

Leading in lockdown: Community, communication and compassion in response to the COVID-19 crisis

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Abstract

This paper examines the ways that Australian school leaders made sense of and responded to situations of crisis and uncertainty that resulted from the COVID-19 global pandemic. The paper draws on a qualitative study of the subjective experiences of eight school leaders and uses a sensemaking theoretical approach applied to crisis leadership to contribute to understanding leadership in unprecedented situations. Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews undertaken in the middle of 2020. At that time participants were working through significant changes resulting from community lockdowns that required their schools to move to remote provision of education. The findings revealed these school leaders engaged in rapid processes of sensemaking and change implementation. They assessed and managed risks, relationships and resourcing in environments where usual processes of change leadership were not available to them. They reported that their attention was predominantly directed to the well-being of their communities. They noted an increase in the community leadership aspect of their role and the requirement of effective, timely and honest communication. They also demonstrated prospective sensemaking orientations in their capacity to reconfigure for a positive and productive future that could emerge from these disruptive experiences.

Keywords

COVID-19, school leadership, crisis, sensemaking

Introduction

In 2020 the world was disrupted by the COVID-19 virus. This global pandemic impacted all corners of the world and most aspects of life as a result of both the health impacts of the virus and the various social and economic consequences. On 25 March 2020 the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres described the pandemic as the most challenging global crisis that had been experienced since World War II. Across the world, educational providers responded

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in a variety of ways that constitutes a level of disruption never seen before. Ways that schools have been impacted include widespread closures, changes in physical arrangements to ensure physical distancing and reductions in the range of activities that students can participate in. In Australia, although COVID-19 case numbers have been relatively low, governments mandated stringent social health measures aimed at suppressing the spread of the virus. These responses included restrictive lockdown policies that resulted in the closure of school sites and the move to remote learning for students. As a result, rapid change and uncertainty for school communities were commonplace and school leaders guided their schools through circumstances that could never have been anticipated.

School leaders are generally familiar with change and most leaders work within systems that would expect a focus on change for the purpose of improving learning. Leadership literature on change is abundant within and beyond the educational sphere (Garcia-Huidobro et al., 2017) and many leadership policy frameworks across nations describe standards and expectations of change leadership for improvement (Hitt and Tucker, 2016). Despite this extensive focus on change, the arrangements and structures of schooling, on the whole, have remained the same (Zhao, 2020) and the disruption to these persistent schooling arrangements caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is the most significant and pervasive to occur since the introduction of mass schooling.

Understanding how key educational stakeholders made sense of and responded to this time offers an unprecedented opportunity to elucidate change experiences and the prospects for schooling to evolve and develop in new and innovative ways. The genesis of this opportunity came from a situation of crisis. The research reported in this paper sought to collect stories of how school leaders experienced these unprecedented times and how their disruption shaped leadership.

Crisis leadership

The COVID-19 pandemic that emerged in 2020 has developed into an experience of crisis that has had global impact. Across the world, the consequences of this unprecedented health emergency are being experienced in similar ways, although to differing degrees in different contexts. The variation in the severity of impact has exposed deep inequalities across and within different countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2020). Far-reaching economic and social implications are compounding the health emergency and, as a result, education has been powerfully changed in never before seen ways. The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimated that 90% of students worldwide had been impacted by school closures (UNESCO, 2020). As a result, many communities of students, families and educators have experienced a scramble to find new ways to provide schooling to children and young people (Bush, 2021; Gurr, 2021). However, leading schools through crises is a more common occurrence in the general turbulence of the world where, for example, significant natural disasters can result in a substantial impact on school operations. Further, at an individual school level, crises can occur that disrupt normality for a community for a broad range of reasons, for example, a building fire or death of a community member.

The concept of crisis is broad and can be applied to a range of circumstances; however, Sutherland (2017) suggested that crises have four common characteristics of: threat to a system, time pressure, an ill-structured situation and a lack of adequate resources for response. Researchers also generally agree that crises are a social phenomenon, where it is not the disaster event itself, but the impact on human systems, relationships and structures, where the crises exist (Quarantelli, 2000). Conventional social systems (business, education, communication, transport, etc.) are

arranged around a presumption of consistency where conditions are predictable (Wachtendorf and Kendra, 2012). When crises occur, there are often mistakes and missteps as decision-making processes that are structured for 'normal' do not respond well to unfamiliar conditions (Topper and Lagadec, 2013).

