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ABSTRACT

Global messages from the edge of Europe the cause and effect of leadership and planning strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic

Martin Brown ^{*}, Joe O'Hara , Gerry McNamara , Craig Skerritt  and Paddy Shevlin

EQI: The Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection, School of Policy and Practice, DCU Institute of Education, Dublin, Ireland

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This paper provides an analysis of the leadership and planning strategies employed by school leaders during the Covid-19 Pandemic. It draws on a series of focus group interviews with school principals from all school types in Northern Ireland. Results derived from the study shows that despite the benefits of various modes of leadership such as distributed leadership and a consensus-based approach to educational provision that is increasingly promoted across many education systems; school leaders spoke of the need to revert to other modes of leadership in the form of situational leadership that quite frequently became the default strategy to cope with the multitude of challenges for school personnel during this period.

While the theory and subsequent benefits of distributed and networked leadership are not disputed, what is questioned is the fragmentary ways in which various modes of leadership are advocated across education systems. This leads to a more succinct question that we suggest should be considered in Northern Ireland and other jurisdictions; that is, what conditions, resources and supports are necessary to ensure that distributed leadership is not only perceived as yet another leadership strategy that can in the main, be implemented in unchallenging as opposed to challenging times.

Keywords: Distributed leadership; situational leadership; strategic planning and evaluation; Covid-19

Introduction and background

Compulsory education is but one of the few areas that has been extraordinarily affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, where it is estimated that the physical closure of schools has impacted 94 per cent of the world's student population (United Nations 2020). Accordingly, various subsets of educational research such as remote teaching and covid learning deficits continue to emerge as the pandemic subsides; yet the majority of research on the effects of the pandemic to date has focused on other fields such as medicine and economics (Palau et al. 2021). In agreement with Harris (2020) that there is limited evidence on school leadership within a

*Corresponding author. Email: martin.brown@dcu.ie

pandemic, the purpose of this paper is to fill the gap of research relating to the leadership and planning strategies that a sample of school leaders in Northern Ireland have used during this period of upheaval.

The paper begins with a description of the methodology that was used in the research. Next, an overview of the literature on school leaders experience of leading and managing schools during the pandemic is described. The penultimate section provides an analysis of the focus group data to deconstruct the cause and effect of leadership and planning strategies that were used by school leaders during this time. The paper concludes with a discussion of the research findings together with recommendations for future practice as education systems enter what is quite frequently termed as the ‘New normal’, a term that has historically been used throughout the twentieth century as countries emerged from various global crises.

Methodology

The research method used in this study consisted of three distinct stages. Stage one of the study consisted of a literature review (Grant and Booth 2009; Wee and Banister 2016) on how school leaders have managed to lead their schools during the pandemic. The next stage of the study consisted of developing an interview schedule to ascertain the planning and leadership strategies deployed by school leaders between March and December 2020. Using the interview schedule developed in the second stage of the study, a series of three focus groups were carried out with 53 primary and post-primary schools from all school types that exist in Northern Ireland. The third stage consisted of coding and analysing the focus group data using a combination of Creswell’s (2008) data analysis process and Miles and Huberman’s (1994) Components of Data Analysis: Interactive Model to provide an overall interpretation of the study.

Leading and managing schools during a pandemic

School leaders are currently both reliant on guidance concerning Covid-19 from various statutory agencies while also, as with other employees in the education sector, being required to deal with extra pressures such as staffing issues and increased workloads (Harris and Jones 2020). They have also had to take on other essential but nonetheless time-consuming duties, such as in the case of Northern Ireland, assisting with contact tracing to curb and monitor the pandemic (McNeilly 2020). Indeed, Stone-Johnson and Weiner (2020) describe principals as essential frontline workers as they are also dealing with societal issues, maintaining students’ morale, and communicating with parents about, for example, the physical opening and closing of schools. Additionally, although the workload of school leaders had already intensified over the course of the last number of years (Brown et al. 2019); indicative of the central role of leadership during the pandemic is a comment made by a teacher in Ewing and Cooper’s (2021, 7) study in Australia when discussing the rapid establishment of online cultures to curb the potential covid-learning deficit during physical school closures.

