

# COVID-19: Leading in Disruptive Times – Challenges for School Leaders

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## Abstract

Since South Africa went into lockdown as a result of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, school principals have been leading in challenging circumstances. A combination of confusing government decisions and advice, compounded by a lack of decision-making by education districts, has resulted in many school principals having to make key decisions on a daily basis, many times being unsure of the support from departmental officials. Principals have had to ensure the continuation of the teaching and learning process even when the schools were closed, in some cases simultaneously developing a viable online systems in order to stay in contact with vulnerable learners and families. School leaders are uniquely positioned to guide families in supporting their children whilst at home during these unprecedented times. For school leaders, this becomes harder as schools serve families across vast geographic areas that may be without access to high-speed internet. How do school leaders lead educators and schools, which are doing their best to function effectively in uncharted territory, where teachers have had to move instruction online?

Using a qualitative research approach, this study aimed to determine the challenges faced by school leaders in managing their schools during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Five schools in the Nelspruit area of Mpumalanga Province were selected through purposeful sampling. Data collected was categorised by themes and logically organised into workable units to facilitate coding. The findings revealed that COVID-19 has had an impact on principal leadership, challenging them to make decisions beyond their usual scope of management, relating to the feeding of learners, organising personal protective equipment (PPE), finances and online learning platforms.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, leadership, technology, principals, schools.

## **Introduction**

The lockdown brought about the coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and the strict regulations implemented by the National Coronavirus Command Council (NCCC) to control its spread in South Africa, meant that academic institutions such as schools and universities, were almost immediately challenged in their ways of leading, organising and implementing the curriculum in a remote fashion. Educators were challenged by the need to teach and work remotely. To avoid a total curriculum collapse, schools had to find ways to improve their academic operations by introducing online-based technology and pedagogy. This ensured learners could have access to learning materials whilst at home. The challenge for schools was to navigate issues and ask questions surrounding their readiness to introduce technology and face online teaching and learning challenges. Apart from changing to an online mode, schools further had to manage declining cash flows including that of state subsidies. In addition, many parents lost their source of income and were unable to contribute to school fees. Thus, the challenges faced by school leaders became greater, especially in the rural schools (Zhao 2020).

According to a 2020 report by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the pandemic has affected 14.6 million learners in South Africa (UNESCO 2020). This resulted in almost all schools in South Africa needing to reorganise teaching and learning practices to be suitable for use in an online mode. Schools were catapulted into virtual learning scenarios, facilitating the curriculum by changing to the use of online classrooms and online tools in order to teach, whilst having to adhere to government health protocols, which prevented face-to-face interaction in a physical classroom setting.

If one looks at the South African context and the socio-economic disparities that continue to exist in the country and within the education sector, COVID-19 has placed many communities, including schools, under pressure to create plans that cater for a wide range of learners. The pandemic has specifically placed schools and school leadership under immense pressure (Harris 2020) to adapt to a digital mode of teaching and learning. In this time of turmoil and disruption, where quick solutions are required in a fast-changing world and evolving pandemic, the wellbeing of leaders, educators and all other stakeholders involved in the reopening of schools must be a priority.

## **Problem Statement**

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in increased demands on school leaders. In March 2020, most aspects of everyday life were altered, often in unthinkable ways, by the appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic. It interrupted the economies of many countries across the globe, disrupting schooling; indeed, it shook the very fabric of education (Hargreaves & Fullan 2020). The pandemic has challenged and redefined learning as a remote activity. Millions of learners were limited to online teacher support, and as Zhao (2020) points out, ‘Virtually all schools have been paused and teaching had to be significantly re-organised’ (2020: 14). In most countries, including South Africa, returning learners to school became an issue; governments had heated debates deciding when and how learners would best the return to schools should happen. Suddenly, schools faced the challenge of social (physical) distancing, the continuous wearing of masks covering nose and mouth, intensive cleaning procedures, and the re-organisation of all movement in and around the school buildings. Whatever the long-term impact and consequences of re-opening schools might be, it is clear that the possible mental health challenges of school leaders, educators, learners and other stakeholders has the potential to become a greater problem than the pandemic itself.