Smith and Riley (2012) suggested a framework that outlines a process for leaders responding to crises in schools: gathering information; adapting; making rapid decisions; demonstrating concern; and communicating clearly and honestly. Mutch (2020) suggests that leaders need to respond according to the different phase of a crisis. Decisiveness is key in the initial stages, moving to calmer, more collaborative processes in later stages. Mutch (2020) found that clear communication and empathetic responses, coupled with positive vision and direction, were crucial in all phases of crisis response.

Notman (2015) investigated school leadership through situations of crisis management following a catastrophic earthquake event that struck the city of Christchurch, New Zealand in early 2011. He noted that there was scant research evidence into the experiences and practices of school leaders in times of crises. Notman (2015: 451) found that a sense of 'collective cohesion' emerged where school leaders derived support for the intensity of their work from the community around them. The leaders focused on building 'a strong sense of group cohesiveness' (Notman, 2015: 452) where trust and confidence, based on an ethic of care, were central to crisis leadership work. Further, strong leadership focused on the goal of successful student learning was important. This was balanced against the impact of the disruption from the earthquake crisis by working through a reconfiguring process that anticipated a 'state of new normal' (Notman, 2015: 456). With this direction guiding their work, leaders recognised that they were not aiming to return to the prior status quo, but to adapt to the new environments, relationships and interactions shaped by the shared experiences.

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen a burgeoning number of publications examine the impact of this pandemic crisis. School leadership through the crisis has been considered by a range of researchers often by applying previously collected empirical findings or conceptual models to leadership through COVID-19 disruptions (e.g. Gurr and Drysdale, 2020; Stone-Johnson and Miles Weiner, 2020) or providing viewpoints, commentary or editorials on school leadership for this unprecedented time (e.g. Harris and Jones, 2020; Netolicky, 2020). Specific empirical studies with data collected during the pandemic were just emerging at the time of writing this paper. One of the largest empirical studies of schooling in the time of COVID-19 is the School Barometer research project (Huber and Helm, 2020). This research surveyed 255 school leaders from across Germany, Switzerland and Austria as part of a larger survey project that included approximately 24,000 students, parents, educators and system personnel. Some relevant findings from this large study included that there were challenges experienced by all actors in school contexts, that parents reported high levels of appreciation for the work of schools and teachers, and that learning with, through and about technology was important.

Thornton's (2021) study of 18 principals from across New Zealand found five leadership practices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. These were: detecting signals and responding appropriately; demonstrating empathy and prioritising well-being; communicating frequently and effectively; leading collaboratively and taking a community leadership role; and taking opportunities to learn at all stages of the crisis. Argyropoulou et al. (2021) conducted interviews with 38 principals in Greece to explore the lived experiences of leadership whilst schools were physically closed and required to implement online teaching. They found that school leaders reported challenges of immediacy in the ways they dealt with managerial and emotional

problems. Also, that their workloads were increased due to the deficiencies in technological and infrastructure arrangements and due to the requirements for increased communication with their communities. Despite the diversity of contexts, leaders were all focused on managing urgent situations with attention to the learning and well-being needs of the stakeholders in their communities.

Sensemaking

Sensemaking has regularly been used to consider the work of school leaders (e.g. DeMatthews, 2015; Spillane and Anderson, 2014) as it is a useful tool to engage with the complexity of leadership work (Reid, 2021). As Weick's seminal work described, 'the basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs' (1995: 635). School leaders have been shown to use sensemaking to 'make sense of changes, contrasts and surprises found in new working situations' (Spillane and Anderson, 2014: 4). Important to sensemaking is how meanings are formulated not just from interpretation of circumstances, but through integrating and adopting to 'bridge' prior experience with new information (Muhren et al., 2008). Weick explains this as:

the willingness of people to rework their initial story and adopt a newer story that is more sensitive to the particulars of the present context. This reworking is far from an exercise in fantasy or elimination. Instead, one's sense of what is going on is constrained by agreements with others, consistency with one's own stake in events, the recent past, visible cues, projects that are demonstrably underway, scenarios that are familiar, and actions that have tangible effects. (2015: 122)

