

School Leadership during the COVID-19 Crisis: A Preliminary Case Study from China

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Abstract

This paper presents the initial findings of how a Chinese school leader employed educational leadership over an early period during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) crisis. The reported research is one case study, part of a larger study that aims to uncover how school leaders in a variety of international contexts, namely China, Bolivia, and Western Australia, managed and responded to the COVID-19 crisis. Qualitative data collection methods were employed to develop insights into the extent to which school leaders' roles and approaches to leadership changed over the course of the crisis as well as how the leaders' approaches were influenced by different contextual factors. This paper focuses on initial findings from one case within the Chinese context which indicate that the school leader's role and leadership approach was centred on supporting student learning, responding to the needs of student wellbeing, and managing parental concerns and needs, which was supported by the school's teaching staff. Additionally, the paper shows how different contextual factors, more specifically the wider educational system and the parents, influenced the leader's response to the COVID-19 at the school level. The study offers important insights into how school leaders responded to the disruptive challenge of COVID-19 and the contextual factors that influenced a leader's approach. Furthermore, the

findings will contribute to current theoretical understandings about educational leadership during times of crisis.

Keywords: educational leadership, COVID-19, China, principal

Introduction

The role of schools within society has generally been to educate children and serve the needs of the local community (Autti & Hyry-Beifhammer 2014; Gainey 2009). However, the coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has altered that role as schools have been thrust into uncharted territory as a front line and essential service (Dunn 2020; Fuller 2020; Lancet 2020). In fact, it might be argued that COVID-19 has exposed the extent to which schools provide stability, routine, and essential support to their school communities during times of crisis (Gainey 2009; Karasavidou & Alexopoulos 2019; O'Connor 2013; Parmenter 2012; Seyle *et al.* 2013).

The impact of COVID-19 on schools has resulted in a crisis. A crisis can be human-made, natural or a combination of the two; it can vary in duration and intensity and be either foreseeable or unexpected (Coombs 2012; Howat *et al.* 2012; Karasavidou & Alexopoulos 2019; Mutch 2014; 2015a; Rego & Garau 2007; Smith & Riley 2012). The unpredictability of a crisis can result in ill-preparedness which impacts a system's capacity to meet basic needs, such as providing medical care, and complex ones, such as managing an economy (Coombs 2012; Howat *et al.* 2012; Karasavidou & Alexopoulos 2019; Mutch 2015a; Rego & Garau 2007; Smith & Riley 2012). Such understandings are clearly reflected in the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. For many people around the world, their awareness of the COVID-19 crisis started in January 2020. As knowledge of the novel coronavirus spread, schools and their role within this crisis has been an issue of much contention. Leaders of national governments alongside leaders from their education systems have set high expectations for schools and most have continually maintained that schools would stay open or would re-open in time for a normal start to the school year. Such declarations related to school openings appear to be primarily driven by concerns about the economy as keeping schools open enables parents to continue to work and this keeps the economy going. For example, in the UK, it has been consistently maintained that students of essential workers and vulnerable children should attend

school (Department of Education 2021). In Australia, most states and territories have directed schools to provide supervision for vulnerable students or the children of essential workers (ABC News 2020). The China Ministry of Education has issued a guiding policy under the name of ‘Learning continues while schools are in suspension’ in February 2020 and its fifth point reads: ‘Children of essential workers, such as medical staff, should be cared for to enable their parents to devote themselves to their work (Ministry of Education of People’s Republic of China (PRC) 2020b)’. Consequently, school leaders and staff have taken on roles and responsibilities that go far beyond what used to be normal day-to-day practices as they implement physical distancing and hygiene practices, manage personnel, and adapt their approaches to leading, teaching and learning in order to fulfil new expectations. The exceptional circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on increasing expectations of schools have brought to the forefront ‘the need for effective leadership in education at every level of the system’ (Schleicher 2020: n.p.). Given the current circumstances, it is important to examine how school leaders across a range of international contexts are managing such expectations and how their approach to leading during this crisis is influenced by contextual factors.

