop small, modular certificate programs that can be useful to students while they obtain a deferral from their regular institution. Some programs are targeting the development of practical skill sets that may not be offered in an academic program but could complement the program. Other programs are targeting special interests, useful for the development of a hobby or side-line. These modular certificates, which are designed to be completed in short, concentrated spurts, can provide useful skills to their repertoire, and realizable in short periods of time for rapid reintegration back to the original study paths of students. In one publicly available interview, the leader shared an understanding of how parents might feel anxious about sending their children away in the fall, citing that she too is the parent of a student studying abroad. This compassionate, understanding approach is one that may serve to galvanize trust in the organization over the long term.

## **Conclusions**

The international school environment may be one that is already used to rapid change, uncertainty, and the need for adaptability. The concept of fit (Budrow & Tarc 2018: 867) is one that drives recruiting efforts, and it includes personal characteristics or skills that include 'intercultural competence and sensitivity, flexibility, adaptability, and self-awareness'. All of the participants in my study, and those outside the study but within these international educational contexts, could be described as having high capacities in all of these areas. They are still experiencing higher than usual stress, as are most people around the globe. It would be useful to document these stresses through further studies, and it would be especially useful should international schools be interested in developing or furthering crisis contingency planning for the future. A recent webinar on adaptive leadership for the future (Center for Asia Leadership [CAL] 2020) named empathy as the single most important trait to be developing in organizations.

There is good news in pondering the organizational effects of COVID in the context of international schooling. Running alongside with high stress levels is the presence of hopeful and resilient mindsets and evidence of compassionate behaviors. If these emerge and grow within organizations, everyone stands to gain in the long run. I have had a preference for transformational, servant, and distributed leadership models up until the COVID crisis. Now I can see the benefit of futurist leadership models, and believe that the development of futurist

leadership academic discussions and practical experiments will be on the rise. And so they should be.

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# Education in the Age of COVID-19: Educational Responses From Four Southeast Asian Countries

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**Abstract:** *The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in education systems around the planet to shift to an emergency-response mode. This paper explores educational responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the national education systems of Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. In order to examine the educational responses, this study employed a document analysis technique in building a simple case study for each country. To furnish the document analysis, social media platforms of each country's ministry or departments of education were searched for items related to COVID-19 education management. To provide a granular understanding of local educational responses, one English-based online newspaper was selected from each country and educational news related to COVID-19 were coded and analysed from the period of global lockdown in March 2020 to July 2020. It was evident that whilst all of these countries pivoted to online learning during the initial stage of the lockdown, all of them pushed to open schools as early as possible as online learning was found to be ineffective and further exacerbated existing inequalities in education. This study established several takeaways, which included that private-public partnerships and community-based initiatives are essential in mitigating the education crisis caused by COVID-19.*

**Keywords:** Education, schools, pandemic, South-east Asia, COVID-19

## Introduction

The COVID-19 public health crisis has penetrated into every element of human life, and it has resulted in education systems around the planet shifting to an emergency-response mode (Anderson 2020). As existing hierarchies in education temporarily lose power and there is a need to rethink critically top-down global policy reforms (Kobakhidze, 2020), education is being reinvented and reimagined at a local level. The impact of mass closure of physical schools has resulted in a possible generational learning crises (The World Bank 2020), and the impact of the pandemic has been significant in Southeast Asia, a sub-region that has strong economic growth, but typified with high levels of inequality, low social protection, and biodiversity loss (United Nations 2020). Therefore, this paper looks at the initial educational

responses of four Southeast Asian countries in their attempts to mitigate the learning loss caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Malaysia

