Educational Leadership and the Pandemic

David Gurr

Introduction

Like many educators across the world, a normal start to the first term of 2020 quickly turned into something extraordinary, and so, come late March I found myself working from home, locked out of my office at the university and quickly scrambling to prepare for on-line teaching through Zoom. I have yet to return to the office and most likely will not be allowed back until some stage in the first half of 2021, and teaching remains on-line for the foreseeable future. Once the shock of the initial lockdown settled, I began pondering how educators would respond to the closures.

I am an educational leadership scholar and so my first consideration was related to educational leadership in times of crisis and then my second response was a need to know how educators across the world were responding the pandemic. In this short paper, I will describe a leadership model which provides a core set of leadership domains which can be fine-tuned by developing leadership capabilities to help navigate turbulent times, and then I will summarize key ideas from 59 articles in four special issues of the academic journal, *International Studies in Educational Administration* (ISEA). The leadership model helps educational leaders to locate their practice strengths and develop other areas which may improve their practice, and the consideration of the special issues provides a strong knowledge base to use as they lead their organizations out of crisis. The two sections are written as independent pieces – one to provide a way of thinking about leadership during tumultuous times, and the other to provide a knowledge base about educational responses to the COVID pandemic. Hopefully, the model proves useful to readers to reconsider their own leadership, and the knowledge of what is happening across the world provides insights to guide education practice.

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Educational Leadership for Times of Crisis

My colleague, Lawrie Drysdale, and I had written about a model of leadership that we thought prepared educational leaders well to navigate uncertain times (Drysdale & Gurr, 2017). We didn't anticipate the uncertainty of 2020, but we did revisit this model at the start of the pandemic and it seems to still provide guidance for the current turbulence facing educators (Gurr & Drysdale, 2020). It is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Leadership in uncertain times domains and capabilities framework

The model has several features. In the center there is a focus on student outcomes, and this will include academic, extra and co-curricular, and personal outcomes (Gurr, 2015). Surrounding this are seven leadership domains. Four of these – setting direction, developing

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people, developing the organization and improving teaching and learning – reflect transformational, instructional and successful leadership research (e.g. Day & Leithwood, 2007; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2020; Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Ylimaki & Jacobson 2011). For the other three domains, Influencing acknowledges that leadership is a deliberate action to influence the behavior of others (Leithwood & Riehl 2003), leadership is enacted within multiple contexts (Hallinger, 2018) and developing self is important for sustaining leadership success (Day & Gurr, 2014). Drysdale and Gurr (2017) argue that the seven leadership domains are enduring features of leadership that seem to be important in most contexts. Within these domains, leaders need to consider the capabilities that they need for their contexts. Examples for times characterized by turbulence and uncertainty are offered in the outer circle. There is not space in this article to consider these, but the reader can access the original papers easily through *Academia* (Drysdale & Gurr, 2017; Gurr & Drysdale, 2020). The model provides a useful set of ideas for the reader to reflect upon their own leadership, what they do well, and those areas that would like to develop.

Educational Responses to the 2020 Pandemic

I now shift to share some knowledge about what systems and educators are doing across the world in response to the pandemic. In May, 2020, as the Editor of ISEA, I produced a call for papers that described educational responses to the pandemic. The papers could be conceptual, empirical, or country reports and, from more than 150 submissions, 59 papers have been published across four issues: volume 48, issues 1-3, and volume 49, issue 1. All are available open-access through the website of the *Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management* (www.cceam.net) and through individual authors placing their papers on sites such as *Academia*. Across the four issues, there are 29 countries represented, with papers focused on all levels of education, and especially on the school and university sectors. Unless otherwise stated, my comments below are applicable across education sectors. These observations are from my reading of the papers.

Positive features

Educators have often been able to adapt quickly and use a variety of technology to provide remote learning, and this work has been facilitated by increased teacher collaboration and leadership from many. There has been a focus on the important work of teachers broadly, and a renewed focus on teaching at the university level. There has also been a focus on schools and the many important roles schools have in society beyond education (in some countries,

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for example, schools provide important nutrition and health services)

Negative features

There have been many concerns raised about what has happened in 2020. Educational inequities have been exposed with particular concerns in regard to education for low income families, and especially in rural and remote areas. Educators have been concerned about the health and welfare of students, especially in poorer countries where nutrition and care issues were paramount. The impact on student development from the discontinuity in education is unknown but predicted to be damaging. Uncertainty about program continuity and practice has been stressful for teachers and students, and remote learning has caused assessment integrity concerns in senior school years and at university. Teachers have reported increased workload and work intensification, loss of income, poor job insecurity, and concern about their ability to cope and provide quality learning and care for their students.

System and country responses

School/university closures or partial closures have been common, ranging from a few weeks to several months, with some having considerable uncertainty (through closure/re-opening/closure). Remote learning provision has varied in quality and extent, and ranges from education conducted on-line with few disruptions to regular lessons, through to only having printed notes and some provision through TV or radio. Physical schooling for essential worker children, or children with special circumstances has often been prioritized. University partial closures typically meant closure of the physical spaces, but rapid movement to remote learning. There were infrastructure issues in many countries, such as poor electricity supply, internet connection, and technology in schools/universities and homes. The reliance on international students for enrolments and funding at the university level was exposed in many countries.

Implications for education going forward

Many are predicting a greater focus on reducing inequitable education provision. There will be increased use of technology to support students in schools and universities, although many countries will struggle with infrastructure to support this. A 'new normal' will see a mixture of in-person and virtual/remote learning, which will have a greater focus on student engagement, agency and inclusion. At the same time, at the school level, a physical school system will be important as the wider social purposes of schools have been highlighted and there will be an enhanced role for schools in the greater good of society

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Concluding thoughts

The pandemic has been a time of crisis. In terms of implications for leadership, the special issues of ISEA have shown that to help transition to remote education provision, there has been a need for teachers in all education sectors to be more collaborative and for leadership to come from many. Rapid professional learning support has been needed to upskill teachers quickly. There has also been a need to prepare leaders to lead through crises. This might include being future focused, highly responsive, and with an emphasis on values-based and moral purpose leadership views. The seven domain and capability leadership model described above, is an example of a model that is already well adapted to leading through a major crisis. The seven domains are research-based, enduring and context-spanning. The capabilities are a way of making this model more nuanced to individual leaders and the contexts they work in. Each educational leader needs to consider the two or three capabilities that are most suited to them and the contexts they work in. Figure 1 provides an example of this.

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