School leadership during a pandemic: navigating tensions

Deborah M. Netolicky
Department of Education, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia

Abstract

Purpose – This paper explores, from the perspective of an Australian pracademic, how school leaders are leading during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Design/methodology/approach – This essay explores the tensions navigated by school leaders leading during this time of global crisis, by looking to research as well as the author's lived experience.

Findings – The author finds that school leaders are navigating the following: accountability and autonomy; equity and excellence; the individual and the collective and well-being and workload.

Originality/value – This paper offers insights into school leadership, at all times but especially during times of crisis and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords Education reform, Leadership, School leadership, Professional capital, School reform, Professional collaboration

Paper type Viewpoint

The work of educational leaders is always complex. It involves strategy, culture, relationships, administration, operations and complex decision-making, with multiple moving parts and often conflicting stakeholder views. During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools and school systems are additionally responding to constantly evolving circumstances, the increasing complexities of the lives of those in the communities they serve and to external narratives. We are subject to the court of public, political and media opinion. In my context of Australia, teachers have been hailed as heroes and rock stars and also denigrated as childminders or selfish cowards too self-centred or afraid to teach in classrooms during a pandemic.

I write as a pracademic in this pandemic – a teacher, school leader and researcher who is living teaching, leading and parenting. The distance learning and teaching we have turned to – or "pivoted to", as the popular language of these times might attest – is not a well-planned and deliberate model of best practice but a temporary response to a crisis. We are doing the best we can in the circumstances, with little lead in time and minimal upskilling, and most of it is not ideal. Here I explore – based on research and also my own lived experience of teaching, and leading teaching and learning, at my Australian school – the tensions that school leaders are currently navigating during this state of global emergency.

Strategy and operations: leading fast and slow

School leaders balance strategic and operational leadership. Shared vision and moral purpose anchor their decisions and align operations with strategy. They simultaneously make decisions with a view of the "dance floor" as well as from the "balcony". They must consider a range of impacts (individual, organisation, well-being, learning, service provision, performance, staffing, financial implications, management of resources and sustainability of business) while keeping all of their individual people in mind. To make effective decisions, they must know the intricacies and idiosyncrasies of their contexts but also best practice occurring elsewhere and the best available evidence of what is likely to work.

In a crisis such as the one in which we are currently existing, perfection is the enemy of progress. Michael Ryan, Executive Director of WHO, recently explained in regard to emergency response (Marco Derksen, 2020) that in an emergency we "need to act quickly ... be the first mover." "Speed trumps perfection," he says, adding that, "everyone is afraid of the consequence

of error, but the greatest error is not to move. The greatest error is to be paralysed by the fear of failure." In a time of crisis, leaders must act swiftly and with foresight but also with careful consideration of options, consequences and side effects of actions taken. They must communicate with clarity and purpose but also with empathy and humanity.

Kahneman (2011) explores how we think "fast and slow": either automatically and quickly with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control, or with methodical concentrated effort. During a pandemic, leaders are simultaneously leading fast and slow. The pace of change and constantly shifting landscape mean that intuition and speed are required but also conscious, deliberate and well-considered planning.

Accountability and autonomy: equity and excellence

School leaders walk the tightrope of accountability on one hand and autonomy on the other. Keddie *et al.* (2018) call these tensions "responsibilisation" and "freedom". That is, school leaders are at once constrained by accountability regimes, rankings, comparisons and an emphasis on external testing data, but they have some freedoms to make their own decisions within tight parameters. This performative environment has been interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the usual measures of education success have been cancelled or postponed. High-stakes standardised testings like Australia's NAPLAN and the United Kingdom's GCSE have been cancelled. Universities are rethinking entrance requirements based on the disruption to final year students' education and their examinations. Schools are, however, performing in new ways. School websites and social media channels are full of graphics showing schools' adjusted timetables and approaches to learning and well-being during this time, as well as photographs of students and teachers at schools and in homes performing their current roles.

The current disruption to education has schools and education systems considering the humanity of education, rather than its measurable outcomes. Last year, Harris and Jones argued that "equity has finally caught up with excellence in the minds and priorities of policymakers" (2019, p. 391). The realities of education in a COVID-19 world have brought equity into even sharper focus as governments, systems and schools interrogate access to Internet, tablets, laptops, printers, learning technologies, stationary, parent involvement and community support. Many of these issues have always been there, but a light is now shining more brightly on the inequities between schools, families and students.

Moving away from a focus on measured performance, surveillance and compliance has led to increased teacher autonomy. Leadership is not a title but an action, a behaviour, a practice, a *doing* and a *way of being,* and the current scenario has provided a crucible for teacher agency, agility, resilience and innovation. A focus on lead*ing* over the lead*er* allows the practice and work of leading to come to the fore (Grice, 2018). Teacher leadership – leadership by teachers that is about influence and impact through action, rather than assigned administrative duties or prescribed roles (Netolicky, 2020b) – is happening now as teachers work to find teaching and learning solutions for their students within the parameters of their particular national, local, school and classroom contexts. Teacher agency is in action as many teachers act in leaderly ways to make deliberate choices and take innovative risks for their students and themselves and to lead colleagues who might be struggling with challenges and changes.