Yet, in many aspects, COVID-19 exacerbates issues of wellbeing, and highlights how inequalities in education profoundly affect those in society who have the least (Vally 2019). This is evident in many areas in South Africa. The pandemic has highlighted disparities in access to digital devices and the internet. When schools were closed towards the end of March 2020, the majority of low-income households in many areas did not have access to a high-speed internet connection at home (UNESCO 2020).

For school leaders responsible to lead in these demanding and chaotic times, the pressure has been relentless and options have been limited. For a long time, learners and teachers have existed in a twilight world regarding education. This reality is unlikely to change anytime soon. School leaders are dealing with changing staffing situations. The social distancing of educators and learners has placed an additional burden on the shoulders of school leaders, challenging them both personally and professionally. In times of crisis, leaders must act swiftly and with foresight (Netolicky 2020), carefully considering options, consequences and side effects of actions taken. There are no precedents or guides to lead school leaders during a pandemic.

Therefore, the research question is ‘what are the challenges faced by school leaders in leading in challenging circumstances?’

## **Rationale**

Previously known as ‘the life cycle theory of leadership’, the situational leadership model was a concept introduced by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard (1982) in *Management of Organisational Behaviour*. They argue there is more than one leadership style that may work in different situations. Situational leadership theory includes four leadership styles (direct, support, delegate, coach) that are adaptive to the employees’ range of development behaviours. Successful school leaders have the ability to look at situations from different perspectives, especially in context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the concomitant challenges school leaders face. Firstly, they assess the situation and behaviour of team members, after which they determine the type of leadership approach to use in order to obtain the best results. Situational leadership theory and its attendant model work to ensure organisational (school) success. Situational leadership can counter uncertainty and volatility. By using situational leadership, school leaders can control all possible outcomes and adapt their style to those they lead.

Without question, COVID-19 has had and still has a big impact on the world. It has devastated the world economy and has changed education dramatically. Harris (2020) noted that in this pandemic, education has been re-crafted, re-designed and re-booted as a home-based, technology-driven, online activity. The core function of schools has changed, and education leaders have been pushed to the limit. With 14.6 million learners out of school in South Africa during the pandemic, the country has experienced a hiatus in education. ‘Virtually all schools have been paused and teaching has been re-organised in various ways’ (Zhao 2020: 1). To regard the current ‘COVID-19 leadership practices’ as a temporary attempt to survive the crisis, or a quick fix until normality resumes, one will surely miss the ideal opportunity to lead differently and maybe more effectively. On the other hand, there are those who wish for a rapid return to the ‘old normal’. For most leaders the reality is located somewhere in the middle. The frustrations and unpredictability (Harris 2020: 2) of living through COVID-19 means there are no certainties. While one can speculate and imagine what the future of education will look like, there are no clear answers available.

For Kuhn (2012), moving forward is key for all leaders while avoiding rash or rushed decisions. The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed the concept of leadership practice. While principals still lead their schools, they are doing so in ways that they could not have imagined months ago (Harris 2020). School leaders are leading from laptop computers, in schools with a reduced number of learners in daily attendance, and in school communities by engaging with parents and districts online as never before. School leaders are now remote leaders, distanced and disconnected from those they lead in these strange, difficult and unpredictable times (Leithwood *et al.* 2020). Achieving this in a virtual space is not impossible, but it does require an extra effort to remain connected with others in meaningful ways that sustain relationships and keep things progressing at schools.

On one level, school leadership is in a crisis. The current situation demands a trial-and-error approach as the situation is unpredictable and uncertain. On the other hand, school leaders have been responding positively to the COVID-19 crisis. Learning has continued, schools have reopened, and educators have been teaching virtually whilst planning for the new school year. While significant, the COVID-19 pandemic is unlikely to be the only crisis to be faced in a lifetime. It is not the first time that school leaders have been called upon to lead through ambiguous times (Harris 2020). In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is evidence both globally and in South Africa, of the critical role leadership plays in steering schools and communities through the many challenges which are faced. There is no blueprint for school leaders in such times, no pre-determined roadmap or simple checklist of things to tick off (Kerrissey & Edmondson 2020).