My principal was very active in ‘setting the tone’. From the ‘get go’, it was important that we had high expectations from the students so that they could see that we were taking their learning during this time seriously.

Furthermore, not only have school leaders and teachers been required to have the technical proficiency to meet the demands of remote education (Roulston, Taggart, and Brown 2020), but they have also been required to be attentive to the local needs of the school community. As Ehren et al. (2021) point out:

They are also required to be attentive to local values and establish educational partnerships with parents and communities to ensure an inclusive and effective approach to repairing the learning loss and socio-emotional damage to child development brought about by the pandemic (62).

It is no surprise, therefore, that in Beauchamp et al.’s (2020) research in the four regions of the United Kingdom during and after the physical closure of schools, principals stressed the importance of being versatile and adaptable when managing external expectations and pressures. For example, with little warning, principals began to receive considerable volumes of information through various statutory agencies and, quite frequently, through information that was initially shared on social media that required immediate planning decisions to be made at the school level (Beauchamp et al. 2021).

It is a little bit annoying that the information released seems to go to the media as quick as it comes to us. For instance, reopening of schools, parents have been asking ‘are you opening, are you not opening?’ (Beauchamp et al. 2021, p. 9).

Given these various demands of school leaders, to name but a few, Harris (2020) strongly suggests that ‘distributed leadership has become the only way to operate’ (324). Similarly, Harris and Jones (2020, 246) put forward the case that ‘Distributed leadership has become the default leadership response in this current crisis’ and that distributed leadership is a necessity to survive as many school leaders fatigue.

However, the concept and need to invoke distributed leadership is not new, and many variants exist (Spillane 2004) Nonetheless, one consistent aspect of distributed leadership that has remained constant within the discourse of the literature is that: ‘From a distributed perspective, leadership practice takes shape in the interactions of people and their situation, rather than from the actions of an individual leader’ (Spillane, p.3). Accordingly, Azorin (2020) in line with the increasingly central importance of Networks in education (Brown et al. 2020; O’Hara et al. 2021a, 2021b) also contends that a positive aspect of the pandemic ‘has been the collaborative networks that have appeared during these uncertain times’ (Azorin 2020, 383) and that shared, collaborative, and distributed leadership ‘is the new imperative of education’. Additionally, Beauchamp et al. (2021) point to the role of distributed leadership during the pandemic. While all principals interviewed by Beauchamp et al. (2021) described pre-existing distributed leadership practices in their schools, the heightened value of distributed leadership was recognised by participants:

Forms of distributed leadership noticeably became a particular strength, allowing delegation of some responsibility and some continuity of decision-making within existing networks in the school communities (Beauchamp et al. 2021, p. 9)

Nonetheless, while a considerable volume of research on leadership during the pandemic has admirably referred to ideal models of leadership, Ribbins (2007) earlier made the point that too much research in the field is about leadership and too little is on leading: ‘detailed and contextualised accounts of what individual leaders do and why they do it in a variety of specific circumstances, how and why others respond as they do, and with what outcomes’ (Ribbins 2007, 359). It is this issue, the how and why school leaders, in this case, leaders in Northern Ireland, have coped with and responded to the pandemic that forms the main part of this study.