Malaysia closed its schools on 16 March 2020 and reopened schools in a staggered phase with final year students returning on June 24. At the point of closure, schools were on a week-long semester break (14-20 March). Upon the closure, the immediate response from the Ministry of Education was utilising its social media platforms (Twitter and Facebook) to disseminate information to teachers, parents, and students on how online learning was set to be carried out. The ministry designed multiple infographics on how to access its online learning platforms, which was through a dedicated website ([portal.moe-dl.edu.my](http://portal.moe-dl.edu.my)). The ministry also outlined how lessons would be implemented using various online tools. Teachers were encouraged to try different methods in order to ensure that learning continued. From April 1 to April 16, Google For Education partnered with the Ministry of Education, along with other educational organisations, in conducting online webinars to upskill teachers. On 6 April, the Ministry of Education launched TV Okey (available on national broadcast), which screened learning content up to 2 hours (9am - 10am, 1pm - 2pm) daily. The Ministry of Education cancelled two national examinations (UPSR administered to final year primary school students, and PT3 administered to final year lower secondary students), and postponed SPM (equivalent to GCSE) for final year secondary school students to January 2021, from the traditional November-December period.

Although internet penetration is over 80 percent in Malaysia (N. Jalli, E-learning sees no smooth sailing in Malaysia and Indonesia, *Channel News Asia*, April 7, 2020), the Malaysian Minister of Education commented that around 40 percent of Malaysian students do not have mobile devices to carry out online learning (D. Chan, K. N. Karim & T. A. Yusof, Almost 40 pct of students can't study at home as they lack electronic devices, *New Straits Times*, April 15, 2020). To overcome this digital divide, on March 25, YTL Foundation collaborated with YTL Communications (YES network) and FrogAsia to launch its Learn From Home initiative (S. Kaur, YTL offers free data and e-learning from home for government school students, *New Straits Times*, March 25, 2020). Taking into account students from semi-urban and rural families with low incomes were the ones greatly affected due to school closure, the initiative offered free mobile phones (with YES 4G SIM card and 120GB of data) for poor students who were nominated by their teachers. Most Malaysian schools regained full capacity starting from July 22, although areas that had active COVID-19 cases were subjected to school closure for another month. Interestingly, when Malaysian schools re-opened, the ministry decided to add instructional time for content subjects such as sciences and mathematics, while reducing allocated time for languages.

## Singapore

Singapore closed schools on April 8 when the number of confirmed cases at the time of closure was 1,114. Initially the planned length of closure was for four weeks, with the planned reopening date on May 4. However, with spikes in the number of COVID-19 cases, schools were finally opened on June 1 with a phased school opening and blended learning. Graduating cohorts (final year students) were to attend on a daily basis, while other students alternated weekly between home-based learning (HBL) and in-person classes in schools (blended learning). Schools fully opened on June 29. Before the full closure of Singaporean schools, Singapore implemented a one-day-per-week HBL as a preparation for parents in case of the possibility of prolonged HBL. With HBL becoming an important feature in learning during the circuit breaker (Singapore's version of lockdown), access to an online learning device was an issue for disadvantaged children. Indeed, in Singapore, online learning has further magnified the inequalities of learning between those who have resources, and those who do not (S. Davie, Covid-19 pandemic shows children's well-being and success depend on more than just what happens in school, *The Straits Times*, May 28, 2020). Nonetheless, it was also reported that schools were quick to find solutions by loaning out laptops and learning devices to needy students (S. Davie, Covid-19 pandemic shows children's well-being and success depend on more than just what happens in school, *The Straits Times*, May 28, 2020). It was noted that more than 1,200 routers and 20,000 laptops and tablets had been loaned to students to do HBL (S. Davie, Covid-19 pandemic shows children's well-being and success depend on more than just what happens in school, *The Straits Times*, May 28, 2020). Similarly, another initiative addressing the digital divide was the UOB My Digital Space programme, sponsored by United Overseas Bank, which provided laptops to needy children (A. Hamzah, Needy kids get laptops on loan under UOB scheme, *The Straits Times*, July 30, 2020). Under the scheme, UOB gave digital learning kits to students from low-income families in Singapore, and also Brunei, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and eventually Indonesia and Thailand. More than 250 kits have been distributed in Singapore and UOB also partnered with Singtel and Singapore Press Holdings by donating a Wi-Fi package and a complimentary subscription of *The Straits Times*, a vernacular online newspaper.