With virtual teaching being the order of the day and the return of learners to schools, leadership is a critical and positive force (Harris 2020) in keeping the system moving forward. In times of crisis, school leaders need to have the ability to cope and thrive on ambiguity, be focused decision-makers, and respond flexibly and quickly with the ability to change direction rapidly. They require tenacity and optimism in order to persevere when all seems lost. The study, therefore, poses the question: ‘What are the challenges faced by school leaders in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic?’

## **Methodology**

A qualitative research approach best serves this research in view of the em-

pirical inquiry launched to investigate a particular phenomenon (Niewenhuis 2013), in this case the challenges faced by school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Inductive inquiry is emphasised during qualitative studies (McMillan & Schumacher 2010), thus, an interpretivist study gathers detailed particulars and synthesises the data inductively in order to develop a deeper understanding of the problem.

The sample comprised 10 purposefully chosen individuals involved in school leadership who were knowledgeable and experienced in leading schools. The participants consisted of five school principals from primary and secondary schools in the Nelspruit District, and the five School Governing Body (SGB) chairpersons of the respective schools. The reason for choosing the Nelspruit District is that the researcher had worked there before and was familiar with the schools and principals in the area. Three schools were in the quintile 1 – 3 group (no-fees schools situated in the lower socio-economic areas, and the remaining two were in the quintile 4 and 5 group (higher socio-economic areas), these being fee-paying schools which charge schools fees.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants from each of the five participating schools. During these interviews, the participants had the opportunity to share their experiences spontaneously, as well as the strategies that had proven to be helpful in facing the challenges confronting schools during the COVID-19 pandemic (Egbert & Sanden 2014).

In order to collect data and taking cognisance of the need for social distancing, five virtual Microsoft Teams meetings were conducted, during which the researcher interviewed the principal and the SGB chairperson from each school.

Generated data was subjected to the thematic approach, suggested by Laws *et al.* (2003: 395), which comprised the following steps:

**Step 1:** Reading and rereading all the collected data.

**Step 2:** Drawing the preliminary list of themes arising from the data. Major issues and themes were identified and arranged accordingly.

**Step 3:** Re-reading the data and checking whether the identified themes accurately represented what the participants had said.

**Step 4:** Linking the themes to quotations and notes. The views that emerged from the data were linked to various scholarly views.

**Step 5:** Perusing categories of themes in order to interpret them whilst remaining focused on the research question.

**Step 6:** Designing a tool to assist in discerning patterns within the data in order to triangulate and determine patterns during data analysis.

**Step 7:** Interpreting the data and deriving meaning. This step highlights the research findings and arranges material according to categories.

Data was transcribed to allow for the capturing of details from the interviews. Inductive coding also assisted in analysing, categorising, testing and refining the collected data. Networks were created by linking related codes, memoranda and comments made through the analysis process. Themes emerged from the data. Participants were categorised as principals (P1–P5) and SGB chairpersons (SGB1–5).

Data analysis focussed on examining thematic similarities and differences regarding the challenges of leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic, among the study's 10 participants.

In this study, the thematic focus was on identifying the themes that emerged the strongest. The interview transcripts were reviewed, and references to specific challenges during COVID-19 were highlighted and identified. In total, 235 specific citations were identified during the five interviews.

To ensure the validity of the findings, data checking was conducted with the participants through WhatsApp messages, where the analysed data was presented to participants for confirmation of the participants' responses to their experiences within the context of COVID-19.

For data verification purposes, each leadership challenge needed to be cited by a minimum of three participants during the interviews, in order to be recognised for this study.