Sensemaking is a continual process but is thought to be heightened during times of uncertainty and ambiguity (Muhren et al., 2008; Spillane and Anderson, 2014; Weick, 2012). During periods of rapid change, such as are required during a crisis, leaders draw on a range of resources to comprehend the circumstances to frame and re-frame responses (Muhren et al., 2008). School leadership is complex work and principals make sense of and act on school-related issues based on their worldviews, beliefs about their communities, and understandings of teaching and learning (Anagnostopoulos and Rutledge, 2007; DeMatthews, 2015; Longmuir, 2019; Reid, 2021; Spillane et al., 2002). With a specific focus on how school leaders collaborated with external stakeholders, Hulme et al. (2021) looked at how headteachers actively engaged in sensemaking to 'craft coherence' during the COVID-19 induced, UK school closures. Using a framework of bridging, brokering and buffering adaptive leadership strategies this study described how school leaders *bridged* to reinvigorate school-to-school networks that had 'previously been under-valued and under-utilized as a consequence of increased competition between schools' (Hulme et al., 2021: 24), *brokered* to negotiate common understandings and shared agreements in ambiguous times and *buffered* by filtering information for staff and parents in ways that ensured trust was developed.

Responsive direction orientation

In understanding the prior capacity and worldview that school leaders bring to their response to change, ambiguity and uncertainty, Gurr and Drysdale (2020) propose the concept of responsive direction orientation to change. Informed by Loader's (2010) description of his own leadership as 'stumbling' through a significant change process, Gurr and Drysdale interpreted that 'what is clear

from Loader's description is that this was not uncontrolled planning, but a deliberate process of venturing forth, stumbling over the unexpected, reflecting upon this, glimpsing new possibilities, and then taking considered action' (2020: 25). This balance of response to unpredicted events with a clear sense of direction is posited as an important orientation for making sense in periods of heightened change. Gurr and Drysdale describe how this orientation might be well suited to COVID-19 times.

Responsive direction promotes a restless planning scheme that is constantly searching for new ideas and reassessing the intended direction. Leaders with this orientation would seem well placed to deal with the immediate and long-term impacts of unexpected events, like school closures and mass remote learning (2020: 25).

The conceptions of sensemaking and responsive direction orientation will be employed to examine school leadership through the crisis of COVID-19 initiated disruption to the normal practices of schooling.

Research context

This research is framed in time by the implementation of community lockdown and the physical closure of school sites in the city of Melbourne, Australia. Melbourne is Australia's second-largest city with a population of approximately five million and is the capital of the state of Victoria. Australia did not escape the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic although, compared to many nations, has had relatively low case numbers. Australia implemented strong border controls and restrictions on travel to minimise the spread of the virus. There were, however, several outbreaks across the country with the most significant of these occurring in Melbourne. Most areas of the country implemented restrictions in late March 2020. At that time much about COVID-19 was unknown and experts and policymakers were scrambling to understand the health, social and economic impacts. While all other parts of the country had relatively short experiences of community lockdown of no more than a few weeks, an outbreak of COVID-19 cases in Melbourne took longer to contain. Lockdown policies, including the closure of schools, remained in place for approximately 10 weeks during the first wave. Restrictions were reduced over the following six weeks, but a second wave of the virus developed in Melbourne and by early July, schools were once again closed. This time most students remained home for between 14 and 16 weeks before schools again reopened in October. The result was that, in Melbourne, students learnt from home for around half of the school year (for further detail about the conditions in Melbourne see Duckett and Mackey, 2020).

Arrangements for schooling in Melbourne during lockdown were that all students who could learn from home needed to stay at home. Schools remained opened physically for students who were vulnerable or whose parents were essential workers, but even these students participated in remote learning programmes, which usually involved the use of online platforms and virtual classes (Longmuir et al., forthcoming). At both times that schools were allowed to re-open (in late May and in October) the resumption of classes was staged with the youngest and oldest students returning approximately two weeks earlier than other students.

The period of time that is most relevant to this paper is the first lockdown. I intended to conduct interviews with school leaders after they had emerged from the disruptions of the first lockdown and started participant recruitment and data collection after schools had re-opened in June. The

semi-structured interview protocol focused the discussions on the highly ambiguous time in the weeks leading up to the first lockdown in early March, and the period of time where remote schooling was first being implemented. Due to the re-emergence of the virus and the timing of interviews, it eventuated that some participants were interviewed just as the second lockdown was commencing.

Research design

This small-scale qualitative study examines school leaders' perceptions and responses through the disruption of school closures and change to remote learning brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative design was most appropriate for this study as this enabled consideration of how participants made sense of the crisis experiences and responded at this time (Maxwell, 2013). Qualitative studies of leadership 'excel in giving the reader a profound sense of the realities of leadership: the frustrations they face as leaders, the forms of leader behaviour they engage in, and their feelings about their successes and failures' (Bryman, 2004: 763). I developed and used a semi-structured interview protocol that was designed to prompt discussion and allow participants to explore their perceptions and experiences based on guiding questions (O'Toole and Beckett, 2010). The interview invited participants to share how they understood and made sense of the changes required at the early stages of the COVID-19 disruptions; describe their responses and practices; reflect on the resources that helped them to make sense of the circumstances and act as leaders during this time; and consider how this time of disruption might inform their future work.

