

COVID-19: LEADING IN CHALLENGING CIRCUMSTANCES – CHALLENGES FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

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Abstract

Principals are leading in challenging circumstances since the country went in to COVID-19 lockdown. The combination of confusing government decisions and advise, compounded by the lack of district decision making has left many principals to make key decisions on a daily basis and many times not sure if they will have the backing of departmental officials. Principals had to keep schools open, whilst simultaneously creating an online machine, keeping in touch with the most vulnerable learners and families. School leaders are uniquely positioned to have the respect and personal relationships to guide families to support their children at home during these unprecedented challenges. For rural school leaders it is harder, as rural schools serve families across a cast geographic area without high-speed internet. How do rural school leaders lead educators and their schools doing their best in unchartered waters where teachers moving instruction online, distributing food and technology?

Using a qualitative research approach, this study aimed to determine the challenges faced by rural school leaders in leading their schools during COVID-19. Five schools in the Nelspruit areas were selected through purposeful sampling. Data collected was organised logically into workable units to facilitate coding. Data was categorised in themes, the findings revealed COVID-19 has had an impact on the principal's leadership as principals were challenged to decisions relating to feeding learners, organising protective clothing, finances, and online learning.

Keywords: *COVID-19, leadership, technology, principals, schools.*

1. Introduction

Since the COVID-19 lockdown and the strict regulations implemented by the National Command Council to control the spread of the virus in South Africa, academic institutions, like schools and universities, were almost immediately challenged in their ways of leading, organising and implementing the curriculum in a remote fashion. Teachers were challenged to teach and to work remotely. To avoid that there was total curriculum collapse, schools had to find and explore ways to improve all their academic operations to best improve their operations online by introducing online based technology and pedagogy. This was to ensure that learners had access to learning materials while they are at home. The challenge was that schools had to navigate issues, and to ask questions such as “are we ready for the technology – online challenges?” On top of changing to an online mode, schools had to manage declining cash flows from learners and state subsidies and support. Add to this, that many parents have lost their jobs and were unable to contribute to school fees, the challenges faced by school leaders just became a bigger challenge, especially in our country's schools.

2. Problem statement

COVID-19 has resulted in increased demands on school leaders. In March 2020, COVID-19 slammed the door firmly on all aspects of everyday life. It interrupted the economies of many countries across the globe, and it disrupted schooling too, indeed shaking the very fabric of education (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020). It has challenged and redefined learning as a remote activity limiting millions of learners to online teacher support and as Zhao (2020) points out “Virtually all schools have been paused and teaching had to be significantly re-organised. In most countries, including South Africa, getting learners back to school was an issue and governments had heated debates to decide when and how learners will return to schools. Suddenly, schools were faced with challenges of social distancing, always wearing of masks, intensive cleaning and the organisation of all movement in and around the school. What the long-term

impact and consequences of opening schools might prove to be, it is clear that the mental health of school leaders, teachers, learners and other stakeholders has the potential to become a greater problem than the pandemic itself. In the time of turmoil (Azorin, 2020) where quick solutions are required in a fast-changing world, the priority must be on the well-being of school leaders, teachers, learners and other stakeholders.

3. Rationale

Previously known as “the life cycle theory of leadership”, the situational leadership model was a concept introduced by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard in *Management of Organisational Behaviour*. They argued that there is not just one leadership style that works for all conditions or situations. The situational theory includes four leadership styles (direct, support, delegate, coach) that are adoptive to the employee’s range of development behaviour. Successful school leaders have the ability to look at situations with different perspectives, especially in times of the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges school leaders are facing. They assess the situation and behaviour of the team members, after which they determine the type of leadership approach to use to get the best results. The situational leadership theory and situational leadership model work to ensure organisation (school) success. Situational leadership can counter uncertainty and can counter volatility. Using Situational leadership, school leaders can control all possible outcomes and adapt your style to those you lead.

4. Methodology

A qualitative research approach served this research best in view of the empirical inquiry launched to investigate a particular phenomenon such as challenges by school leaders during COVID-19 (Niewenhuis, 2013). Inductive inquiry is emphasised during qualitative studies (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010) and thus interpretivist study gathered detailed particulars and then synthesised the data inductively in order to develop a deeper understanding of the problem.

The most frequently referenced practices are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Most Frequently cited challenges during COVID-19 by school leaders.

	Challenges	Citations
1.	Financial Sustainability	49
2.	Leadership Challenges	43
3.	Digital Challenges	41
4.	Safety of Learners and Poverty	40
5.	Curriculum Challenges	34
6.	False Sense of Community	28
	TOTAL	235

5. Recommendation

An undeniable human right, education is the bedrock of just, equal and inclusive societies and a key driver of sustainable development. Strengthening the resilience of education systems enables countries to respond to the immediately challenges of safely re-opening schools and positions them to cope better with future crises.

The role of school leaders must be clearly defined in crisis response. School leaders have a sense of responsibility to support their communities. The Department of Education must set clear guidelines on what is expected of school leaders as well as providing support and resources required to perform their roles. School leaders have voices and must be heard as they play an important part in the COVID-19 crisis. School leaders should use their distributive leadership skills to task and inspire their teams to address all COVID-19 concerns, School leaders should be connected in peer groups so that they can rapidly share best practices, and to motivate and coordinate activities to ensure leaders, staff and communities are connected to plans made by education officials.

School Governing Bodies must prioritise spending for the remainder of the school year and new budget for 2021. Schools need to find ways to overcome pressure on the school budget. Donors and communities should protect education assistance and frontload their existing commitments to help finance

the COVID-19 response. This is an opportunity to join hands with local communities and businesses to donate surplus stock to schools to distribute to families in need. Budgeting must focus on what is the urgent needs of the school and all luxuries like tours, functions even too many extra-curricular activities, need to be considered when planning the budget for 2021. School must seek and identify additional and alternative revenue streams.

School leaders are tasked to quickly create a safe and healthy learning space for learners and staff. Leaders must look after the mental health and well-being challenges among teachers and learners who may suffer from anxiety, depression, isolation or malnutrition. School leaders need to be trained to identify the symptoms. Additionally strong school leaders know the needs of their communities well and can help effectively marshal the available resources to those who need them.

School leaders must be trained to become techno-savvy and well informed. School leaders need to be discerning about the digital products on the market they choose and need to strike a balance between technology and pedagogy in their respective schools (Hargreaves, 2020).

6. Conclusion

A new chapter is being written about school leadership in disruptive times. In normal times, normal context, school leadership operated with well-known parameters with clear patterns to a school year, clear lives of accountability rules governing examinations and sport days. COVID-19 has changed all of that and unpredictability and uncertainty are now watchwords to those leading our schools. A new leadership has emerged, which has no leadership, no preparation and benchmarks. There is no blueprint to assist school leaders through the current challenges of COVID-19. Leading in disruptive times, will challenge school leaders to navigate a different course and to create a new pathway through the COVID-19 disruption. School leaders on this journey are defined by their determination, their hope and their belief that whatever happens, whatever the cost and whatever the scale of the challenge, they will continue to put the best interest of the learner first.

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