The most frequently referenced practices are listed in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Most frequently cited challenges faced by school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

	<b>Challenges</b>	<b>Citations</b>
<b>1.</b>	Financial Sustainability	49
<b>2.</b>	Leadership Challenges	43
<b>3.</b>	Digital Challenges	41
<b>4.</b>	Safety of Learners and Staff	40
<b>5.</b>	Curriculum Challenges	34
<b>6.</b>	False Sense of Community	28
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>235</b>

## **Discussion of Findings**

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the strict regulations implemented to control its spread during the early stages, many schools were brought to a standstill, with educators and learners forced to learn, work and teach remotely. Schools and school leaders had to adjust to a ‘new normal’ to avoid a total disruption of schooling and to improve operations to ensure all schools could function optimally. The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it various challenges that required schools to act swiftly. Many learners experienced problems, and this led to learners not attending school. During the interviews, the following themes stood out strongly:

### ***Financial Sustainability***

The financial constraints caused by COVID-19 resulted in limitations being set on annual school fee increases. Furthermore, a significant increase in outstanding learner debt was expected to place huge financial constraints on schools. COVID-19 compelled schools to confront long-standing challenges surrounding tuition affordability, as well as issues of access and transformation. Some learners reside in remote areas, which may not provide spaces conducive to an effective learning experience. The facilitation of seamless teaching and learning for such learners will be a particular chal-



lenge and top priority for schools to solve. This will require additional resources through an ‘intentional focus on third-stream revenue and wider partnerships’ (PWC 2020).

In terms of section 40 of the South African Schools Act (SASA), parents of learners in public schools are liable for the payment of school fees but can be exempted (Republic of South Africa (RSA) 1996) from such in the event that they are unable to pay. Parents have been encouraged to continue paying school fees wherever possible. Many parents lost their jobs as a result of the national lockdowns and could not pay the fees charged by schools. Fees must be charged to sustain schools financially; thus, the non-payment of fees makes this unsustainable.

According to P4, ‘Our school lost 37% of our monthly income in June, July and August [2020]’. ‘We are in a very difficult situation to keep up with monthly payments’ (SGB2). The SGBs held Microsoft Teams meetings to discuss ways in which to reduce the budget. ‘We never thought that our expenditure for personal protective equipment (PPE) will [would] be R175 000 [as required in preparation] to be ready for COVID-19 protocols and that left a big hole in the 2020 budget’.

With the impact of COVID-19, it is expected that cuts to funding of education in general will be made, which will affect both public schools and the lives of learners. Unemployment and salary cuts will have a direct impact on the payment of school fees. In order to survive, parents will spend on necessities, which will leave schools vulnerable with regard to the receipt of school fees. Not only will schools need to compensate for the dramatic gaps in government spending, they will also need extra finance to pay for the additional items necessary to sustain the educational programme.

According to SGB4: ‘We feed [a] hundred learners at school every day and every Friday (with the support of the local Spar, a grocery store) we send some grocery hampers to vulnerable families in our school [community] as well’. ‘We have already cut the 2021 budget with [by] 20% to at least sustain the basics at the school’ (P2).

We have cancelled all holiday camps for the different sport codes at the school. The money of [previously budgeted for] the tours will come in handy to pay out water and electricity, which amounts to R650 000 per annum and it takes good financial management to balance the budget (SGB1).

SGBs will now have to reassess their budgets, re-visit their spending and prioritise the needs of the school in order to sustain an acceptable academic standard. SGBs will have to face the challenge of a lesser income with which to cover all their obligations as public schools, as the impact of COVID-19 will not have vanished within a year.

We had to let eight teachers go who was [were] in SGB posts, as we cannot afford to pay them anymore, and that puts pressure on our teachers as classes will be bigger next year (P3).

The two fundraising activities for the year, with a possible income of R710 000, had to be cancelled. If that was included in your [the] budget for 2020, it leaves us [sic] stranded to make up the huge loss (SGB2).

Schools are also dependent on the timeous payment of donations, which affects their cash flow. Schools have noted a delay in the payments of specific donations and funding, especially from private companies and donors. To sustain the financial situation in schools, careful cash flow management will be an important focus area, as cash flow deficits can be expected in 2021.

### ***Leadership Challenges***

School leadership practices have changed due to COVID-19. Due to the pandemic, school leadership has shifted on its axis and is unlikely to return to normal in the near future. Research (Harris 2020; Van Ark 2002; Zhao 2020) has shown that the principles of good leadership such as having a clear vision, developing others, managing staff, implementing policy, etc. are a constant (Leithwood *et al.* 2020). The evidence points towards the importance of responsive leadership, implying a shift in school leadership practices has occurred due to COVID-19 (Harris 2020).