As such, the purpose of this paper is to provide initial findings from a project which aims to uncover how school leaders have managed and dealt with the COVID-19 crisis. This paper focuses on China because that is where the pandemic lockdowns and school closures first began. It focuses on an exemplifying case of one principal of a Chinese school. The paper begins by outlining the current research on leading during times of crisis as it relates to schools. The paper then explains the study’s research design and methodology. The initial findings are then presented, after which the paper concludes with a discussion and implications for future research.

Literature Review

Past empirical research on schools and crises have typically focused on preparedness and risk reduction (Mutch 2015a: 188). In general, the amount of empirical research on educational leadership in times of crisis is limited but what has been presented is set in different international contexts across a range of crises (Hemmer & Elliff 2020; Mutch 2015a; Smith & Riley 2012). It is interesting to note the scant amount of empirically based research on

how educational leadership is enacted during a health-related crisis.

Nevertheless, previous research has provided useful evidence on how crisis shapes a leader's work. Bishop *et al.* (2015), Fletcher and Nicholas (2016) and Mutch (2015b) have shown how a crisis results in leaders' roles and responsibilities being amplified, extended, and broadened. This is a result of how crises require leaders to take on new responsibilities and to enable other staff members to step up in order to fill in the gaps and provide expertise (Sutherland 2017). Past studies have also demonstrated how leadership during a crisis entails providing care for the members of the school, as well as its wider community (Bishop *et al.* 2015; Goswick *et al.* 2018; O'Connor & Takahashi 2014). Furthermore, numerous studies have indicated how collaboration and teamwork are important aspects of leadership during times of crisis as various stakeholders work together in order to provide aid and support over the course of the crisis (LaRoe & Corrales 2019; Notman 2015). Additionally, several studies have illustrated the importance of effective communication in times of crisis. In this case the empirical research has pointed to how clear and consistent communication, provided in different modes, is a crucial part of a leader's work during any type of crisis (Bishop *et al.* 2015; Mutch 2015b; Fletcher & Nicolas 2016).

Past studies have also provided evidence that points to how leadership in times of crisis is influenced by different contextual factors. The findings have indicated how the context of a school's wider community has an influence on how leaders approach a crisis (Geer & Coleman 2015; Bishop *et al.* 2015; Mutch 2015a). Other studies have illustrated how the school's internal context can influence leadership during times of crisis. For instance, Tarrant (2011) illustrated how a school's culture can impact on the way a crisis is managed and dealt with. Adding to that, Mutch (2015a) and Sutherland's (2017) findings show how the relationships between staff and the school leader can support, or sometimes hinder, a leader's work to manage and respond effectively during a crisis. Furthermore, research has demonstrated how an educational leader's personal qualities and past professional experiences with crises can have a bearing on how they lead during a crisis (Bishop *et al.* 2015; Notman 2015; Tarrant 2011).

Empirical research and discussion papers concerning the impact of COVID-19 on educational leadership are emerging. Stone-Johnson and Weiner (2020) have deliberated on the implications of COVID-19 on school

principals' work. The scholars have discussed the effects of COVID-19 on a principal's role and their professionalism as the pandemic constrains their ability to make decisions, practice autonomy and utilise their expert knowledge (Stone-Johnson & Weiner 2020). Such discussions are evident in a report which discussed Longmuir and Hefferman's research on school leaders in the state of Victoria, Australia (Earp 2020). Unsurprisingly, the research's initial findings have demonstrated the significant impact of the pandemic on a school principal's workload (Earp 2020). Furthermore, the findings have illustrated how the urgency of the crisis and the intensification of work has resulted in principals relying on the strong relationships they have with the school's staff to help them navigate through crisis (Earp 2020). Cunningham's (2020) piece echoes such ideas. In this article, teachers and school leaders' insights have demonstrated how COVID-19 has added extra work to their already busy and demanding workload. Additionally, the insights have revealed the stresses which teachers and leaders have experienced as they have managed the impact of COVID-19 on their personal and work lives (Cunningham 2020). In a similar way, Netolicky (2020) has highlighted a number of tensions that school leaders are contending with as a result of the pandemic, including accountability, workload and supporting the wellbeing of students, staff, and parents. Another piece is Harris' (2020) article which poses the question: is school leadership in crisis? Harris reflects on various problems that have arisen as a result of the pandemic, including inequality and inequity; privatisation and marketisation (2020). She explores how COVID-19 has changed leaders' work and concludes that pandemic is altering how educational leadership is understood and practised (Harris 2020).