This study was limited by the nature of the topic and the range of participants that were available to participate. It was also limited by the nature of the methodology whereby interview data comprise participant-reported interpretations of their experiences.

Participants

My study employed a convenience sample of eight school leaders who were working in schools in the Melbourne area during 2020. Email invitations were sent to 20 school leaders that had been involved in university-school partnership programs over the prior two years. Eight agreed to participate and interview times were arranged. This participant selection process may be subject to some selection biases. Those that agreed to participate may have done so due to the nature of their prior relationships, or because they had more pronounced experiences or opinions of the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their communities and their leadership work, or because they felt more strongly about sharing their learning. While recognising the risks of selection bias possible in this sample, this approach was the most appropriate for this time-sensitive enquiry (Rivera, 2019). This sample included a diverse range of leaders in terms of the schools where they worked (see Table 1).

Four participants were in primary schools (students aged between 4 and 12 years old), two were in secondary schools (students aged between 12 and 18 years old) and two were in very large, multi-campus, high-fee-paying, private independent schools with both primary and secondary students. Four participants were principals of their schools and four were in a deputy-level role of either assistant principal or head of school. The schools where these participants worked represented a range of sizes and also a range of community backgrounds in terms of socio-economic status and cultural and language diversity. Four participants identified as female and four as male and all had a minimum of five years of experience in school leadership roles.

Table 1. Participant information.

Pseudonym	Leadership role	School type	School enrolment
Dave	Assistant principal	Secondary government	2100
Danni	Principal	Secondary government	350
Nick	Assistant principal	Primary government	300
Kate	Head of school (secondary)	ECE-12 independent	4000
Kaleb	Head of school (primary)	ECE-12 independent	3100
Katrina	Principal	Primary government	550
Narelle	Principal	Primary government	320
Frank	Principal	Primary government	100

ECE: early childhood education

Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed and analysed using NVivo software. Themes were developed inductively through a coding process where commonalities, connections and patterns were identified and emerging trends contrasted and compared (Miles et al., 2014). In the first phase of coding, 15 codes were identified and applied as the data were reviewed. These codes were established based on interpretations of relevance to the research purpose and repetition of similar ideas in the responses. Through subsequent phases, codes were connected, merged and hierarchised, resulting in the four themes to be described below. A further phase of analysis involved using text search queries to review the transcripts for key terms relevant to the themes. This strategy provided a review and validation that all relevant data informed the interpretation of each theme.

In this study, I sought to understand the ways that school leaders made sense of the turbulent time of change that accompanied the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated disruption to the usual operations of schools. Findings around the four themes are presented here with the use of quotes from the school leaders that are indicative and illustrate aspects of each theme.

Connection to community

The leaders described how their experiences of this time heightened their understanding of their relationship to their communities. Particularly in the time of uncertainty and confusion that was prevalent in the early weeks of the disruption, a time which included the weeks before the implementation of lockdown measures and the first weeks of implementing remote schooling, they became key figures for their communities. They described how they felt the need to support students, teachers and parents to understand the ambiguity of the unprecedented situation. The normal focus of their daily work shifted to being more attuned to what was happening in the community beyond the walls of the school. They needed to be aware of state, national and international developments and be thinking about how these could be understood for their school communities.

What you realise really quickly in times like this is that you're actually a community leader. What I mean by that is outside of sort of a political voice that our members of parliament have, it seems that the next voice that many community members go to, particularly families, is to school leaders. (Danni)

The importance of this role was described as needing to be available, to be stable and calm and to present a resilient demeanour. Participants described the numerous and constant inquiries they received from staff, parents and students asking what was going to happen. They became very conscious of the likely social and economic challenges for families in their communities and they knew that these broader concerns were permeating into the school more than ever before. In response, the leaders explained that by portraying an optimistic and confident stance, they became important anchors as the community grappled with how to respond.

My role is as a community leader, and reminding myself that I'm leading a community of people, the families, the staff and their families, and ensuring that I'm doing the best to spread a positive attitude. The glass is half full. We will get through this. (Frank)

The participants described how they felt that their school communities were strengthened during the early phase. A sense of 'we're all in this together' (Katrina) developed and the school facilitated support for those in the community who were struggling.