The cause of leadership and planning strategies during the pandemic

Counter to the existing research on leadership strategies during the pandemic; most leaders interviewed in this research were of the view that the delegation and distribution of leadership tasks and responsibilities were no longer viable due to the increased workloads of their staff. As stated by one interviewee: ‘We’re not distributed, not at the moment, because we’re trying to protect our staff as best we can’ (Liam). Another principal stated:

Middle leadership teams or even some of the newer younger staff members were very keen in the past to take things on, you know, want to try x, y and z. They are now kind of just saying, ‘Well no, not at the minute, not at the minute ... when things go back to normal? We’ll pick that up again’ ... And that is totally understandable. And I am in no way putting pressure on anybody. (Gayle)

In this regard, school leaders appeared to be faced with increased planning and leadership responsibilities that under pre-covid conditions would have been distributed among other staff members. Throughout these accounts, it appears that the most dominant theme emerging from the focus group data as to the cause of minimising distributed leadership and planning strategies was a strong ethic of care to staff:

I feel I’ve taken a lot more on myself ... because I can’t ask much more of anybody. (Mary)

I need to give staff time to do what they want to do. There are things that I don’t want to delegate to staff, and I won’t delegate to staff, because they’re under enough pressure, even my senior staff, and vice principal, because they are under enough pressure to deal with the day in day out. (Gayle)

While unprecedented times have presented education systems with unique challenges and unforeseen stress, at the macro-level of decision making, most school leaders that were interviewed were at times displeased with the lack of distributed and strategic leadership from some statutory agencies. The following comments illustrate this point.

The fact of it is, is that that’s the reality that’s facing us as school leaders at the moment, because there is no strategic leadership ... as far as we as people are concerned. (Liam)

There needs to be strategic leadership from the top and I would say there needs to be strategic awareness. (Anne)

It was as if schools should be open, schools are safe to be open ... there was no, there was no leadership from the top. That then put us as educators in very, very precarious you know ... we didn’t know what to do. (Jack)

There's no joint collaboration from all the different people trying to run the schools. (Vicky)

As one participant explained, principals felt silenced:

Each and every time that we have had conversations with so-called politicians or civil servants at various levels, and anything that we have suggested hasn't been taken into consideration ... It's actually the same for the majority of people ... They constantly talk about the voice of parents' voice. Yeah. But we as a principals' group, our group, none of us whether it's no matter what sector we're in, we know our schools, we know what's going on yet it's as if we're non-existent. (Jack)

Those who were interviewed were also of the view that, although they recognised and appreciated the added pressures that statutory agencies were also facing, they were also of the view that they had been, at times, left to their own devices to navigate this new terrain. Some of the communications they did receive were not considered adequate or appropriate to allow for timely and distributed leadership and planning strategies to occur and appeared to be a source of great frustration. As one principal said, 'I am just sick to death of it' (Anne). Specific issues concerning communication and guidance from statutory agencies, also related to school leaders quite frequently receiving updates 'on social media' (Mary) and the notice received about developments or updates 'not being sufficient' (Vicky) that resulted in school leaders having to make decisions with immediacy and with limited consultation among staff. Inevitably, the effects of planning and leadership strategies deployed from above and from within appeared to affect those interviewed profoundly.

The effects of leadership and planning strategies during the pandemic

Foregrounded in all accounts offered by interviewees was how principals have become overwhelmed by the increased demands from various groupings during the pandemic. Worryingly, Principals' accounts were saturated with inferences of coping, managing, and just about, surviving. Certainly, the language used by participants was remarkably similar and accurately depicted the emergency that they were dealing with:

It's almost firefighting. (Fiachra)

We're sort of falling from one crisis to another crisis of pains. One fire, another fire, we're firefighting all the time. (Tom)

We, we want to be strategic in our leadership, we don't want to firefight. We don't want to be going from one crisis to the next crisis. (Michael)

By all accounts, the adverse effects that the pandemic was having on the health and wellbeing of those who were interviewed was significant.

