

Leading schools during challenging times: The impact of COVID-19 in catalysing a 4IR driven culture of learning
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01 September 2021

Introduction

While significant, the COVID-19 pandemic is unlikely to be the last crisis we will face in our lifetime, and it's not the first time that school leaders have been called upon to lead through times of ambiguity.

UNESCO reports that one year into the COVID-19 pandemic, close to half the world's learner are still affected by partial or full school closures, and over 100 million additional children, internationally, will fall below the minimum proficiency level in reading as a result of the health crisis.

A World Bank report suggests that COVID 19 is likely to cause the first increase in global poverty since 1998. Estimates suggest that COVID 19 will push millions of people into extreme poverty from 2020 and beyond. The impact on young people will be immeasurable, far reaching, devastating and potentially irreversible.

We must aim to provide a meaningful future for our youth that goes beyond employability, simply getting children through matric isn't enough. In a country where more than 30% of young people are unemployed, we've got to give them the skills they need to survive, and thrive, in the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

What kind of school culture is needed for education to thrive in a fast-changing world?

Leadership at every level – from school leaders to district offices to provincial departments – is a critical part of education systems, and never more so than in the current context of the global Covid-19 pandemic. School leaders in these times cannot simply go about business as usual: leading in disruptive times and beyond means being able to navigate new pathways. The waves of school closures and re-openings have clearly demonstrated how important good leadership is to learning in all forms.

Challenges faced by school leaders, in the past, have ranged from rebuilding after environmental disasters through to supporting communities through economic, social, and emotional devastation. During these times, school leaders have provided clarity and direction, built resilience and instilled hope as they remained focused on the best possible outcomes for their learners and school communities.

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

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

Being fully aware of the significance of leadership and the inevitability of change, we must consider how to best equip all leaders to respond to the current crisis and create more equitable and resilient education systems beyond it.

Prioritising education recovery is crucial to avoid a generational catastrophe and as the education sector we must make all effort to mitigate the impact of school closures, address learning losses and adapt education systems, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged communities.

There is no guidebook for school leaders as they make decisions and try to move forward during the pandemic. With more than 40% children rotating classes, the uncertainty is a challenge for school leaders who are often used to orderliness and control.

The pandemic has clearly illustrated the importance of effective use of technology and data for inclusion and learning during times of disruption. During the crisis, school leaders around the world rapidly adapted to new learning environments to comply with public health regulations and lockdowns. Given the lack of precedent (and in many cases, government guidelines), this crisis has been extremely challenging for school leaders but has also provided an opportunity for them to accelerate change at an unprecedented scale and pace.

Despite large-scale, national efforts to utilize technology in support of remote learning, distance education and online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, clear fault lines have emerged.

For example,

- In the USA it has been noted that the pandemic has highlighted disparities in access to digital devices and the internet. When schools were closed, 15 percent of U.S. households and 35 percent of low-income households with school-age children did not have a high-speed internet connection at home. In early April, nearly 2/3 of leaders in high-poverty districts reported that a lack of basic technology was a 'major' problem. (Darling Hammond 2020)
- Similarly in the UK, COVID19 has revealed a stark digital divide with 1.9 million households having no access to the internet and tens of millions reliant on pay-as-you-go services to make phone calls or access healthcare, education and benefits online.
- In South Africa, No-Fee schools that service communities have limited resources. Very few of the country's no-fee schools have access to the devices, skills and bandwidth needed to provide any form of ICT education. Further, provincial variances also exist in terms of access to funding and other resources to address the technology gaps that exist in schools. On the other hand, fee-charging schools are better resourced and were more responsive. In addition, a significant number of schools in South Africa have limited to no internet connectivity, which is essential for education delivery during trying times. Before the pandemic, many school leaders and teachers in the country had not received substantive formal technology training, either to support blended teaching and learning or to fully apply online learning.

