

EDITORIAL NOTE: EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Giambattista Bufalino, University of Catania

The COVID-19 pandemic is having an unprecedented impact on our world. The modern crisis has become even more complex. It is not spatially confined by common boundaries, and there is no “*playbook*” for leadership when the stakes are high. There are no easy answers in time like this. Also, fake news and misinformation about COVID-19 has spread widely across social media. Remember what the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci says:

“The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”

Crises have never been easy to manage. Organizational chaos, media pressure, stress, and incorrect information are just a few factors that make it very difficult for leaders to make sound decisions. This is particularly true for many educators, school leaders, teachers and families who have had to make a rapid, unplanned transition to remote (or distance) learning. With students dispersed, schools and our society must confront long-simmering inequities and well-being more than ever before. We are working in an extremely vulnerable time. It is a time when we need to put leadership at the center of our discourse. We need inspirational, charismatic, and transformational leaders who can act as artists, renew old ways of doing things, act and create new challenges in schools. If the strength of each leader is to inspire, create, strengthen, and encourage, how will they guide the course of change in all of this? What is their role in this time of change?

There are many important lessons to be learned from the present situation by school leaders, teachers, educators and researchers. So far, here are some of my own takeaways.

The Distributed Mission

Schools can, of course, learn from the experiences of virtual schools already in operation. But our response needs to be a joint one: School leaders, teachers, parents. At every school level, we need to find new ways to listen to each other at a distance. School leaders must listen to their teachers and their parents. Teachers need to listen to their students and their families. It is about helping students and teachers to see that we are still a class. Yes, we are in a different space, but there’s still some familiarity with what we are doing. The more stakeholders feel they are partners in the co-construction of the response, the more they will be invested in learning. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the need for individuals and groups to work together to achieve leadership results.

Searching for Meaning

In times of confusion and complexity, leadership has a vital role to play in helping people to make sense of the situation which they find themselves in. Teachers were suddenly taken out of their class. In one week time, they were asked to change their teaching and to implement an entire on line learning curriculum without proper training. Students are also experiencing social isolation. They don’t see friends, grandparents or classmates. They are subject of continuous interference of bad news. They have undergone a change in their routine and classical activities. They can experience feelings of boredom, anger and sorrow.

Schools leaders should be able to frame the context in a way that recognizes the nature of the experienced issue(s), addresses the concerns of school members and provides a degree of clarity about the actions/responses that are required. Teachers and students should be encouraged to see online learning as an exciting adventure rather than a major inconvenience. Presence and humanity are crucial. This will require awareness and attention to how this situation could offer privileges that are not available to others.

Humanity

Humanity has become the new leader of the world. It is much easier for us now to recognize that we are dependent, limited, fallible beings. Embracing our shared vulnerability is becoming a key means of building up real communities. A lot of people are doing great things for others. They serve, they volunteer, and they help. They give, they love, and they work together to solve problems. Shared vulnerability allows us to disrupt our pattern of doing things that are counterproductive or toxic. Human leadership has its source in the minds, hearts, and souls of individuals, and is sustained by meaningful relationships.

A Social Justice Perspective

Educational leadership creates, responds to, and reconstructs different meanings of justice, both educationally and socially. Precarities resulting from the deepening of social inequalities in the neo-liberal economic order are likely to escalate. The novel coronavirus outbreak has set a mirror in front of our faces, magnifying the inequalities in our school systems and in our society. The so-called digital divide is one of the most important issues, not only technological, but also social and cultural. Not everyone has an Internet connection, not everyone has a computer. Many teachers are also unaware of digital learning pedagogy. Furthermore, the fact that schools are closed for a long period of time could have detrimental social and health consequences for children living in poverty. Leaders and teachers should consider how to adapt their learning materials to students who do not have access to wireless internet, a computer, or a place to study. Local and national legislators must prepare for the major challenges that await at the end of the pandemic. Educational leaders can play a key role in mobilizing the discourse and achieving social justice in schools. The perspective of social justice should be pursued at a time when new events are challenging justice.

Learning from the Pauses

Listening to us, listening to our teachers and our students, drawing new and profound awareness from this listening. Accept the fear and with it the transformation that will inevitably affect us. We cannot oppose this. Here, leaders are called upon to demonstrate resilience and resistance. And they are called upon to rework themselves, their priorities. They should use this “*suspended time*” to work, to regenerate themselves with strength and humility in order to find a new balance.

These are just a few initial reflections and there is much more to say. Looking forward, I have no doubt that the coming period will be seen as a defining moment in our understanding and commitment to educational leadership. Schools need to make a difference for the better. And what is really good needs to be built.