

REFEREED ARTICLE

The Role of School Leaders in Building a “New and Better Normal” as Schools Emerge From the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply impacted the field of education, highlighting many problems to be considered by educational leaders as schools emerge from the pandemic. In planning to address challenges and consider innovation, school leaders are encouraged to implement changes in curriculum and assessment to meet the needs of contemporary learners, build strong home-school relationships by honouring the voices of all stakeholders, encourage direct social and emotional instruction, and execute a systemic mental health action plan. At this pivotal moment in history, school leaders play a critical role in the transformation of the current system, acting as catalysts for change in the pursuit of a new and better normal.

As schools emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, the profound effect of public health orders and restrictions, school closures, and remote learning has highlighted many problems in the educational system, requiring thoughtful consideration by school leaders. Problems in the areas of academic achievement, curriculum and assessment, home-school relationships, social and emotional learning, and mental health have emerged as significant concerns in the educational system. As a result of these situations, school leaders are encouraged to engage in critical reflection as they plan a response to these problems in order to restore school climate and culture. This is a pivotal time in educational history. Educational leaders have an opportunity to think deeply about the current system and consider positive actions to address the significant areas of concern that have come into view. As schools emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, education can be reimaged. School leaders can play a critical role in spearheading a transformation as the system evolves into a “new and better normal.”

Academic Achievement

The negative impact of COVID-19 on academic achievement is a problem requiring consideration by school leaders around the world (Harmey & Moss, 2021). Although it existed prior to COVID-19, the academic achievement gap has been exacerbated by school closures and lack of access to educational opportunities (Javurek & Mendenhall, 2020). COVID-19 has highlighted inequities in the current educational system, and contributed to an academic gap that has grown exponentially throughout the pandemic (Fisher et al., 2021). In order to plan for effective rebound learning, and work toward closing the academic gap, addressing systemic and societal inequities is an area of concern for school leaders.

Identifying and responding to systemic and societal inequities, including access to basic needs, health, wellness and technology (Shah & Shaker, 2020, p. 37), is critical for school leaders as they work to close the academic achievement gap (Fadlallah, 2021). Honest and open performance conversations between school leaders and educators through an equity lens can help identify strengths along with areas of growth in this area (Fisher et al., 2021). In this moment in time, there is a unique opportunity to transform by critically reflecting, identifying, and challenging current practices that contribute to the marginalization of students (Katz et al., 2018). To close the academic achievement gap, it is important for school leaders to ask critical questions in order to recognize and address inequity while engaging and empowering all stakeholders.

In the return to a new normal, school leaders must implement a systemic intervention model to diagnose academic gaps efficiently and address closing the gaps through effective instruction (Hattie, 2021). High expectations are required for all students, along with targeted interventions carefully designed to accelerate learning and close academic gaps (Javurek & Mendenhall, 2020). It is critical for school leaders to provide instructional leadership, as well as responsive and enriched professional development opportunities (Fadlallah, 2021), in order to encourage teachers to reduce less effective instructional strategies such as lecturing and teacher-centred questioning (Hattie, 2021). Effective instruction occurs when educators facilitate learning by curating resources and actively engaging students in student-centred, inquiry-based learning (Zhao & Watterston, 2021). With student voice in both learning and decision making, academic gaps can be closed as students become engaged in meaningful, personal learning rather than learning based on age and grade level (Javurek & Mendenhall, 2020). School leaders who promote effective instructional strategies will encourage acceleration of the closing of academic achievement gaps through student engagement in meaningful learning experiences.

In order to enhance effective instruction, school leaders may consider leveraging what has been learned about technology throughout the pandemic (Javurek & Mendenhall, 2020). Thoughtful consideration and use of digital products and technology can be implemented by educational leaders to promote inquiry-based, student-centred learning (Zhao & Watterston, 2021), and to accelerate learning to close academic gaps (Harris & Jones, 2020). Through ongoing professional learning and collaborative teacher inquiry (Katz et al., 2018) in the areas of digital resources and technology, educators can continue to develop effective pedagogy and targeted interventions to accelerate the closing of the academic achievement gap (Fadlallah, 2021). With a goal of supporting engagement and academic achievement through a student-centred approach, effective pedagogy can be enhanced through technology and digital resources, including clear success criteria and ongoing evaluation to determine the effectiveness of instruction (Hattie, 2021). As a key to addressing academic gaps and accelerating learning, school leaders must reflect on the area of effective instruction and ensure that transformative instructional strategies are in place in schools.

Curriculum and Assessment

School leaders must consider addressing the problems that have emerged around a knowledge-based curriculum. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, teaching of curriculum has often required memorization of facts and worksheets (Fisher et al., 2021), highlighting content designed to prepare children to enter a workforce of the past with an emphasis on the acquisition of skills needed for jobs that are no longer relevant (Mitra, 2020). The focus on task completion teaching has resulted in the disengagement of a significant number of learners (Zhao & Watterston, 2021). In planning for a new and better normal, addressing concerns related to content-driven curriculum is important for school leaders.