The Singaporean education ministry also stated that if COVID-19 cases were to emerge in schools, the goal was to 'ring fence' these schools and not the full closure of Singaporean schools (J. Ang, Approach to Covid-19 cases in schools is to ring-fence on small scale, not close schools: Education Minister Ong Ye Kung, *The Straits Times*, July 17, 2020). The ministry also noted that HBL was going to be a regular feature in the Singaporean education system as it is said to encourage more independent and autonomous learning, which is considered as an important lifelong skill. With HBL becoming a permanent feature in the Singaporean education system, the ministry brought forward the National Digital Literacy Programme, which was supposed to be completed in 2028, to the end of 2021 (S. Davie, Lessons learned, opportunities seized amid Covid-19: Ong Ye Kung, *The Straits Times*, June 29, 2020). The goal of the programme was that every Singaporean student would get a personal laptop or tablet to aid their learning progress. The ministry took into consideration that disadvantaged

students were most affected during the school closure as they did not have any personal digital learning device to maximise their learning. Therefore, the ministry noted that one way to bridge the gap was through digital inclusion. In terms of examinations, the ministry scrapped mid-year exams, but national exams remained.

## Indonesia

Indonesia closed schools on March 16 when the number of confirmed cases at the time of closure was 117. The country immediately implemented a distance learning curriculum, and lessons were made available online and broadcast on television according to a daily timetable. Two major discourses that emerged from the analysis are the challenges faced by rural children to participate in online learning, and the pushback faced by the Ministry of Education and Culture in reopening schools. Geographically, Indonesia is an archipelago that is made up of more than 17,000 islands. Thus, internet connectivity is a major issue in the country, mainly due to insufficient infrastructure in remote and rural areas. Therefore, the mass closure of physical schools further put remote schools at a disadvantage as online learning failed to reach children who did not have any access to internet, computers, smart phones, or even television. Wahana Visi Indonesia compiled 170 letters from rural students describing their challenges of online learning during the pandemic (G. H. Cahya, Teachers, activists decry educational disparities exacerbated by outbreak, *The Jakarta Post*, July 22, 2020). The sudden switch to online learning also left teachers fearing technology, and the decreased interaction between student and teacher, hampered the social development of students (G. H. Cahya, Distance learning threatens to exacerbate education inequality in Indonesia, *The Jakarta Post*, July 19, 2020). Taking this into consideration, the Ministry of Education and Culture announced that schools would reopen from early July in low-risk areas (green zones), but this was met with a lot of pushback from different parties (G. H. Cahya, Decision to reopen more schools draws ire from teachers, *The Jakarta Post*, August 11, 2020). Nonetheless, the Minister of Education, Nadiem Makarim, defended the ministry's decision stating that Indonesia was not only going through a public health crisis, but also an educational crisis, and it was essential for schools to re-open to avoid permanent learning loss (R. Fachriansyah, COVID-19 crisis opportunity for education reform in Indonesia, *The Jakarta Post*, August 13, 2020).

Although the education minister reiterated that re-opening schools was optional depending on the situation, he also stated that Indonesia was the second last to re-open schools in Southeast Asia (R. Fachriansyah, EXCLUSIVE: Nadiem says schools reopening 'bold' but necessary amid 'education crisis', *The Jakarta Post*, August 12, 2020). This implied a hidden race that was going on with the reopening of schools in the region. In terms of examination, the ministry cancelled all examinations (G. Ghaliya, Indonesia scraps national exams due to COVID-19, *The Jakarta Post*, March 24, 2020). One of the initiatives being carried out to combat the learning loss caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was the Merdeka Belajar, which roughly translates to freedom in learning, a policy which grants teachers the freedom to focus only on the essential aspects of the present curriculum (R. Fachriansyah, COVID-19 crisis opportunity

for education reform in Indonesia, *The Jakarta Post*, August 13, 2020). Another community-based initiative was by Wartawan Lintas Media which donated old, but still functioning, smartphones to needy students who had no access to technology during the pandemic (G. H. Cahya, Distance learning threatens to exacerbate education inequality in Indonesia, *The Jakarta Post*, July 19, 2020). Collaborative learning was also becoming a key informal feature among Indonesian schools. One such example was Sinarmas World Academy (SWA) in Bumi Serpong Damai (BSD) that was collaborating with public schools, such as SMA 6 and SMA 28 state high schools in South Tangerang. The collaboration involved sharing online learning videos and promoting friendship among students from all three schools (Inforial, Making online learning work for students, *The Jakarta Post*, August 12, 2020).