I think I've aged about 20 years. I'm not joking ... it's wearing me down. (Audrey)

I'm going to put my hand up here and saying what about itself is, but I'm on my knees. (Ailis)

I'm at breaking point ... I'm only back today after two weeks' isolation. (Finbar)

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explore the leadership and planning strategies employed by a sample of school leaders in Northern Ireland during the Covid-19 pandemic. Results derived from the study show that perhaps unsurprisingly, in most instances, evaluation and planning activities that were agreed on before the pandemic became less of a priority for school leaders. Instead, the period saw the emergence of more nascent plans for practice such as remote learning and, above all, the prioritisation of the health and wellbeing of pupils and teachers. Furthermore, as described in the preceding sections of this paper, school leaders spoke of the need to limit distributed leadership and planning in their schools. This marked a significant break from the pre-pandemic period, which focused on distributed leadership in many schools throughout Northern Ireland (Brown et al. 2020). Instead, other modes of leadership in the form of situational leadership (Sims, Faraj, and Yun 2009) frequently came to the fore. In addition, and supporting the argument put forward by Harris and Jones (2020), the unprecedented circumstances faced by school leaders during the pandemic have resulted in a significant increase in the pressures they face in all elements of their personal and professional lives. This has taken an extraordinary toll on their health and wellbeing and is arguably unsustainable in the medium to long term.

Furthermore, while the theory and exemplars of practice highlighting the benefits of distributed leadership are not disputed; what is questioned is the often fragmentary ways in which the many lenses of distributed leadership are sequaciously advocated across education systems as a utopia or a mirage without taking into account the various power structures that affect such practices. As Lumby (2013) states, ‘the major part of the literature on distributed leadership tends not to problematise power, nor its relationship to distributed leadership’ (583). Indeed, as has been shown in this research, at the macro-level of decision-making between statutory agencies and schools, as the pandemic developed, it became clear that the multiple control systems put in place across the public sector identified the principal as a recognisable point of contact within each school and in practice required them to take responsibility for a much more extensive range of actions and activities than before. In parallel to this, the extraordinary pressures placed on teachers resulted in teachers having less time and capacity to take on additional roles and responsibilities as envisaged in the distributed leadership construct. As Hatcher (2005) earlier stated: ‘Thus, officially sanctioned ‘distributed leadership’ is always delegated, licensed, exercised on behalf of and revocable by authority’ (256).

In conclusion, while the tone and narrative from those interviewed might appear somewhat bleak and, at times, makes for uncomfortable reading; to concur with Coe, ‘if we hear only the success stories then pretty much anything may seem like an effective strategy for school improvement’ (2009, 368). However, the challenges of Covid-19 in an atypical environment also confirms Spillane’s (2012) and Spillane and Diamond (2007) perspectives on the actual value and pathway for distributed leadership across education systems. Here they argue that the emphasis should be on leadership as practice rather than leadership as role or responsibility (Spillane and Diamond 2007) . . . with an emphasis on interactions rather than actions. This view presupposes that leadership is not simply restricted to those with formal leadership roles but that influence and agency are widely shared (Harris 2013; cited in Harris and DeFlaminis 2016, 141). The challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic, as

highlighted in this study, is that the opportunities to exercise influence and agency were significantly limited by the realities of remote working, statutory identification of ‘named’ leaders and the at times overwhelming realities experienced by teachers. Given this, the question then becomes – under what conditions and by association, what resources and supports are necessary to create education systems, where distributed leadership continues to be practiced in unprecedented as well as normal times.

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Notes on contributors

Dr. Martin Brown is Associate Professor, School of Policy and practice, Internationalisation coordinator and a Director at EQI, the Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection, Institute of Education – Dublin City University.

Professor Joe O’Hara is President of the European Educational Research Association, Professor of Education and a Director of the Centre of Evaluation, Quality and Practice at the DCU Institute of Education.

Professor. Gerry McNamara is Professor of Educational Evaluation and a Director at EQI, the Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection, School of Policy and practice, Institute of Education – Dublin City University.

Craig Skerritt is a researcher at EQI, the Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection, School of Policy and practice, Institute of Education – Dublin City University.

Dr Paddy Shevlin is a senior researcher at EQI, the Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection, School of Policy and practice, Institute of Education – Dublin City University.

ORCID

Martin Brown  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5436-354X>

Joe O’Hara  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1956-7640>

Gerry McNamara  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9725-9304>

Craig Skerritt  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3695-758X>

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