Independence and interdependence: the individual and the collective

School leaders are individual and interdependent parts of the collective, at once their idiosyncratic leader selves, and an interconnected part of the dynamic whole of a school (Netolicky, 2020a). Leading in schools often involves navigating continua of directiveness and empowerment, visibility and invisibility (Netolicky, 2019). A school leader within a crisis still

needs to make careful decisions about how to best serve his/her communities, foster trust and distribute power and agency, but the nature of the crisis necessitates leaders like the principals to step forward to the "front" to act as a trustworthy, credible voice for their community. In leading their schools, leaders consider each individual as well as the wider organisation and the greater good.

The collective interdependence of those within each school community has come into sharp focus during this pandemic. Schools, where possible, are providing one-on-one, online or telephone support, either internally or from outside experts. Teachers and school leaders are engaging in deep job-embedded learning, trying, iterating and refining practice as they go. Colleagues – within schools but also across schools, systems and countries – are helping colleagues with planning, learning technologies, remote pedagogy, feedback strategies and ways of assessing. These are not formal professional learning communities but, involve profound collaboration borne out of necessity and urgency; we need to change and we need to change now.

Teachers, school and system leaders, and education organisations around the world are using social media platforms to share resources, processes and learnings as they address education needs in this uncertain time. In my own school, I am finding that much of the collaboration happening during this pandemic embodies the principles of collaborative professionalism (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018), particularly collective autonomy, collective efficacy, collective responsibility, collective initiative, joint work and common meaning and purpose. Solvason and Kington (2019) found that cross-school groups could provide school leaders with a safety net of emotional support, enhanced by shared values, a lack of hierarchy and openness of members to participate in the work of the group. This reflects my own present experience of the feeling of solidarity among school leaders across schools locally and also globally. There is a feeling that around the world, despite our different contexts, we are facing similar challenge and are "all in this together". This is resulting in generosity of sharing and of support.

Well-being and workload: human needs before outcomes

Schools and systems are grappling with the tension between well-being and workload of students, teachers and parents. This can be framed as the tension between Maslow and Bloom, in which Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of learning represent the importance of balancing physical and psychological safety with learning and academic rigour. In a time of global crisis, grief, trauma and instability, we need to consider Maslow before Bloom (Doucet *et al.*, 2020). We should foreground health, safety, well-being and belonging first, before curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

Of course, governments and educators around the world are ensuring that learning continues during this time, in ways appropriate to their contexts. They are also realising the important social and economic functions that schools play. Schools are meaningfully continuing the education of their students in ways appropriate to current circumstances but with fundamental human needs, compassion and kindness at the forefront. At this time more than ever, we must consider humans before outcomes, students before results and well-being before learning.

Supporting student and family well-being means providing clear communication to students and families about changing circumstances and expectations. It means taking on the mantras of "less is more" and "keep it simple" in regard to curriculum and set work. A distance or remote learning model is a time to reconsider what is essential in curriculum, not to fill students' days with work to keep them busy. Schools and teachers need to be realistic about the work set in a distance learning model, allowing time for well-being, standing, stretching, breaks from screens, exercise, hydration and nutrition. This means using positive pre-suppositions when communicating with students about their lack of engagement or

failure to submit work. This is not a time for punitive or accusatory approaches but for gentle check-ins that ask "How are you? Can you let me know how you are travelling and what support you need?"

There can be no student well-being without teacher well-being (Hargreaves *et al.*, 2019). Considering teacher well-being requires leaders to support teachers through clear expectations and structures that take teacher needs and feedback into consideration. In places where teachers are teaching from home, many have their own children learning at home. Teachers and parents alike have complexities in their lives that can make teaching and learning at home difficult. Shirley *et al.* (2020) found that educators' well-being is likely to prosper in environments that engage them in deep and morally inspiring purposes over which they exert shared professional control; meaningful collaborative professionalism that brings them closer to each other and to their students in taking responsibility for and achieving these transformational purposes; working in multi-disciplinary teams to respond to the multiple diversities of their students and when there is external support from government and organisations. Leaders of schools and system can work from this shared moral purpose, value teacher expertise and provide opportunities of meaningful collaboration in online, remote or physically distanced modes.

Old normal, new normal, next normal

Education systems around the world are grappling with similar challenges in their very different contexts. The COVID-19 global pandemic has led to education reform at a rapid rate but reform out of necessity rather than deliberate and thoughtful planning.

In considering our "next normal" we can ask ourselves the following questions.

(1) *What is it that we've missed that we want to bring back in to schooling and education?* For example, how do we reignite and build on the distanced connectedness of our school communities and the relationality of teaching?

(2) *What is it that has been removed that we do not want to return to?* For example, how do we want to measure and judge the effectiveness of education? What is the role of schooling and of teachers?

This pandemic has shown us that we are one society, one humanity and that leading is for us all. This is a time for us to consider what leadership means, regardless of title or position. We can reach out (from a physical distance) to others and support one another as best we can, even though isolation feels like it goes against our biology. We can consider carefully where we get our information and how we respond to that information. We can all lead by example, by clear communication with one another and by clarity of purpose and cohesiveness of action. There is no more important time to be kind to ourselves and each other than right now. We are in a time of adaptation and evolution, by necessity. When we come out the other side, society, work and education may be reformed for good.

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Corresponding author
Deborah M. Netolicky can be contacted at: deborahnetolicky@gmail.com