## Thailand

Thailand closed schools on March 16 when the number of confirmed cases at the time of was 147. The school closure coincided with the end of the school year. After several postponements, schools and universities were fully opened on August 13, five months after the COVID-19 closures. In April 2020, the education minister of Thailand, Nataphol Teepsuwan, informed UNESCO about Thailand's educational strategy in addressing the learning crisis (UNESCO Bangkok 2020). Six major strategies were described. According to the report, the minister mentioned that the ministry arranged a distance learning television (DLTV) model nationwide. The minister reaffirmed that this will be the main solution during the period of school closure as television is able to reach even underprivileged children. The second strategy mentioned was to use new pedagogical approaches and reinforce the importance of parental support. For primary students (grade 1-6), the pedagogical method focused on one-way communication, while for secondary students, more interaction between teacher and students was encouraged. Teachers were encouraged to use various online platforms to reach their students. Meanwhile, during the school closure, the role of parents in assisting their children's learning was essential. The third strategy highlighted the impending need for Thai teachers to enhance their ICT skills. The fourth strategy was to explore a suitable assessment system to monitor learning performance in crisis. The ministry suggested that there should be a national system to record students' learning and progress. The system also intends to collect data on how teachers or instructors prepare their lesson plans. The ministry believes that by collecting data it can be better informed to assess the online education planning and developing process. Finally, the last strategy mentioned by the minister was the pandemic has shifted priorities and this implies that resource allocations are also likely to shift. According to the minister, if schools continue to be affected by the outbreak, the budget allocations are likely to shift from schools to the development of curricula, online teaching, and ICT devices which are considered crucial tools to maximise online learning.

While all national education systems around the world continue to navigate the uncharted educational spaces they are currently in, it is undeniable that schools play such an important role in learning. This is because, fast-forward in August 2020, Thailand has been looking at



every possible opportunity to bring schools and universities to normalcy (Post Reporters, Education ministry to push for full school opening, *The Bangkok Post*, August 4, 2020). This is chiefly because the technological divide in Thailand is a pressing problem for the promotion of more online learning (R. Lao, Pandemic is exposing the gaps in Thai education, *The Bangkok Post*, May 1, 2020). Schools in Thailand were opened with alternate schooling in which one group of students studied for five days in a row at school, while the other group of students learnt through online lessons (Post Reporters, Split classes, alternate days await school students, *The Bangkok Post*, June 12, 2020). After one week, the two groups switched. However, this arrangement was considered flawed as Dr Taweasilp, the spokesperson for the Centre for COVID-19 Situation Administration, mentioned that students who do not possess personal learning devices or even computer hardware and software were unable to take advantage of online learning (Post Reporters, Officials mull full reopening of schools, *The Bangkok Post*, July 28, 2020). Besides that, impoverished students could not take advantage of state-run school lunch programmes when they are not present in schools. Similarly, the education ministry believed that partial re-opening might not be conducive for students' learning development.

## Conclusion

There are several takeaways about online learning during the pandemic. From the analysis, we can conclude that the challenges faced by the countries are not unique. It can be said that online learning really translates to crisis teaching. Within a short period of time, physical teaching shifted to an online format where all parties were not particularly prepared for it. The first takeaway from this study is communities on the fringes of societies are the ones greatly affected by the pandemic in terms of education. Consequently, rural children are further disadvantaged and already existing learning gaps are certainly to be exacerbated. The next takeaway is digital inclusion is a necessity if online learning is to be maximised. One of the key challenges that resonated with all the countries was the lack of infrastructure and devices to conduct online learning. Apart from that, teachers were not entirely prepared to conduct online teaching, while the lack of class interaction led to low student acceptance of online learning. Finally, in order to mitigate the learning crisis, private-public partnerships in education need to be enhanced and community-based initiatives are needed to provide rapid local solutions.