In seeking to transform the system, an area of consideration for school leaders is the implementation of a thinking curriculum, whereby students can work independently and collaboratively (Hattie, 2021). Rather than teacher-directed instruction of a knowledge-based curriculum, school leaders are encouraged to implement a curriculum focused on competencies such as creativity, curiosity, critical thinking, collaboration, communication, growth mindset, and global citizenship (Mitra, 2020). Students will engage enthusiastically in personalized, project-based learning (Fadlallah, 2021). A curriculum with a student-centred focus on content through rich learning experiences (Hattie, 2021, p. 15) is designed to promote creative thinking, deep questioning, and challenging of current norms (Tarc, 2020). School leaders are urged to support teachers in the implementation of a thinking curriculum, built on a foundation of essential skills and knowledge, encouraging student voice and choice in learning (Zhao & Watterston, 2021). As the system transforms, school leaders can spearhead a curriculum for students to learn to think

critically and analyze multiple perspectives while building a lifelong love of learning (Shah & Shaker, 2020). School leaders have the opportunity to implement a new and better curriculum, one that is designed to instill in all children the ability to contribute to humanity, and to empower the next generation of adults with the skills necessary to make the world a better place.

Schooling during the pandemic has reinforced the need for school leaders to address concerns that have emerged around assessment and grading (Fisher et al., 2021). Content-driven curriculum lends itself to assessment that is designed to determine the ability of the student to memorize facts (Mitra, 2020) along with practices that promote measuring students, rather than learning (Flanagan, 2020). In a context wherein students have access to the internet and do not need to know facts but only how to find them (Mitra, 2020), current assessment practices are a problem for school leaders to explore.

School leaders are encouraged to challenge educators to implement assessment practices designed to eliminate bias and foster student development in order to measure growth (Fisher et al., 2021). Quality assessment practices offer students the opportunity to demonstrate proficiency when they are ready, promoting the communication of mastery (Javurek & Mendenhall, 2020). As schools emerge from the pandemic, it is essential to implement accurate assessment in a timely manner in order to identify student needs and performance related to the acquisition of skills such as skills such as comprehension, communication and computing, rather than grade level expectations (Mitra, 2020). School leaders have an important role in ensuring the implementation of high-quality assessment practices, used by teachers to drive interventions and learning.

For some educators, the impact of COVID-19 on schools created an opportunity to re-think assessment and engage in powerful assessment practices. Pandemic teaching for some educators has included frequently using a variety of multi-model assessments for a range of purposes, including to guide instruction, to evaluate the quality of their teaching, and to identify student growth (Fisher et al., 2021). In order to enhance collective efficacy, school leaders are encouraged to leverage the work of these educators by establishing and supporting a culture of learning through professional learning communities (Katz et al., 2018). School leaders are encouraged to build assessment literacy and common understandings among educators. By challenging teachers to examine assessment practices and to apply critical feedback, school leaders can work to enhance assessment processes.

Home-School Relationships

Experiences throughout the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the importance of the home-school relationship. Impacted by many different stressors as the system navigated school closures, isolation and remote learning, the home-teacher-school connection has often been challenged, and in many cases broken, as families disengaged with the school (Harmey & Moss, 2021). It is critical for school leaders to acknowledge and rebuild broken relationships (Fisher et al., 2021). School leaders will need to begin with open and honest communication combined with collaborative decision making (Grooms & Childs, 2021). It is important to meet parents and guardians where they are at, first by listening, and then by finding out what each family needs (Flanagan, 2020). Transformation can occur as school leaders reengage the community through partnerships forged through open communication and collective action.

School leaders are encouraged to use home-school relationships to leverage community resources, expertise, and knowledge (Harris & Jones, 2020). Relationships with the wider community can expand opportunities for learning experiences beyond the walls of the school, both by enhancing student strengths and by assisting in the closing of learning gaps (Javurek & Mendenhall, 2020). Strong community connections can further school-based efforts to examine and improve equity (Fisher et al., 2021). Powerful home-school connections can support the development of student identity and honour the diversity of the school community by

acknowledging and celebrating differences (Shah & Shaker, 2020). School leaders can successfully strengthen the home-school relationship by increasing the voice of stakeholders in terms of equity, community connections, and cultural awareness.

Throughout the pandemic, many parents and guardians have been involved in critical conversations around learning (Hattie, 2021). School leaders are encouraged to expand on this dialogue, moving parent advisory councils beyond the typical role of fundraiser into one wherein parents and guardians hold a valued voice as stakeholders in the areas of curriculum and instruction (Fisher et al., 2021). Taking inspiration from the work done during the pandemic, school leaders are urged to enhance partnerships with the home by asking critical questions around how best to support student learning and by working together to determine student needs (Grooms & Childs, 2021). It is essential for school leaders to continue investing in home-school relationships as powerful partnerships, while also creating a climate wherein community engagement and family advocacy are deeply valued.