Suddenly most of our school's preparation programmes prior to COVID-19 are out of step with the challenges school leaders are facing today (P3).

The models of leadership will require a radical re-think, re-imagining and significant modification to remain relevant for current and future principals.

The training we thought was relevant pre-COVID-19, is simply not fitting the purpose at the moment (P5).

We were not trained to face challenges like pandemics and the impact on the daily running of the school (P1).

New thinking on how to lead in a pandemic and become re-skilled in areas that will suit the current and ongoing COVID-19 situation will be required. Leaders need to distribute responsibilities. They will not be able to lead without support given the myriad challenges that COVID-19 has created. Thus, distributed leadership will be needed for school leadership to survive (Azorin *et al.* 2020).

Self-care will become a main priority for all school leaders. Leading a school through the changes and challenges that accompany COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 will require school leaders to put their own health first, in order for them to be able to assist others (Harris 2020).

We are on a daily basis managing the emotional responses to the COVID-19 crisis including anxiety, anger, depression and frustration (P3).

The phrase ‘connect to learn, learn to connect’ (Harris & Jones 2012) describes the daily reality of educators and learners trying to work together in this pandemic.

School leaders will increasingly need to be on par with technology and [be] well informed (SGB2).

School leaders will need to discern which digital products on the market they prefer and strike a balance between technology and pedagogy in their respective schools (Hargreaves & Fullan 2020).

For me it was difficult to lead the technology side of affairs, as I am not technology wise. I had to rely on my younger leaders in the school (P4).

Not all schools were ready to change to digital platforms and currently still have problems in this regard.

We had many crises to get the online challenge in place at our school. We even brought people in from outside to assist (SGB1).

Crisis and change management are now essential skills for leaders of schools. According to Harris (2020), the change will be fast and a high degree of trust will be needed. Running a school effectively during the pandemic will require more than routine problem-solving skills. Many principals engaged in constant change and crisis management have the support of their staff. A high degree of trust developed between leaders and staff, making it easier to address issues collectively. More than ever, schools need to form stronger bonds with the staff, parent bodies and community groups. Schools need to support the staff and parents who are vulnerable and marginalised (Hargreaves & Fullan 2020).

Principals discovered that communities had become key in the COVID-19 setup. ‘We found that developing strong links with communities/parents is now more crucial than before COVID-19, which was [were] generated particularly for vulnerable and marginalised learners’ (P3).

Distributed leadership has become the leadership style during COVID-19. ‘That is the leadership response for the pandemic crisis as more school staff act as leaders at all levels’ (P2).

This crisis requires more leaders on all levels of school leadership, to connect, share, learn, and network their way through issues (Azorin *et al.* 2020). Many school leaders are ‘running on an empty tank’, given all the challenges COVID-19 has created. Thus, distributed leadership is a necessity in order for schools to survive. The preparation which school leadership received prior to COVID-19 in in all likelihood uncoordinated with the current challenges facing school leaders. COVID-19 has forced a radical re-thinking, re-imagining and modification of such programmes for aspiring school leaders. New skills need to be added to training programmes in order to cater for pandemics and other disasters (Leithwood *et al.* 2020).

### ***Digital Challenges***

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the digital agenda of schools

around the world (PWC 2020). All schools have had to rethink and embrace digital technologies in order to create sustainable solutions for both learners and staff. Schools are increasingly moving into the online environment. As a result, education classes have changed dramatically. With the rise in e-learning, teaching now takes place remotely. However, on a digital platform there are challenges to overcome. Not all learners have access to digital platforms. Learners without reliable internet access and technology struggle to participate in digital learning (Harris 2020). This gap exists across South Africa and between different income groups.

In our school we have spent a lot of money to place ourself in a position to join the digital space. If we will be able to sustain it, is another matter (SGB4).

The change to online teaching has cost the school money, which we did [had] not budgeted for. So, we had to trim the budget in other budget posts [areas] like maintenance, duplicating paper and Section 38A expenditure (SGB1).

