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|---|---|
| Title | Ensuring learning continues during a pandemic |
| Authors | Jeanne Ho and Lee Yong Tay |
| Source | *International Studies in Educational Administration, 48*(2), 49-55 |
| Published by | International Studies in Educational Administration |

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# International Studies in Educational Administration

Journal of the Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration & Management



CCEAM

Volume 48 • Number 2 • 2020

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International Studies in Educational Administration
**Volume 48, No. 2, 2020**

# Contents

Editorial Note
**DAVID GURR** **1**

A School in the Grip of COVID-19: Musings From the Principal's Office
**ALEC O'CONNELL AND SIMON CLARKE** **4**

Keeping the Bus Moving While Maintaining Social Distance in a COVID-19 World
**STEPHANIE NARVAEZ BRELSFORD, ERICA E. CAMARILLO, AMANDA SANTANA GARCIA, GLORIA GARCIA, VALERIE REYES LOPEZ, CELESTE PAREDEZ MONTOYA, RALPH MORA III, ZULEICA OLVERA, ANDREA RAMIREZ, FRED WICKER AND BETTY MERCHANT** **12**

A Descriptive Analysis of Educational Services in Nigeria During COVID-19 Lockdown
**SAHEED OYENIRAN AND FOLASADE MARDIYYA OYENIRAN** **21**

Managing the Challenges to the Effective Utilisation of E-Learning as a Response in COVID-19 Nigeria
**INNOCENT C. IGBOKWE, NDIDIAMAKA J. OKEKE-JAMES, ADELINE N. ANYANWU AND NGOZI C. ELI-CHUKWU** **28**

School Leadership as (Un)usual. Insights From Principals in Sweden During a Pandemic
**BJÖRN AHLSTRÖM, ULF LEO, LARS NORQVIST AND PÄR POROMAA ISLING** **35**

Coping With the Global Pandemic COVID-19 Through the Lenses of the Cyprus Education System
**ANTONIOS KAFA AND PETROS PASHIARDIS** **42**

Ensuring Learning Continues During a Pandemic
**JEANNE HO AND LEE YONG TAY** **49**

Leadership in Times of Pandemics: Reflections From Singapore
**DAVID HUNG, JUN SONG HUANG AND CHLOE TAN** **56**

Educational Responses to the Pandemic in Japan: Primary and Secondary Education Policy Issues
**HIROSHI SATO** **64**

Collaboration, Communication and Wellness: Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Manitoba Schools
**CAMERON HAUSEMAN, SUSAN DARAZSI AND STACY KENT** **70**

School Principals and Students With Special Education Needs in a Pandemic: Emerging Insights From Ontario, Canada
**STEVE R. SIDER** **78**

Educational Responses to the Pandemic in India
**HEMLATA TALESRA** **85**

Managing Education in a Peculiar Environment: A Case Study of Nigeria's Response to COVID-19
**FEMI S. AKINWUMI AND ANTHONY A. ITOBORE** **92**

Management Practices in Lagos State Private Secondary Schools Amidst COVID-19 Lockdown
**AKEEM A. ADEKUNLE, JACOB A. ADEYANJU AND GBOLAHAN I. OYEGOKE** **100**

Going Hard and Early: Tertiary Teaching Under Lockdown in New Zealand
**SYLVIA ROBERTSON** **107**

# Ensuring Learning Continues During a Pandemic

**Jeanne Ho and Lee Yong Tay**

**Abstract:** *In the volatile, uncertain, and complex environment of the 2020 pandemic, education systems, school leaders and teachers must be ready to respond, adapt and even re-shape the context to ensure that student learning continues. In this paper, we analyse the Singapore Ministry of Education's response to the 2020 pandemic. We propose that two leadership constructs explain the leadership provided: contextually responsive leadership and an ecological perspective of leadership. Our analysis reiterates the importance of the teachers' role in working with and encouraging their peers, particularly when changes are required in the teachers' instructional practice, such as the use of technology.*

**Keywords**: Contextually responsive leadership, ecological leadership, distributed leadership, Singapore schools

## Background

As a small island-state with no natural resources, Singapore has always been exposed to external forces. Consequently, there exists a cultural mentality that we need to constantly adapt and innovate to survive as a nation. The underlying philosophy of Singapore's first info-communication masterplan for education (1997-2002), which continues to drive our later masterplans (2003-2008; 2009-2014; 2015-present), is that education should continually anticipate the future needs of society and work towards fulfilling those needs (Lee 2008).