There were also strengthened relationships across neighbouring school communities. Connections with other local schools were mentioned by five of the six participants from the public schools. Networking across neighbouring schools is a feature of system arrangements for Victorian government schools, but the constraints of funding structured around a per-student model often moderate these connections due to the competitive policy environment (Rowe, 2016). These participants noted that, at this time of crisis, these prior constraints diminished and school leaders were connecting to share resources and to support one another.

It's been a really great collegiate approach to all of this. Principals, assistant principals, teachers have taken the competition off and are willing to share resources and share best practice, share guiding policy or share what works in their school as it might work in another setting. And I think that's been a really big positive. (Nick)

Whether it was through connections to their own school communities or more broadly working with networks of school leaders, these data show that at this critical time attention was directed beyond the boundaries of their own schools.

Crucial communication

The centrality of communication was a strong theme from these data with all participants discussing how their approaches to communication were adapted to meet the rapidly changing needs of their students, teachers and families. Firstly, in the period leading up to the school closures and move to online learning, leaders reported that it was essential to be both regular and clear in their communications. At this time, school leaders were collating and interpreting information from a range of sources and they found ways to disseminate it so that it decreased the ambiguity and confusion for their communities.

Clarity of communication was really important . . . We set up the communication channels, because there was so much confusion, and so many questions . . . We just took direction from whatever came out and kept everything clear, a single-source of truth. (Kate)

I wanted to make sure that our messages were based on fact, evidence, the information to date. That they weren't alarmist. That they didn't catastrophise and that our students at the centre of all this, our students and staff at school, felt safe and comfortable. (Danni)

Honest and open approaches were also a priority for leaders in their communications at this time. It was important that they were clear about what they did and did not know, and they prepared the community for the possibility of further changes to arrangements as new information became available.

We just took a stance for our school, of just being open and honest, and transparent, right from the very start. So we started communicating with parents straight away; as soon as we got news, we let it out to parents that day. So we wrote letters, emails, we did some updates on our Facebook page, like video messages telling them what we knew. I did daily bulletins to staff every morning of what the latest news was, and even if there wasn't any news, just a touching base with them . . . that's what I found was the biggest thing really, was just that regular, really regular communication, and just really honest, and I said to parents, 'As soon as I know, you'll know', and that's what I did, and I got a lot of positive feedback from parents around that. They felt that they knew everything, because we were being so open with them. (Katrina)

As well as the establishment of communication that provided clear sources of information, school leaders needed to set up new systems and processes for communication within the remote learning environment. These processes were for multiple purposes including distribution of information and establishing new ways of relating across the nexus of students, families and teachers. A number of school leaders established 'check-in' protocols, where they made purposeful plans for regular contact with teachers, parents and students, particularly those who they felt were vulnerable or needed extra support to navigate the rapidly changing situation.

The fast-paced nature of the changes that were happening in this early phase also necessitated an adjustment for school leaders in terms of how they consulted during decision-making processes. School leaders described how they had to abandon their normal consultative processes and procedures of seeking input and advice during a major change in favour of independent decisiveness and implementing the best solution most quickly. Information changed rapidly and there was a significant sense of urgency to implement responses. These leaders, and particularly the four in principal roles, spoke of the requirement to make fast decisions. They described having to trust their instincts and change their consultative practices:

As a principal I'm very consultative, I like to take everyone's ideas on . . . I like to know that I've considered all the angles. Whereas I found during the last few months, I didn't have time to do that. People looked at me to be the leader, and I was just making decisions and there was no time to think about them, that's just the way it was done, and then if I had to turn around four days later and say, 'I'm sorry, I made that decision but it's turned out it was the wrong one', then I just had to do that. (Katrina)

Further, along with the abandonment of normal consultative approaches, leaders developed a willingness to take on board feedback and to be flexible in response.

I just decided I could put my own message out, and then if I had to change it when it came out, I would change it. And I think that's just been again on the forefront of communication. I think because

everyone was ‘we’re all in together, we’re all learning’, I think it showed everyone that we’re all learners in a school. (Narelle)

Processes for communication to meet the need of collecting feedback and then implementing responsive adjustments were developed by the school leaders. Narelle describes the range of processes developed to gather feedback at her school.