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# Special Education Students in Public High Schools During COVID-19 in the USA

**Matthew Nelson and Elizabeth Murakami**

**Abstract:** *The world, nation, and states have never experienced a pandemic that would affect us all at the same time. This article examines unprecedented changes and instructional delivery challenges under the COVID-19 health crisis. For USA students, school closures during the crisis jeopardised especially those underserved and with special needs, in their ability to receive equitable opportunities. In this article we exemplify how the pandemic exacerbated unequal and inequitable outcomes, with key leadership considerations focused on high school students with special needs.*

**Keywords:** School district leadership, COVID-19, special education, pandemic

## Introduction

Peter is a 12<sup>th</sup> grade student (senior) in a rural high school in Texas and diagnosed with autism. With accommodations and supports from special education and general teachers, he has been very successful. He has forged strong relationships with his special education case manager and his Foreign Language teacher. During his senior year, Peter was maintaining high grades (A's and B's). Although he struggled with some social skills, he was a capable and accomplished student.

Peter struggled when working with groups or presenting in front of peers, but his case manager reported tremendous growth since he began high school. Just before the COVID-19 outbreak, Peter was participating in group learning and was a leader in his German class. He was on track to finishing high school successfully. Peter aspired to go to college, demonstrating interest in cinematography. His special education case manager researched college programmes of interest to Peter. He was meeting the GPA minimum required for admission at New York University (NYU) (3.69) and was but a few points away from meeting the GPA requirement at University of Southern California (USC) (3.73).

On March 23, 2020, Texas mandated school closures due to COVID-19. The district organised measures for at-home online learning, provided tablets/laptops for students as well as WiFi strategically located across the schools' vicinities. However, once the at-home learning began, Peter did not log into class meetings or check in with his teachers. Attempts to contact him were futile. Due to the loss of the supportive campus environment and loss of positive teacher interactions, Peter was in real danger of failing courses.

The school diagnostician finally reached Peter's father. He reported that he worked 12+ hours daily and as a result, was unable to assist Peter with school. Peter was at home alone for the better part of most days and did not have access to internet. Peter was unable to access the school's WiFi due to distance and his father's schedule. The father reported that Peter was depressed and did not want to get out of the bed: 'I am at a loss. I don't know how to help my son.'

Peter exemplifies the reality of many students. Prior to COVID-19, educational opportunities for students in the USA were already uneven with a number of variables impacting academic performance, including a lack of family structure, behavioural and/or cognitive limitations among students, language learners, socioeconomic disparities and racial discrimination (Spring 2018). During COVID-19 these variables were magnified, jeopardising students' ability to earn high academic achievement. If students like Peter struggled to perform in school, these extraordinary times further limited his chances of success. They were robbed of the opportunity for equitable outcomes when compared to non-disabled students with greater resources.

Peter's example in a public school in the state of Texas allow us to share how unprecedented changes during the pandemic impacted students in need of special services. Here, we examine how adaptations were addressed in relation to unequal or inequitable outcomes during COVID-19. This paper was developed during the pandemic, between March and July 2020, when national and state mandates closed schools and while schools puzzled through decisions to reopen in August. We used pseudonyms for the student's story and school district, with the intent of providing context to this case, and transferability to similar settings.

## **Rationale**

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) is the state's entity that oversees education for more than five million students, distributing federal and state funding, administering curriculum, instructional materials, assessment and accountability, and support for specific student populations. Half a million of these students, or 9.6 percent, received special education services (TEA 2020b). For a student to receive special education services within public schools in Texas, the student must meet eligibility requirements.

Once a student has met eligibility through an evaluation process (sometimes through an initial teacher referral, or from specialists outside of school), an Admission, Review and Dismissal (ARD) committee convenes to determine the need and degree of supports and

services. With parental participation, the committee reviews medical and academic evaluations, results of any State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) (TEA 2020c), as well as behavioural and physical needs (Navigate Life Texas 2020). If the ARD committee determines that the student will receive special education services, the student is supported by trained case managers, behaviour, speech, or other specialists, and special education teachers. These professionals supervise the educational placement, needed curricular modifications and other accommodations. These services are documented and reported to parents throughout the year. Progress is closely monitored. If a student fails to make progress, the committee is required to meet again to determine the reason(s) for the lack of progress and adjustments to the student's educational plan are made.