To transition to online learning is costly. This is a major challenge, as schools need to broaden their internet access, acquire new laptop computers and internet data, all of which are expensive outcomes. Before any online programme can hope to succeed, all learners must have access to online learning. The challenge lies in rural and specific socio-economic areas. If the online time available to learners is limited (Turner 2020) based on the amount of internet access they can afford, learner instruction will be inequitable. School leaders will need to be technologically well informed and knowledgeable. 'I am still from the old school and technology is a huge challenge to me' (P3). School leaders need to know about the digital products they choose and be careful to strike a balance between technology and pedagogy in their schools (Hargreaves & Fullan 2020).

We bought three laptops for our teachers to stay connected with the challenges of online teaching. Add to that the additional cost of [internet] data and COVID-19 expenses are increasing every day (P5).

Budgets must be re-organised, and principals and SGBs are under pressure to sustain standards and obtain parent buy-in to online teaching. If parents

fail to do so and the budget not reorganized, the school will be under pressure to sustain and maintain academic standards in the era of COVID-19.

### ***Safety of Learners and Staff***

School leadership practice has changed due to COVID-19 and this trend may be irreversible. The pandemic has shifted the axis of school leadership. Therefore, principals and SGBs need responsive leading, which implies a shift in school leadership practices because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

All grades in South African schools returned to class in August 2020. The Department of Basic Education revised its Directions for School Reopening and updated its Standard Operating Procedures for the prevention, containment and management of COVID-19 in schools (Department of Basic Education (DBE) 2020).

Suddenly teachers and learners became like health officials. They had to learn what the process is if someone is identified with COVID symptoms. They need to monitor learners at the school gate, take temperatures, record in registers, keep social distancing, and [keep] sanitising classrooms. They need to make sure learners keep social distance and get used to the fact to see only half your [their] class on a daily basis, or [the] boys [on] one day and the girls the next day. This [has] all put the teachers and learners under severe pressure and stress (P5).

School plans have to be designed to minimise disruptions to teaching and learning and to protect learners and staff from contracting COVID-19 (Harris 2020).

The school, a place for learning, has become a place of warning, washing of hands, signs and posters encouraging good hand and respiratory hygiene practices. Handwashing stations, alcohol-based sanitisers in each classroom, entrances, near toilets, became the norm of school every day (SGB2).

Learners had to become vigilant and protect themselves behind masks and shields. The safety of learners and staff is the highest priority of the School

Management Team (SMT).

Whilst school safety is the SGB's responsibility, the school principal and educators are obligated to ensure the learners' safety during school hours. This is promised in the educators' *in loco parentis* status, as well as the educators' position of authority and duty of care towards learners (Prinsloo 2005). Safe and secure school environments are a requirement by law. Sections 24 and 28 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA 1996) provide that 'everyone has a right to an environment that is not harmful to their health and well-being'. This implies a clean and safe environment that is conducive to learning.

Teachers found it very difficult to adapt to the demands of COVID-19 procedures at schools. According to P4, 'Overnight our teachers became health experts and safety officers'. School leaders should place their own health and wellbeing first, in order for them to be able to assist and help others. School leaders are now managing emotional responses, anxieties, frustrations and anger. Therefore, it is crucial that self-care becomes a priority (Zhao 2020).

We went the extra mile, and it was costly to prepare the school for the returning learners. The physical [personal] protection [protective] equipment (PPE) sent to school was not enough so we had to buy [it] ourselves to be ready. Money not budgeted for [was spent] to secure the safety of learners at school (P3).

Schools had to refresh their own safeguarding processes and protection policies with staff and learners, reinforce expected behaviour, and reporting and response mechanisms. Schools had no user-friendly safety checklists in place.

Over and above the efforts to secure a safe return of learners and maintain safety at schools, it will take further effort from the whole school community to prepare for and reduce the risk of subsequent waves. This plan should be based on health and education measures in order to secure a safe school.