We did weekly surveys with students, staff and parents, myself and my assistant principal. We did fortnightly meets with cohorts of parents for feedback, and we tailored it as we went. And, every week, we would take all the feedback we’d got and implement changes. (Narelle)

Those leaders who were contemplating returning to remote learning due to the second lockdown were particularly able to talk about the feedback that they had gathered during the first remote schooling period and reflect on how they intended to adapt and adjust as they re-established the remote learning arrangements.

These data show that leadership activities focused on communication took a great deal of time and attention. They were dealing with the novelty and urgency of their situation, responding to the specific needs of their communities and innovating to implement untested processes. Being prepared to act quickly and make changes later was important to the success of their lockdown responses.

Care and compassion

All the school leaders prioritised the welfare and well-being of members of the community above any other concerns. Participants explained that this focus took most of their attention and it is easy to see through the prior two themes how this focus underpinned their work on community connections and communication. Katrina describes how this focus manifested in her work during the early phase of the crisis when uncertainties about the lockdown and remote learning were high.

It was balancing the well-being and all the anxieties, but then balancing the logistics of, are we going to keep going or not? So really it was just a bit of compassion and a lot of communication, and a lot of honesty. (Katrina)

As mentioned above, personal ‘check-ins’ were used by school leaders. To varying levels of formality, they developed schedules or processes of regular contact for teachers, parents and students. How these arrangements were developed depended on the perceived needs of the group or specific individual. For example, many of the school leaders described that in order to maintain a connection to their students, they did things like dropping in on the online classes and running online assemblies. For teachers, there were several ways that care and compassion were demonstrated. Participants explained that they scheduled specific individual check-ins with all their staff, or, in the larger schools, they shared this responsibility with other members of their leadership team. The nature of these connections depended on the needs of each teacher and ranged from technical concerns to understanding the personal difficulties that were being experienced. Often these interactions were not about dealing with the work issues or solving problems, but rather space for teachers to be heard and have their challenges acknowledged. Kaleb’s comment demonstrates the importance of this listening:

There were a lot of conversations where teachers really just spoke about how tiring it is, and ultimately you really just need to listen to that . . . and acknowledging, and saying ‘Make sure that when you do get that opportunity you do take a break, or do something that you really love once a day’ or whatever it might be. (Kaleb)

As well as individual arrangements, the school leaders scheduled events and activities, such as trivia afternoons and morning teas, that brought staff together in a social or generally supportive way.

Care and compassion for students and their families was a primary concern. Leaders were all aware of those families that were having acute difficulties, such as loss of work, or who were more deeply impacted by the isolation of the lockdown due to prior situations (for example, mental health concerns). Although it is undoubtedly the case that leaders attend to these kinds of issues at all times, during this crisis, this focus on care and compassion surpassed other aspects of their work. Whilst more broadly there were discussions in the media and policy spaces about ‘lost learning’ during this time (Gore et al., 2021), these participants were aware that academic progress was a secondary concern.

Look, for me really, it was just the well-being of the community, that really was the biggest thing. Once we started the remote learning, I mean some families thrived, some families did it OK, and some families just struggled, and so we were really strong in our message, regular messaging with families, that ‘don’t stress. If you can’t get the work done, don’t do it. That’s our job, when they come back, we’ll catch them up. Don’t listen to the media that’s saying that your kids are losing all of this’. So we spent a lot of time reassuring parents of that, and saying things like, ‘It’s not home schooling, we’re doing their schooling, you’re just supervising it at home, and if that’s not working for you, let it go’. (Katrina)

The overarching sense of the importance of a caring, compassionate approach to leading showed that, at a time of crisis, leaders return to the humanising purposes of education. They focused on the foundational needs of all members of the community and ensured that these were prioritised before any organisational or learning requirements. Some of the specific illustrative practices that were shared by participants included organising food hampers for families who they knew to be particularly economically impacted, providing devices for students who did not have access, and connecting teachers, students and parents to counselling and other support services as needed. Danni, while speaking with a focus on the way she supported staff, illustrates how this humanising focus was important at this disruptive time:

Looking after the well-being of staff in these unique times is central to the success of what schools were trying to achieve . . . that we humanise what they do again and they’re not some sort of robots on a device that can just be turned on and off . . . I think they’re experiencing the same level of angst that a whole society is and, you know, really allowing that ‘humanness’ to be part of their practice and talk about it. (Danni)

The ‘humanness’ described by Danni captures the essence of the tendency of leaders to revert to compassionately understanding ways that experiences of the crisis were impacting members of their communities.

Possibilities and potential

The final theme from the data to draw attention to is the hopeful, positive and resilient dispositions that were evident in responses from participants. Although school leaders identified challenges such as issues of workload and emotional drain, they also engaged in reflection on the important opportunities and learning that the experience of rapid change and disruption offered.