Important to consider in reporting on Peter's story is that in 2018, federal investigations found Texas failed to provide adequate services for these students. In order to control the enrolment of students for special education programmes, TEA was found operating under a policy limiting the percentage of students receiving services (Ayala 2018). This policy resulted in an artificial decline of special education services while the overall population of students grew by more than a million during the same period. That same year, the US Department of Education required Texas to put into place a corrective action plan. Through the plan, the state attempted to address the lack of appropriate services for students. Although some progress was made before the pandemic, support for these students was still disproportionate and was further aggravated by the pandemic.

## Special Education During COVID-19

Peter exemplifies how high school can be a testing time for students. Yager-Elorriaga and McWhirter (2014) recognised that today's 'young people are facing huge amounts of distress, especially from body image issues, substance abuse, behaviors, lack of confidence or security, not fitting in, or not performing well enough' (p. 31). While confronting these issues, Peter needed to follow a rigorous coursework programme, prepare for state and course assessments, and pursue college admissions. A concern for special education students in high school relates to how successful they will be when transitioning to college. Gil (2007) confirmed that 'the more preparation they have prior to beginning their journey to postsecondary education, the greater the likelihood of a smooth transition' (p. 12). Nonetheless, school districts never anticipated the life-altering measures and the uncertainty generated by school closures.

As schools closed during the pandemic, TEA (2020a) required school districts to report on each student using the following terms: (a) engaged (when students completed assignments), or (b) contactable (when students were responsive to teachers). The report showed that one in ten students (11.3%) disengaged or were not contactable during the crisis. One school district with 489,000 students in a metropolitan area in the state, in fact, lost contact with 9,300 students in the initial weeks after the school closures (Phillips 2020). Economically

disadvantaged students showed a higher degree of disengagement, and special education students were among the ones with the higher needs of adjustments in communication, modified instructional resources, and specialised services when schools moved to online delivery. Teachers were pressed to generate materials and activities in one week, and adjustments for students in special education required longer adjustments.

Out of 254 counties (municipalities), 172 counties in Texas are rural, with many students having limited access to WiFi (Texas Health and Human Services 2020). The delivery of education was not limited to online access, when transitioning from school to the home in March 2020. Teachers trying to reach students by phone were unable to locate families in districts, especially where the turnover of students was high. Not all parents came to schools to pick up laptops or materials prepared for students. Some small rural districts distributed breakfast and lunch using the school buses.

## School Leadership in COVID-19 Times

District superintendents and principals seemed to be challenged by three main concerns, including teachers' skillset for remote delivery, access and delivery platform, and home environment, as follows:

**Teachers' Skillset.** For the first time across the nation, educators were required to transition their curriculum to at-home learning on a large scale. Huerta, Shafer, Barbour, Miron and Gulosino (2015), considered that '[w]hile a great deal of research has focused on defining teacher quality in traditional settings, little is known about what constitutes teacher quality in virtual schools' (p. 20). Principals and teachers poured their energies into developing learning comparable with on-campus opportunities. Nonetheless, Smith, Basham, Rice and Carter (2016) observed how online learning models 'for well-designed courses and assessments are likely to be scarce in the newness' (p. 176).

**Delivery Platform.** Overnight, students lost both resources and supports. Even though it may be assumed that all households have WiFi, not all students had high speed internet and stable environments for learning at home. While some students enjoyed home routines, meals, and family interactions to support their learning – some equally proficient students proved to not have comparable opportunities, hence Peter's example. Yager-Elorriaga and McWhirter (2014) warned that without supports, students 'are given the responsibility to teach themselves, placing them at the mercy of their individual differences such as family background, innate ability, and socioeconomic status' (p. 33). Parents also needed to learn how to use technology and educational platforms set by schools.

**Home Environment.** A high number of students at risk of failing are found in the poorest or rural areas of the state. There were noticeable differences in student outcomes, where some students earned better marks due to being in an advantaged home (i.e. with stay-at-home parents, with a college education). Those in less advantaged homes were unable to sustain the same academic achievement on their own, despite the teachers' best efforts online. At

school, Peter received multiple supports like adaptations, teachers and counsellors' supervision, and specialised services. These supports were lost when schools shut down and at-home learning began. Many students had parents that were considered essential workers (i.e. construction, transportation, medical personnel, etc.) and were unable to supervise their children's school work.