### ***Curriculum Challenges***

According to Harris (2020), the closure of schools has occurred against a

background of persistent education inequality and a long-standing education crisis, where most learners attend under-resourced schools with poor infrastructure, ill-equipped teachers, low educational attainment and high dropout rates. Several educationists have come out strongly in calling for the reimagining and remaking of the education system (Black 2020). However, the reality of the situation is clear as many learners are from disadvantaged communities with dilapidated school buildings, dangerous pit toilets, shortages of water, shortages of learning materials and large classes. Schooling inequality is mirrored in our society. South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world with extremely high levels of poverty and unemployment, now exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant lockdown (Valodia & Francis 2020).

Suddenly our schools found them [sic] in the middle of a shift from printed instructional materials to a technology era where classrooms are integrated in the virtual space (P4).

As a quintile 3 school that was a challenge, as all of our learners are less privileged in terms of access to technology and quality education (SGB2).

Quintile 1 to 3 schools in South Africa are the poorest schools and fall in the lower socio-economic areas of the country. Schools in quintile 1 – 3 do not receive school fees from learners' parents/ guardians and receive larger subsidies from the government than the quintile 4 and 5 schools, which can charge school fees and only receive a minimal subsidy from the state per learner.

The DBE has instituted plans for curriculum recovery during and post-COVID-19 in order to minimise the impact of the pandemic on education. Learners returned to school in a staggered fashion in schools where platooning had been phased in. The COVID-19 pandemic placed immense pressure on schools to complete the curriculum, which was trimmed for all grades except Grade 12, in order to recoup days lost to teaching as a result of school closures. Exams were cancelled and replaced by continuous assessment tasks, or alternative modalities such as online testing for final exams. Innovative continuous assessment methods also received a great deal of attention (Harris 2020). Learner progress was monitored



through mobile/cell phone surveys, tracking usage and performance statistics from learning platforms and applications, and implementing rapid learning assessments to identify learning gaps. Every solution has its own challenges, most notably in terms of equity.

The COVID-19 situation has put us in a place to be more innovative and creative to teach and access learners in the virtual space (P2).

My teachers struggled to adapt to an online system, as our school is lacking online resources, and many of the older staff had problems with the new online system of teaching (P5).

Strategies such as Blended Learning can be useful in minimising the impact of COVID-19 on education (Harris 2020). It can enable learners to have access to online learning materials, for curriculum support and recovery during and post-COVID-19. However, as long as the challenges surrounding inequality exist, curriculum delivery will be affected.

### ***False Sense of Community***

One of the critical challenges that has emerged during the COVID-19 crisis has been the realisation of a false sense of community touted by many teachers and schools.

We are challenged to build a new understanding of what community within our schools really means (P3).

Since the lockdown, the focus has been on keeping learners connected and close to school leaders and teachers. What lies ahead is a valuable opportunity to challenge and redefine current thinking regarding relationships and connections with the learners and their families (Kerrissey & Edmondson 2020).

Central to daily conversations with school leaders, is strategising how to capitalise on the opportunity ‘to change practice, including how we teach, how we lead and [how] we connect with learners and families’ (SGB 1).

We need to open up more space for families to share their experien-

ces and guide our educational solutions as they are closest to the pain. It is our duty to change the way systems have been operating and work collectively for [the] future of all our learners (SGB2).

For many families, Maslow's most basic needs – health, food and shelter – have become urgent priorities as their means of security has evaporated. In addition, families had to navigate the educational system in completely new ways, often finding themselves left behind due to a lack of English skills and technical literacy, which deepens already existing educational inequities.

As leaders we have a tremendous responsibility to listen to families and their needs in their own language and in [using] the technology they prefer, often phone or text (P4).

Listening to historically oppressed and poor families benefits us all. A family's wisdom and experiences of community, together with our expertise in navigation systems, will allow us to learn and create change together.

We are struggling to meet the needs of our most vulnerable learners and communities because they have not been at the centre of what we do (P4).