This background is important as it is illustrative of the Singapore Ministry of Education's leadership in continuing 'to scan the horizons and understand the future needs and challenges that Singapore and our students will face (Ng 2015). The Ministry and schools were able to respond in the ways they did to the COVID-19 pandemic because of Singapore's long-term investment in building our schools' and homes' technological infrastructure, developing school leaders' capacity to harness technology, developing our teachers' capacity to use technology for teaching, and developing our students as future-ready learners.

## Learning From the Past in Preparing for the Future

The COVID-19 pandemic is not Singapore's first experience with a medical crisis. In March 2003, Singapore was hit by SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome). The impact on schools at that time involved a shorter period, with all primary schools, secondary schools, junior colleges and centralised institutes closed from March 27 to April 6. By May 30, the World Health Organisation declared Singapore SARS free.

Despite the short time frame, the SARS experience left an indelible impact. In response, the Ministry of Education (MOE), Singapore, initiated plans to minimise disruptions to learning should schools need to be closed again. Since the late 90s, the Ministry supported schools to set up learning management systems, initially procured from vendors, that schools could use for technology-facilitated lessons and periodic home-based learning (HBL). These different learning management systems evolved to become the Singapore Student Learning Space (SLS) in 2017, MOE's own learning portal, which comes with curriculum-aligned resources developed by the Ministry. MOE also continued the professional development of teachers to enable them to harness the affordances of technology for educational purpose.

Besides encouraging schools to implement HBL, MOE institutionalised protocols which started during SARS, such as the taking of students' and staff's temperature at the beginning of each term, after the school holidays. As the Minister of Education, Mr. Ong Ye Kung, wrote in his Facebook post on January 22, 2020, schools have measures in place since SARS to ensure the safety of students and staff and are 'ready to activate them if the situation requires it'.

## Responding With Deliberation and Ingenuity to the Context

Reed and Swaminathan (2016) coined the concept of a contextually responsive leadership (CRL). They proposed three tenets of CRL: first, leaders need to take into consideration the context that they are leading, both at the school level and beyond; second, leaders must use creative ingenuity to address contextual needs and the needs of diverse stakeholders, finding workable solutions to complex problems; finally, leaders need to achieve a balance between transformational leadership and transactional leadership, taking incremental steps and making smaller changes, while maintaining a more ambitious goal.

We propose that MOE (Singapore) demonstrated CRL, particularly the first two tenets, in their various decisions related to COVID-19. In March 2020, around 8,000 parents signed a petition to close schools in Singapore, noting that many countries had done so. It would have been easy for MOE to give in to this pressure and close schools. Instead, the Ministry reminded the public of the needs of a specific segment of society, families whose parents need to work and cannot afford alternative childcare arrangements. MOE explained that schools serve as pillars for 'the most vulnerable members of our society' (March 27 Facebook) and thus should be kept open for as long as possible, so that learning continued.

Nevertheless, responding to the national rise in COVID-19 cases and the need to prepare schools and parents should there be a need for school closure, MOE came up with a creative

interim solution, activating on April 1 a blended learning model of one day a week of home-based learning for all students. The rationale was to prepare parents and students for more days of HBL should the COVID-19 situation worsen (One day of home-based study a week, *The Straits Times*, 28 March, 2020). At the same time, this one day a week of HBL enabled teachers, the other main group of stakeholders, to test run HBL with their students.

The Ministry's progressive and calibrated responses to the evolving COVID-19 situation meant that schools managed to stay open until April 8, one day after Singapore implemented nation-wide circuit breaker measures, which have similarities with lockdowns in other countries, with people who can work from home required to do so. This meant that by the time schools were closed, many parents were at home to supervise their children's home-based learning. However, as usual, MOE anticipated the needs of its diverse stakeholders. For parents who needed to go to work, and for students whom schools assessed would benefit from attending school, schools remained open so that learning could continue for these students. Furthermore, anticipating that students in families with lower social economic status might not have access to computers, schools loaned their notebooks and worked with the community to source for additional notebooks to loan to these students.