The decision by National Government to shut down schools in response to the pandemic forced teachers to adapt and innovate to ensure that learning continued despite the challenges faced. The Education Departments developed guides for teachers addressing on approaches and available resources that they could use when teaching from home. This is how teachers across South African schools have responded to COVID-19:

- Having little to no previous experience, they have had to adapt to online learning platforms while learning how to use learning management systems during the pandemic.
- To keep supporting learners, the teachers used online teaching resources and conducted one-on-one consultations using platforms like Zoom, WhatsApp and Google messaging services that allow video calls.
- The WhatsApp messaging service has been repurposed for learning. Schools have created WhatsApp learning groups to take pictures of book pages and send them to parents, while learners receiving teaching material through their smartphone apps have enabled classes to continue. The Department of Basic Education also launched a complementary WhatsApp portal to provide teachers with information about COVID-19 and educational material.
- In some instances, teachers pasted pieces of paper on the wall and used them as “whiteboards”, then recorded themselves on their phones to teach learners from these whiteboards. They shared the videos with parents via the WhatsApp groups. Schools have also used platforms such as Facebook to share information and send learning material to parents.
- Radio and television have also been used by teachers to supplement learning. Prior to the pandemic, these had lost popularity as key learning media. But teachers now recognise that since most learners have access to them, they should be incorporated into remote learning material. The Basic Education Department also recognised that pupils were more likely to be able to access radio and television compared to any other technological medium of learning.

While South Africa’s focus prior to the pandemic was on digital transformation in the fourth industrial revolution, teachers were emerging as key players in digital skills development and sustainability. We must intensify our efforts to embed information and communication technology (ICT) into our schools and curriculums. Young people who do not have digital skills and who cannot access the internet are not equipped to participate in the digital economy. Having 4IR skills and competencies is critical for any form of economic participation post-secondary school.

What kind of school leadership is needed during challenging times?

Starting out as a school leader in the current crisis is daunting, but an intentional and equity-based leadership entry plan can help. Linking all of these principles together is the conviction that education systems must transform even more quickly in the wake of the current emergency to avoid exacerbating the learning crisis. In the recent event, many education systems pre-Covid were not working well enough for many – not least the disadvantaged and marginalised.

Covid-19 has redefined school leadership but at the same time there are no leadership standards or benchmarks. But school leaders have to be guided by constitutional principles that focus on equity, inclusion, and wellbeing of all children. This is foundational to effective leadership.

Effective school leaders will be instrumental in transforming systems, but policymakers, government development partners, and civil society organisations, among others, will need to support and

empower them to effect meaningful change and create more equitable, resilient, and responsive systems for our future.

During challenging times, the best leaders act as champions for all learners, but especially the most vulnerable. These leaders must focus on the impact on disadvantaged children and young people, especially marginalised girls, poorer households and communities, and learners with special education needs and disabilities.

Beyond COVID-19, a lesson for South Africa and many other countries is the role that school leaders play in supporting teachers in co-creating a digital learning environment. For technology to be adopted in schools, the school leadership play an important role in the sustainable use of any educational technology.

We must give school leaders ownership of the process, which is vital, in the technology adoption process. To this end, school leaders must be encouraged to support teachers through the learning journey. School leaders must be the champions of technology in schools and need to recognise and reward teachers in order that technology adoption is not seen as just an additional task or burden for teachers.

The Covid-19 pandemic is a reminder that school-community-private partnerships have the potential to help us respond to systemic problems efficiently and quickly. That's why we believe that the answer lies in bringing together a broad range of partners, each with a specific understanding of the problem, to deliver a complete ICT solution to the learners that need it the most.

The evidence of leadership's impact on learning is significant. In one study, almost a third of the changes in learning were attributed to leadership – making it second only to classroom teaching in its impact on education outcomes.

Leadership's impact has been made very clear during the Covid-19 crisis, in which leaders have adapted and innovated alongside teachers to ensure education continuity for children and young people. Yet leadership is often given little attention, and there has not been enough investment to understand how to best select and professionally develop leaders so they can support a wide range of education outcomes for all learners.