COVID-19 has given us the opportunity to see Maslow's hierarchy of needs taking precedence over Bloom's taxonomy. In a pandemic, all indicators point to Maslow before Bloom. Now is the time for teachers to fully embrace the spirit of this simple idea. As teachers, we must understand that our learners are not equipped to learn until their basic needs are taken care of. In a world where both children and adults are experiencing stress at unprecedented levels, one thing teachers can do is to see to the social-emotional needs of a learner. Academic benchmarks are arbitrary and can be redrawn; diploma plans can be adjusted to help learners during a pandemic. Social-emotional skills can be used for a lifetime. Learners need educators to prioritise mental health over academic learning. This means incorporating compassion and empathy into one's teaching practice by asking learners about their day. It means asking learners if their basic needs are being met and helping to connect school families with community resources that can help with disabling problems like hunger. Some learners need to vent, others

may benefit from an extended deadline or a different assignment.

The COVID-19 challenge can assist us in creating a post-text of inclusion and equity in our schools. For school leaders, this provides an opportunity to advocate for the most vulnerable learners in the nation's schools and communities.

## **Recommendations**

As an undeniable human right, education is the bedrock of a just, equal and inclusive society, and is a key driver of sustainable development. Strengthening the resilience of education systems enables countries to respond to the immediate challenge of safely re-opening schools and positions them to cope better with future crises.

In responding to a crisis, the role of school leaders must be clearly defined. School leaders have a sense of responsibility to support their communities. The Department of Education must set clear guidelines regarding what is expected of school leaders, as well as providing the necessary support and resources required to perform their roles. School leaders have voices, which must be heard as they play an important role in the COVID-19 crisis. School leaders should use their distributive leadership skills to task and inspire their teams to address all COVID-19 concerns. School leaders should be connected via peer groups in order to share best practices and motivate and co-ordinate activities that ensure leaders, staff and communities are involved in plans made by education officials.

School governing bodies must prioritise spending for the remainder of the school year and reassess budgets for the future. Schools need to find ways to overcome pressures on the budget. Donors and communities should protect education assistance and frontload their existing commitments to help finance the COVID-19 response. This is an opportunity to join hands with local communities and businesses to donate surplus stock to schools, to be distributed to families in need. Budgeting must focus on the urgent needs of the school and all luxuries such as tours, functions, even some extra-curricular activities, need to be carefully considered when planning future budgets. Schools should also identify additional and alternative revenue streams.

Notwithstanding the challenges brought about by the pandemic, schools should not forget the bigger, long-term picture when devising strate-

gies. Anticipated technology trends, demographic shifts and socio-economic changes will not disappear. Schools should think about these challenges when creating a resilient operating model that is fit for the future. Schools should also focus their attention on offering an online and on-campus learning where online learning approaches are integrated with face-to-face learning opportunities. Schools must seek to deepen digital engagement across the learner and school value chain.

School leaders are tasked to rapidly create a safe and healthy learning environment for learners and staff. Leaders must look after the mental health and wellbeing of educators and learners who may suffer from anxiety, depression, isolation or malnutrition. School leaders need to be trained to identify the symptoms associated with these conditions. In addition, strong school leaders are knowledgeable about the needs of their communities and can be effective in marshalling available resources to those in need.

School leaders must be trained to become techno-savvy and well informed. They need to be discerning about available digital products and which ones they choose to use, striking a balance between technology and pedagogy in their respective schools (Hargreaves & Fullan 2020).

National authorities need to act in order to mitigate long-term consequences for learners, despite constraints on public spending, with education interventions forming part of national COVID-19 stimulus packages alongside health, social protection and economic recovery initiatives.

## **Conclusion**

A new chapter is being written about school leadership in disruptive times. In normal times and contexts, school leadership operated within well-known parameters with clear patterns regarding the school year, clear lines of accountability, rules governing examinations and sports days. The COVID-19 pandemic changed all of that and unpredictability and uncertainty are now watchwords to those leading our schools. A new leadership has emerged, which has preparation or benchmarks. There is no blueprint to assist school leaders through the current challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Leading in disruptive times challenges school leaders to navigate a different course and to create new pathways through the COVID-19 disruption. On this journey, school leaders are defined by their determination, hope and belief

that whatever happens, whatever the cost and whatever the scale of the challenge, they will continue to put the best interests of the learners first.

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