LEARNING TO TEACH AND LEAD IN TURBULENT TIMES

Giambattista Bufalino, University of Catania

EDITORIAL

Governments, ministries and schools all over the world face the challenge of planning the delivery of education in very uncertain and turbulent times. Countries in Europe and around the world have gradually lifted restrictions following major learning disruptions due to school closures in previous months, while maintaining key protective measures, particularly regarding physical distances. At home – and abroad – large class sizes, educational disadvantages and underfunded education systems are additional headaches for policy makers dealing with the emergency pandemic crisis.

In this context, I consider the importance of teacher responsiveness and flexibility in unpredictable situations, which means that courage and steadfastness are needed in the face of dilemmas and conflicting interests. Last week, I had the opportunity to deliver a teaching program to a group of experienced Italian teachers using unconventional methods and the Lego Serious Play Methodology (LSP). LSP is a participatory, facilitated methodology that helps people to brainstorm and discuss complex ideas through storytelling that revolves around the metaphors represented by LEGO bricks and models. During this workshop, I asked the teachers to create their own model using Lego bricks to represent the theme of "Teaching at Covid Times". The answers and the models were diverse, but they all shared the senses of loneliness, frustrations and the need to find new ways to reach the students who are kept at a safe distance in their classrooms. In fact, students are not in a position to be close to teachers, classmates, and cannot exchange teaching materials. Students must remain firm in their seats, while teachers sometimes have to act as controllers, inviting them to continue wearing masks. Also, sources of teacher stress multiplied with the advent of Covid-19. Balancing personal and professional roles is a challenge for many teachers, but in some classes online teaching creates a lack of physical, temporal and/or psychological boundaries between school and home. Further, a pervasive concern for the health of one's family and oneself, has increased levels of stress and a variety of negative emotions (anxiety, anger, sadness, and loneliness). Some of the teachers have shown the importance of their role in supporting student well-being, providing correct information, and acting as psychological and emotional support. In this sense, teachers' responses focused on the well-being of students, families, prioritizing emotional and material needs over mandated curriculum and testing. In addition, teachers are essential for communicating measures that prevent the spread of the virus, ensuring that children are safe and supported. In this unpredictable situation, teachers had to adjust or condense the curriculum and adapt the lessons. Teachers pointed to the need to reinvent themselves, to find new ways of teaching.

The COVID-19 crisis has created a unique situation for teachers to demonstrate leadership, creativity and innovation: teachers work individually and collectively to find solutions and new learning environments for their students to ensure that learning can continue in a meaningful way. This pandemic challenges the revision of teachers' teaching and leadership. In view of these insights, the issue of teacher leadership in response to the crisis is not only timely but also critical in terms of the efforts that teachers have (and still are) recently made to ensure online and offline teaching and learning and to support vulnerable populations. In my opinion, leadership does not lie with a person

assigned to a formal position of power or authority, but rather, leadership encompasses the potential capacity of both teachers and school leaders. While some leadership roles are formal with assigned responsibilities, others are more informal as teachers' coaches, interact with peers, parents, and the local community. In emergency situations, leadership often takes the form of grassroots (bottom-up) approaches, while the system is self-adjusted at a higher level.

The Covid Crisis shows how the leadership of teachers can become crucial to managing change. It is a vocation, too. This means loving what you've got to do, getting to take care of and serving others. As teacher leaders, the aim is to form a human person and thus to form a person-in-relationship. It is through these educational values and leadership principles that teachers, both as individuals and as a community, are able to meet, engage in dialog and work with others. The model of educational leadership that is making a difference at this time is one that focuses on the character, presence, relationship and value of service leadership. Every year on 5 October since 1994, UNESCO celebrates World Teachers' Day (WTD) to commemorate the anniversary of the signing of the 1966 ILO/UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers. This year WTD will be celebrated with the theme, "Teachers: Leading in crisis, reimagining the future". This theme provokes us to celebrate the teaching profession worldwide, to take stock of achievements, and to draw attention to the voices of teachers who are at the heart of efforts to achieve the global education goal of leaving no one behind.