Besides considering the needs of parents and students, the Minister of Education considered the needs of the teachers, also key stakeholders. The Minister reminded the public that teachers are also parents of young children. Thus, he asked for parents' understanding during HBL when some teachers may not be able to give immediate replies to their students' queries (Families all set for home-based learning, *The Straits Times*, April 8). In deciding whether to extend HBL when the government extended the circuit breaker to end one month later on June 1, MOE decided to bring forward the June holidays instead, explaining that it would be 'better to let everyone have a break from this intense [HBL] period' (April 21, Facebook), especially the teachers who needed 'some time to rest and recharge' (May 2, Facebook).

Throughout the evolving COVID-19 situation, MOE kept its larger goal of learning for students in sight, while considering the needs of diverse stakeholders in coming up with viable solutions: parents who had the means to keep their children at home, parents who had to work and had no child-care arrangements for their children, teachers who needed to prepare and conduct HBL while having to take care of their own children who were at home, and students who had problems accessing HBL.

## Communicating Rationale, Listening to Stakeholders and Showing Empathy

As the public face of MOE, the Minister of Education has a Facebook profile which he uses to communicate with teachers and parents. In his postings, he observed that we should not let fear dictate our lives and outlined reasons for not suspending schools too soon. Periodically, he acknowledged questions from concerned parents about MOE's decisions and worked with MOE to provide answers to their top questions. In explaining the ministry's plan to

progressively bring students back to schools, he assured all that schools were taking 'whatever precautions we can to ensure the well-being of all students and staff'.

The Ministry of Education also reaches out to parents, teachers and students through the MOE Facebook profile and other digital and non-digital means. A mobile application, Parents Gateway, was launched in January 2019 (GovTech - https://www.tech.gov.sg/) as a one-stop platform for schools' and parents' communication. Responding swiftly to the continual changes in the COVID-19 situation, MOE came up with Parent Kits to assist parents in supporting their children's HBL, and later to share fun and meaningful activities parents could carry out with their children during the holiday period. A live FB session was held on May 23 for parents to raise their concerns about school re-opening on June 2, 2020. To inspire the teachers, innovative HBL lessons designed by their peers were highlighted.

The use of social media, such as Facebook, to keep in touch with the ground, and to communicate with different stakeholders, both parents and teachers, enabled MOE to monitor and nimbly respond to contextual concerns and needs.

## Working With the Community and as a Community

As observed by Crow and Scribner (2014), the context which school leaders need to work with lies beyond the school to include the larger community, with the need for principals to form community partnerships to support their students' learning. Similarly, an ecological perspective of leadership recognises that schools are situated within a nested context of ecological systems (Toh, Jamaludin, Hung & Chua 2014), requiring leadership to be practised by stakeholders at various ecological levels, including the macro community and the micro teacher levels, particularly when dealing with adaptive challenges which require untried, experimental ways to adapt (Wielkiewicz & Stelzner 2005).

In the Singapore context, MOE and schools work closely with various government agencies to support students' learning and well-being. One example is the Infocomm Media Development Authority's (IMDA) NEU PC Plus Programme which complements schools' loan of devices to students. This programme started in 2006 and aims to help low-income families with school-going children own a new computer with Internet access. Over the years, IMDA has reviewed and increased the qualifying income cap for this initiative, later including an option of a subsidised second PC for families with three or more school-going children. IMDA provides leadership to support students' use of technology through the provision of resources, continually reviewing its policies in response to changing contexts.

As Singapore's circuit breaker continued, schools realised that their concern about students' learning turned out to be the least of their problems. When parents started to lose their jobs, community partners, such as 'Food from the Heart', stepped in to work with schools or independently on their own to provide food packs (Singapore schools step up to help needy students, families, *The Straits Times*, May 2, 2020). In an ecological perspective of leadership, leadership emerges as agents in interdependent networks mutually engage issues.

At the micro level, there was evidence of teachers supporting one another. When teachers who returned from overseas during the March holidays had to observe 14 days leave of absence, staff who were working in the Ministry returned to schools to support schools who had many staff on LOA. During HBL, teachers worked together, through the MOE networked community on Facebook, to lead in designing and sharing HBL lessons with the fraternity. Known as the Singapore Learning Designers' Circle (https://www.facebook.com/groups/sglearningdesigners/), the community grew exponentially to over 15,000 members within a few months of the COVID-19 situation.