Social and Emotional Learning

School leaders must have a plan to address the significant deficits in the area of social and emotional learning that are a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has resulted in reduced opportunities for socialization and connection, both in the classroom and on the playground (Flanagan, 2020). As school returns to in-person learning, problematic and anti-social behaviours will be evident in both the school and the wider community (Fisher et al., 2021). School leaders must have a plan to address deficits in social and emotional learning.

Children need to learn how to be with each other in their school communities, as well as in the wider world (Tarc, 2020). School leaders can promote a new and better normal through a school-wide focus on building relationships and intentionally fostering social and emotional well-being (Zhao & Watterston, 2021). School leaders must encourage educators, who are commonly focused mainly on academic gaps and a need for students to catch up on lost learning, to slow down and take time to build relationships (Tarc, 2020). Before focusing on academic achievement gaps, it will be imperative to provide direct instruction of self-regulation skills and most importantly, to respond to the social and emotional needs of students (Harmey & Moss, 2021). Strong self-regulation skills are directly connected to student engagement and academic achievement (Hattie, 2021), making a primary focus on social and emotional teaching a priority (Carrington, 2021). It will be well worth the effort for school leaders to prioritize social and emotional learning as the system transforms in the wake of the pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic, it has been difficult to provide critical instruction in the social and emotional domains to address challenging behaviour. Instead of addressing negative behaviour, many students with challenging behaviors have simply been removed from virtual meetings (Fisher et al., 2021). As students return to in-person learning and challenging, anti-social behaviors increase, school leaders must encourage teachers to develop an understanding of challenging or dysregulated behaviour as a desire by students for connection (Carrington, 2021). Through honest professional dialogue and reflective conversations (Katz et al., 2018), school leaders can support educators to challenge deficit thinking around student behaviour by bringing compassion and grace to teaching (Grooms & Childs, 2021). School leaders are advised to embed school-wide restorative practices with a focus on relationships, in order to encourage students to develop an understanding of the impact of their actions on others (Carrington, 2021). School leaders play a critical role in encouraging educators to view challenging behaviours through an empathy lens, and in ensuring that structures are in place to provide significant support for students as they re-engage in developing citizenship and personal management skills through direct social and emotional instruction.

Mental Health

The mental health of students and staff has emerged as a key concern for school leaders (Harmey & Moss, 2021). Students and staff members are returning to schools with feelings of isolation, stress, anxiety, and depression as many continue to process trauma related to the pandemic (Flanagan, 2020). Schools play a vital role in helping not only students and staff, but also wider communities, to address the mental health needs that have arisen (Harmey & Moss, 2021). School leaders are encouraged to acknowledge the trauma (Carrington, 2021) and to provide professional development to educators in order to facilitate the implementation of trauma-informed practices (Grooms & Childs). Students will require education about COVID-19, along with time to process their experiences, with an understanding by school leaders that the effects of trauma, and the implementation of trauma informed practices may be required for months, and even years, to come (Harmey & Moss, 2021). School leaders must plan to address the mental health needs of all stakeholders by acknowledging trauma and implementing trauma-informed practices in schools.

Countless individuals throughout the school system may be hesitant to return to in-person learning because they do not yet feel safe in school buildings (Fisher et al., 2021). It will be important for school leaders to implement strategies and structures to ensure that everyone feels safe at school and to communicate these clearly to all stakeholders (Flanagan, 2020). Timely and carefully planned multi-tiered support will be required for students and staff (Grooms & Childs, 2021) from trained professionals, including social workers, school counsellors and other clinical team members (Shah & Shaker, 2020). In addressing the mental health needs of the school community, school leaders will need to execute both a systemic and individualized response to mental health needs. It is critical for school leaders ensure students and staff receive significant emotional support in a timely and intentional way.

Conclusion

School leaders are in the unique role of spearheading a transformation in the educational system as they begin to address many problems that have emerged or been exacerbated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. An outdated curriculum, compounded by unfair assessment practices and an achievement gap impacted by inequities, requires school leaders to consider curriculum planning designed to meet the needs of contemporary learners, and assessment practices that measure growth and foster learning. School leaders are encouraged to address the need to repair broken home-school relationships through honouring the voices of all stakeholders. School leaders play a critical role in implementing direct social and emotional instruction in schools to address the impact of missed social opportunities for children. Planning for a systemic response to the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of students and staff is also crucial for school leaders. In this pivotal moment in history, through planning to address these many challenges and the consideration of systemic innovation, school leaders are in the unique position of acting as catalysts in the transformation of schools into a new normal, one that is even better than before the COVID-19 pandemic.

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