Two participants described change programmes that they had been involved in before the onset of the pandemic. They talked about the information gathering, consultative and collaborative processes that they had been working on and they reflected on how those had been discarded in 2020. Kaleb explained that his school had been working on a process of implementing a new digital platform for feedback and reporting. The change project had been ongoing for over a year and was planned to continue for a further year before implementation. However, with the onset of remote learning, these plans were accelerated and a digital platform was introduced within two weeks. When asked what he felt were possible benefits from the lockdown experiences, he responded:

I think just what's possible. I think, really, we're so scared of change a lot of the time. And like I said, two years it took us to roll out [a digital platform], and then in two weeks we had [the digital platform] up and running and staff embraced it. Like, you put the right supports in place, I think anything's really possible. I love what's happened because of what it's made us do. (Kaleb)

Other participants noted that although teachers were often exhausted from the pace and pressure of the rapid change into, through and back out of lockdown, many returned to school with an amplified appetite for change, having expanded their understanding of what was possible.

It feels like now actually there's a bunch of people that have come back and gone, 'Actually I want to do some stuff now'. I feel like there's a little bit more appetite for it. Our team leaders at the senior campus came back, and after a week or so they were making all these proposals . . . and they've been a bit enthusiastic about taking on new stuff. I feel like a lot of people have come back and they've been like, 'I've been in my hole this whole time, and I haven't been able to get anything going', and their desire to push change in school has built up over the term. So we're having a little burst on now. (Dave)

There's been a real flurry of people wanting to try other things and it being okay. Implement something, if it doesn't work, pull it back or you modify it. And it's about that agile thinking, that has really come to the forefront within all the staff. (Narelle)

These observations of the sense of optimism and enthusiasm that were evident to these school leaders as their communities had returned to their re-opened schools suggest that, with appropriate tools of reflection and attitudes to change, there is great potential for significant transformations to emerge out of these disruptive times.

Discussion

The findings of this work indicate that school leaders make sense of crises by reverting to crucial safety and relational aspects of their work. In ambiguous and unclear situations, they filtered the usual complexity of the role through a sharpened focus on the core purposes of schools. These findings illustrate sensemaking conceptualisations of Weick (2015) where the leaders' clear priorities helped them to 'rework' and 'adopt' from their past understandings and experiences to make

sense in new unfamiliar contexts. Aligned with Notman's (2015) findings of principalship in the wake of the Christchurch earthquakes, these leaders also 'crafted coherence' for their communities by balancing attention to what was important with empathic flexibility and adaptability.

In this study, as has been found in prior research, leadership through crises was enacted in different ways during different phases of response (Mutch, 2020). These included an early phase of a focus on buffering and translating information and engendering community in initial uncertain times, then an interim phase where leaders made decisions and considered feedback as they stabilised new practices and arrangements for learning and relating, through to finally being able to look forward to the possibilities and potential in a recovery that learnt from the experiences and anticipated a 'new normal' (Notman, 2015: 452). Through all phases, the constant was that these Australian school leaders demonstrated empathy and compassion paired with common sense and action that was needed to guide their communities to go on in these challenging times. A focus on benevolence, openness and compassion engendered trust at a time when stakeholders were adrift in uncertainty. As shown in other research on leadership in crisis (Sutherland, 2017), positive communication and proactive but flexible decision-making helps all those involved in the community to make sense and respond in productive ways.

Connections with the findings of sensemaking work that headteachers displayed as they responded to the COVID-19 induced school lockdowns in the UK (Hulme et al., 2021) are relevant for this study. Although with a specific focus on how the headteachers negotiated and leveraged external relationships with network schools, and middle and central tier system governance agencies, the bridging, brokering and buffering tactics that were used by those UK leaders (Hulme et al., 2021) were also evident in the work described by these Australian participants. A specific example of *bridging* tactics were the connections that leaders, particularly those in the government schools, made with their neighbouring schools to share resources and approaches. These leaders rapidly *brokered* as they supported their communities to adapt to remote learning by arranging access to technology support and, in some cases, even supported access to food hampers. *Buffering* was also a key tactic that was particularly obvious in the early stages as these leaders took the fragmented information they were provided and reframed and disseminated it to their communities in ways that minimised confusion and encouraged positivity and resilience. In these and other ways, leaders 'occup[ied] a key mediating-moderating role enabling transition and adaptation to change' (Hulme et al., 2021: 5).