Not included in the three areas of concern was the leadership to generate important accommodations for special education students. Special Education directors were key personnel in a district's office helping schools in facilitating the transition to online services. TEA (2020b) emphasised that, to the greatest extent possible, school districts were to continue providing special education services to students. To that end, TEA provided general guidelines and support to districts regarding continued services for these students. These guidelines were an important first step as districts navigated an uncharted territory. In instances when neither parents nor teachers were skilled to provide specialised academic delivery, districts provided additional support to both the adults and students. Instructional videos, equipment like speech devices, or one-on-one therapy were prepared for each child. Additionally, some districts relied on *out of the box* thinking and began providing services through teletherapy, virtual meetings with parents to provide support and resources and special education staff attending virtual class meetings to provide support for students. For school leaders, it was important to ask parents to keep an accurate record of documented challenges and student difficulties at home, since these students would be eligible to receive extra professional help once schools are open again (Swaby 2020).

## Final Thoughts

Peter transitioned to at-home learning on March 23, 2020. Most parents in different districts received technology and online guidelines, materials, schedules, and assignments. At the same time, parents were impacted with changed lifestyles, where some were deemed *non-essential workers* and could work from home supporting their children's academics. Parents deemed *essential workers* continued working away from home, with restricted capacity to support children with at-home learning. While some had more stable home environments, many were from less stable homes. Some students benefitted from one (if not two) supportive parents while others would have no support and/or preparedness for special education needs. As an essential worker, Peter's father was working long hours and could not make sure his son was even out of bed.

As schools prepare to reopen in the Fall, we are reminded that USA's education goals have been controversial, where Spring (2018) affirmed that 'equality of opportunity refers to everyone having the same chance to pursue wealth. It does not mean that everyone will have equal status or income, but just an equal chance to economically succeed' (p. 5). COVID-19 produced massive shockwaves, intensifying unequal and inequitable outcomes among students. TEA (2020b) recognised that when focusing on the priorities of special education

students, '[t]here is no defined or correct method to adequately and equitably meet the needs of all students in an unprecedented event such as the current COVID-19 pandemic response' (p. 1). Nonetheless, the agency confirmed that students with disabilities should have equal access to the same opportunities as when schools were open.

In terms of leadership, Starratt (1991) considered that 'educational administrators have a moral responsibility to be proactive about creating an ethical environment for the conduct of education' (p. 187). Principals and teachers had to make swift decisions about what would be a true representation of students' abilities in the academic work submitted by parents. Schools and their leaders could not guarantee that every child's at-home learning environment was equal and equitable, especially when students required specialists and accommodations beyond those able to be offered through a virtual learning environment. The next challenge when reopening schools in the Fall is to increase the support for those who have had their academic achievement compromised due to the limited educational services during the pandemic.

School districts cannot ignore how the pandemic revealed how school leaders, teachers, students and families are less prepared for specialised educational delivery. Unchanged, educational practices often assumed home environments to be equal and alike. Such a viewpoint would be 'blind to [the] socioeconomic and cultural differences' (Allen, English & Papa 2014: 141). Modifications are warranted in order to address students' learning, beyond the crisis, when we cannot be indifferent to the needs of students both in schools and at-home, considering their backgrounds, context, and differences.

Peter struggled with at-home learning and fell into a group of students who were hard to reach following the schools' shutdown. After the diagnostician connected with Peter's father, they strategised and employed strategies to reengage Peter in his academic activities. Peter interacted weekly with his teachers by phone and goals were met. School personnel hand-delivered printed packets to Peter's home. He received assistance by phone. He was back on track to complete high school with a GPA that would enable him to attend college. Peter's experience ended as a success story. But for every Peter, there were likely more students across the state and around the world who got lost in the transition from school closures to at-home learning. Educational leaders must be vigilant to safeguard learning in ways that best promote equal and equitable outcomes for all students.

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## International Studies in Educational Administration

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