## Barriers to Home-Based Learning

Research has focused mainly on the use of technology within a school context, with two barriers identified (Ertmer 1999). First-order barriers refer to accessibility to hardware and software, network infrastructure and technical support. This barrier has largely been addressed in Singapore, with every teacher provided with a computer notebook, and with the setup of computer laboratories or mobile laboratories with broadband access in schools. However, for students to participate in HBL during COVID-19, consistent access by students becomes critical and this can be problematic in poorer households or in families with a big number of school-going children. Although MOE loaned out more than 20,000 computing devises and 1,600 internet-enabled devices, the COVID-19 situation showed up how inequality affects children outside school. For children, beyond the first-order barrier of access, some also faced poverty, domestic violence, lack of space, limited parental support and limited access to other educational resources (COVID-19 can widen gaps, *The Straits Times*, May 21, 2020). Recognising that providing students with access to technology, and through technology to continual learning, is a key strategy to keep social mobility alive, all secondary school students will receive a personal laptop or tablet for learning by 2021, seven years ahead of the original target of 2028 (Each secondary student to get learning device by next year, *The Straits Times*, June 18, 2020). This timely response accentuates MOE's willingness to make changes to policies to reshape context when the situation highlights a need for change.

The second-order barrier (Ertmer 1999) refers to teachers' use of technology; it includes teachers' beliefs about computers in education and their willingness to use technology. In an ironic way, this barrier was overridden in the face of COVID-19. Teachers basically had no choice but to respond by rolling up their sleeves and working with peers to design one month's equivalence of home-based learning, incorporating a blend of online and offline learning. Teachers also generously shared these lessons with the fraternity, providing leadership in a difficult situation. Variations in teachers' competency in adapting the use of technology to the instructional needs for different contexts resulted in variations in the quality of students' HBL experiences (Covid-19 pandemic hastens Smart Nation drive, *The Straits Times*, May 21, 2020). Recognising teachers' difficulties in designing HBL, which involves designing for both synchronous and asynchronous learning, MOE will be reviewing ways to

enhance teachers' capacity to blend classroom and digital learning (Now is a good time to reopen schools, *The Straits Times*, June 3, 2020).

## Conclusion

Two leadership concepts appear to explain the leadership provided in Singapore in our educational response to the Covid-19 pandemic: contextually responsive leadership and an ecological perspective of leadership. Both concepts view leadership as needing to respond and adapt to shifts in contexts.

The literature suggests that context-responsive leaders are not confined by the contexts in which they work. They decide what is important and are able to rise beyond the immediate context to a larger goal (Bredeson, Klar & Johansson 2011; Drysdale & Gurr 2017), shaping the context where necessary (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins 2008). The Ministry of Education, Singapore, despite the uncertainties arising from COVID-19 and pressure from some parents, was clear that it was important to keep students in school for as long as possible, not just for their learning, but also for their social-emotional well-being. Thus, MOE explored creative alternatives to immediate school closure, such as the once a week home-based learning. When schools were re-opened on June 2, 2020, they similarly adopted an initial mix of onsite learning and HBL for different grade levels, reducing the risk of infection while helping students to progressively regain their lives.

Clearly, leadership to respond to a pandemic cannot be provided by an individual. While the Minister of Education is the face of the Ministry, and should be both heard and seen in providing leadership (Drysdale & Gurr 2017), leadership is required at the various ecological levels (Toh et al. 2014), from the community to the Ministry to schools to the teachers. While the Ministry provides the direction, and schools the supporting structures, teachers are ultimately the ones who design and facilitate the learning experience for the students. Research has consistently shown that teachers need to be actively involved in influencing their peers to change, particularly when educational reforms require changes in teachers' instructional practice, such as the use of technology (Ho, Chen & Ng 2016; Tay & Lim 2016). The COVID-19 situation shows that our teachers were able to work collaboratively to adapt to the crisis, with teachers who were more competent in designing HBL emerging as leaders and motivating their peers to explore more innovative pedagogies in implementing HBL.

In brief, a long-term investment perspective needs to be adopted by leaders at the country and school levels towards educating students to be more self-directed and self-regulated as change and uncertainty are the only constants in the future world. While maintaining a long-term perspective, since change is a constant, leaders also need to be ready to respond to changes and re-shape the context where necessary.

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