As the pandemic continues, we know that a return to 'normal' will not be enough to improve the life chances of the generation whose education has been so disrupted during this time. New thinking driven by strong leadership is needed if we are to create more inclusive, equitable systems that can promote quality education for every child and young person.

The focus on equity and wellbeing will remain critical as schools reopen and countries try to build more resilient systems. School leaders need support and training to help them better ensure the wellbeing of their learners and staff. The Covid-19 crisis has clearly demonstrated that the health of education systems is linked to the wellbeing of communities – with the disadvantaged often faring worst. This impact notably includes learners' wellbeing, but leaders have also had to consider wellbeing and equity in the broader education ecosystem – for instance, among teachers and families.

How can we enhance collaboration within and beyond schools for meaningful change?

School heads are at the heart of the education system, connecting education authorities, teachers, learners and communities. Like in our own bodies, when the heart fails, the entire system breaks down. School heads have been under enormous pressure to put together the emergency response to schooling amidst a pandemic. In times of crisis, more than ever, they need time and energy to concentrate on the immediate challenges. This could be done through measures such as temporarily adjusting school heads' administrative workloads or compensating them for the increased volume of work. During difficult times, it is important that school leaders are encouraged, supported and their efforts recognised as they play a crucial role in ensuring learning continues, even at a distance.

As lockdowns ease and schools reopen, it's as good a time as any to take stock and look at the likely future of education. It is an opportunity to ensure that children who start school from now on will grow up to be workers and leaders in a digital-first world that will demand new skills and new ways of thinking.

Adaptive or complex challenges can be approached in multiple ways, often with multiple solutions and usually require changes in numerous areas. Adaptive leadership requires collaborative problem solving, continual learning and adaptation, the leveraging of multiple perspectives and shared leadership responsibilities (Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano 2018).

Education leaders should adopt a proactive approach to contributing to the mitigation of the impact of the Pandemic and to prevent learning loss during the period of necessary social distancing. They should also collaborate with internal and external role-players to implement programmes to compensate for the lost time and for the learning losses.

Because a Pandemic is the quintessential adaptive challenge, creating opportunities for rapid learning and continuous improvement is necessary. Also, in addressing this adaptive challenge, collaboration will be essential, everyone will need to step up, get out of the comfort zone to get the job of educating learners done. School leaders must structure the school response in three different time horizons. The first one, most immediate, focused on completing the ongoing academic year. The second one, focused on the following academic year in the event a new variant impact and that social distance measures continue to be necessary. The third one focuses on a multi-year recovery plan that must be adjusted continually for each subsequent loss of time.

Good leadership in schools fosters nurturing learning environments that help children grow and develop. To cultivate such an environment, school heads must navigate and promote collaboration across the often complex network of stakeholders: education authorities, teachers, learners, parents and local communities. In a sense, school heads are the glue that holds everyone together.

When school leaders create a culture of collaboration within and between schools, they can powerfully impact teachers' professional development and leadership skills. Communities of practice and networks of schools promote sharing of knowledge, innovations, and expertise, helping teachers to lead on improving their own practice.

What are some of the key imperatives highlighted by the pandemic, which we should hold on to as we "build back better"?

As we move beyond the pandemic, education systems must accelerate transformation of education systems into more equitable and inclusive learning systems – and school leaders have a key role to play.

The education system needs to build e-learning ecosystems involving national and provincial governments, schools, teachers, parents, telecommunications companies, NGOs and the private sector. Most importantly, teachers need to be supported and trained in digital education. These interventions should look beyond the pandemic as critical components enabling learning with technology in and beyond the classroom.

The Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) is successfully implementing ‘Schools of the Future Paperless Classroom Programme’ which thus far is relevant in terms of addressing the educational needs in the 21st Century. The implementation targets two categories of schools, namely Full ICT Schools (Grade 7 – 12) and No/Fee Paying Secondary (Grade increment from Grade 12 – 8). The ICT Rollout in these schools entailed the provision of:

- **Full ICT Schools:** ICT devices (Learners, Teachers & Classrooms) preloaded with digital content and Wi-Fi Connectivity.
- **No/Fee Paying Sec:** ICT devices (Teachers & Classrooms) preloaded with digital content and Wi-Fi Connectivity.