The findings of this study also support Thornton's (2021) discussion of principal responses to the COVID-19 crisis in New Zealand. These leaders needed to perceive and interpret information and made sense of it within their contexts to format responses. They led with empathy and prioritised well-being. They communicated effectively and embraced a community leadership role. These practices are also reflective of findings into the way school leaders have more broadly responded to other crises, such as the Christchurch earthquake in 2011 (Mutch, 2020; Notman, 2015). Discovering that commonalities are emerging in practices and dispositions during times of crisis suggests that some preparation for leading in crisis may be possible. However, while preparation might empower leaders and support them with knowledge that could be applied during a time of ambiguity and urgency, it is also evident from this, and the literature on crisis leadership, that school leaders appear to almost instinctively turn to the core focuses of safety and relationships and these serve them well as they make sense in times of crisis. These instinctive tendencies that were displayed connect to the notions of responsive decision making. Falling back to core concerns and having an orientation that is familiar with change leads to resilience to see beyond the immediate challenges of 'stumbling over the unexpected' in order to glimpse possibility (Gurr

and Drysdale, 2020: 25). I also acknowledge here that the emotional leadership capacities, and associated emotional labour, needed in order to project positivity and resilience are significant and important.

With the breadth of the shared experience of COVID-19 disruption, leadership learnings from this time are even more potent and relatable. This study contributes to the range of work done at a variety of stages of this current crisis. In these unusual times a range of literature has emerged that has varying connections to empirical evidence gathered from actual practice as schools responded to pandemic conditions. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to undertake a deep review or critique of this body of literature, it is of note that those authors reviewed for this paper who had published early (Gurr and Drysdale, 2020; Harris and Jones, 2020; Netolicky, 2020; Stone-Johnson and Miles Weiner, 2020) provided insights that were borne out in the findings of this study. For example, these early works predicted a focus on community and well-being. I also note that there are questions that require further investigation. The most prominent of these is the place of collaborative practices and distributed leadership in times of crisis. This study has shown that the *position* of school leader was significant. The four principals that I heard from spoke of the burden of being the person that was 'looked at . . . to be the leader' (Katrina) and of how they felt the responsibility of setting an honest, positive and resilient tone for their communities during the upheaval that was experienced. Although this ultimate leadership is not mutually exclusive to ideas of collaboration and distribution, further investigation into how, where and why leading practices are individualistic in crisis situations may be of use. This is a particularly pertinent question given the claims of others that 'distributed leadership has become the default leadership response in this current crisis' (Harris and Jones, 2020: 246).

Through this exploration of how leaders made sense of and responded to this time of crisis an orientation to education that was both contextually and historically informed as well as hopeful and optimistic for the future was evident. Standing on a bedrock of 'humanness' these participants demonstrated responsive direction orientations. They ventured forth, stumbled, reflected and glimpsed new possibilities. They move from sensemaking aimed at understanding the immediate situation and responding to the urgent, through to a future-focused prospective sensemaking orientation (Reid, 2021) where prior knowledge, current experiences and visions for a new future were assembled to look forward to possibilities facilitated by the 2020 disruptions. The potentials and possibilities offered by these participants contribute to a hopeful post-pandemic outlook for schooling. In Australia, leaders are closer to experiencing this time than perhaps is the case in many other nations that have been more deeply impacted by COVID-19. Other research in Australia has suggested that the community more broadly has been impressed by the work of educators in response to COVID-19 and that these experiences may have engendered a willingness to accept new and diverse ways of schooling, such as maintaining online learning opportunities (Heffernan et al., 2021).

This research may contribute to the implications for understanding schooling and school leadership that emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Specifically, this study offers insights into how leaders understand and navigate crisis and disruption. This could inform leadership preparation as well as support further conceptual and practical insights into how leaders respond to significant and unplanned change. The study is limited by the methodology, with findings generated from self-report of leading practices taken from specific participants. The participants shared a general context with experiences of state-level pandemic responses in common. The applicability of these findings to other contexts should consider these limitations.

In summary, this research shows that the work of leaders was complex and important through these challenging times and that leaders prioritised compassionate, humanising goals that grounded all other work at this time. They made sense of what was happening and what they needed to do by maintaining this focus and understanding their positions within their communities. They mobilised communication practices that were reassuring as well as open and honest. Promisingly, these leaders optimistically looked to a post-pandemic future that may build upon the disruptions that originally seemed threatening and dangerous but were made sense of in ways that could open new opportunities for schools.

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