The effect of COVID-19 virus has forced the Department to rethink their delivery models. Health Experts have projected that the virus may be with us for the next 18 months. It is for this reason that the GDE is compelled to adjust to the new normal to prevent disruption to teaching and learning by unlocking efficiencies emanating from the existing ICT, multi-media as well as broadcasting resources.

An audit of all the existing investments has been conducted with a view to identify the gaps, consolidate, repackage and respond with a virtual classroom solution in preparation for a worst-case scenario. The current ICT investments predominantly provide for a classroom solution with limited configuration to cater for virtual learning which is mostly needed under the prevailing conditions.

It is imperative to support forms of organisation that provide learners time to engage in predictable and structured learning opportunities. When possible, those should draw on on-line activities because they provide the richest modality for interactive learning. Achieving this would require ensuring access to devices and connectivity for the learners who do not have them. When this is not possible, other modalities such as television, radio, podcasts, DVDs and learning packets should be used for the delivery of educational content to learners.

Different timeframes will also influence the various options to be deployed. For example, in the short term, schools that do not already have an existing infrastructure to support online learning and universal access to devices, it is unlikely that online education can be deployed to deliver education. Other modalities will be necessary, of lower cost and relative ease of implementation, such as radio education or educational television. In the medium term, however, it is possible to provide the infrastructure for online learning, an investment which is likely to have benefits that extend well beyond the current predicament.

As a response to Covid 19 challenges, the GDE solution has been repositioned from being classroom based to cater for virtual learning and mitigate for instances where learners are unable to come to school during the hard lockdown alert levels. Technology provides for an alternative platform for curriculum delivery with more agility and adaptability to address the educational needs of the learners more specifically and on point.

The intention is to prevent or minimise disruptions in teaching and learning during these trying times caused by COVID-19. It is for this reason the department will focus on two new innovations in the province:

Firstly, we will adapt the current solution to a virtual classroom solution. This proposed solution seeks to cater for an eventuality where the learners and the educators may not be under one roof because of lockdown or other complications. Through the Virtual Platform the teacher needs to be in full control of the class, be able to view learners in attendance, present a lesson (display the lesson script, explain the content, annotate on the lesson plan, allow for class participation/interaction through chat a function or oral communication between the teacher and learners). The learners and the teachers should be able to use the platform for collaboration with the teacher utilizing any ICT Device (Tablet device, Cell phone, Laptop, etc.).

The content is being designed to provide learners opportunities for response and interaction. It may be necessary to have two different strategies for the short and medium term, in the event the Pandemic is not controlled before the start of the next academic year. In the short term, it is likely not feasible to create an infrastructure of connectivity and to provide devices to all learners in systems where those are not already available.

Secondly, it may be necessary to depend on lower cost technologies such as radio and educational television. However, it is imperative to invest in the development of such infrastructure where it is lacking, something which is difficult to do out of the ordinary education budgets, but which the response to this Pandemic may contemplate as an essential investment. This investment could provide devices to learners and teachers and connectivity, to support a model of online learning that allows the greatest possible interaction in real time among learners, among learners and teachers, and with parents, as well as the creation of school networks and professional teacher communities across schools.

The GDE is currently building a broadcasting studio supported by Sci-Bono to cater for learners who are not yet benefiting from the current rollout. This will allow the department to use the SABC and other local channels but also stream and create on demand content.

Nowhere has the role of school heads been more visible than during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, with generalised lockdowns and school closures in countries all over the world. Not only did they have to co-ordinate measures to maintain learning continuity during the lockdown and school closures, but they were also responsible for ensuring a safe learning environment when schools were allowed to reopen. Through the GDE ICT project and solution, we are taking a strong partnership approach and working very closely with the schools and sister department on a sustainable system.

Thanks