There is also research emerging from China. In their study, Li and Gu (2020) investigated a principal's practice during COVID-19. This research found that, 1) transformational skills, i.e. extracting potential new resources for educational use that have emerged from the crisis; 2) system-level rethinking skills; 3) ability to collaborate and motivate remotely; and 4) long-term planning/ vision were key aspects of leadership that are required during times of crisis (Li & Gu 2020). Another example is Gong *et al.*'s (2020) research about online teaching during COVID-19 and the difficulties encountered by principals. In this case, 100 Chinese school principals were surveyed on how they facilitated the switch to online teaching and learning. The survey results revealed that more professional development was required

to better equip the principals and teaching staff for a more efficient provision of online teaching. Such findings relate to a common concern amongst most of the surveyed principals about the quality of online teaching and learning delivery, given that it was provided in hurried circumstances (Gong *et al.* 2020).

In sum, this body of work has provided valuable insights into leadership during crises and some preliminary insights and commentary on the impact of COVID-19 on educational leadership and school leaders. However, it is important to provide empirically based research on how school leaders across a range of international contexts have managed and dealt with this particular crisis in order to better understand how leadership during times of crisis is different or similar to leadership under ‘normal’ circumstances. This is particularly important given the limited understanding of how educational leadership is enacted during times of crisis generally, and more specifically, the lack of research on educational leadership during a health pandemic. So, the paper focuses on China as a starting point to begin examining how leaders in schools have managed and dealt with COVID-19.

Methodology

The study was based on the following central research question: How did school leaders and educators manage and respond to the COVID-19 crisis? The study’s focus on these stakeholders’ experiences of the crisis led to the adoption of a case study design. A case study approach was deemed appropriate as it explores a single phenomenon and places the investigation in its real-life context (Stake 2006). Furthermore, a case study approach allows for a rich, thick description of the topic (Merriam 1998; Stake 2006). Stake has noted that the selection of cases is important as the cases demonstrate ‘how the program or phenomenon appears in different contexts’ (2006: 27). Given that assertion and the understanding that case study research requires information-rich cases, purposeful sampling was used to identify schools (Patton 1990). To assist with the process of selecting Chinese schools, one of the authors who has strong professional connections with Chinese schools, provided advice on cases that could be appropriate for the study. Several schools were identified and informally contacted about participating in the study via email and provided with an outline of the study and its aims. From that contact three Chinese principals

consented to participate in the study.

The need to develop information-rich cases necessitated the adoption of qualitative data collection strategies (Cohen *et al.* 2011), including semi-structured interviews, mind mapping, timelines and document analysis. The semi-structured interviews served as a means to capture an understanding of how leaders managed and responded to the crisis. Timelines and mind maps provided a visual representation of key events that influenced the participants' leadership over the course of the crisis and the different ways the participants provided leadership from January until July 2020. Document analysis of key guidance policies of the Chinese Ministry of Education during the pandemic developed a more comprehensive picture of the school's context and the principal's leadership actions.

After consent had been received, a time for the interview was scheduled and the participants were asked to create timelines and mind maps prior to the interview. The participants were provided with directions and additional guidance, as needed, for the creation of these visual data methods. The timelines captured the key events and the important turning points of the crisis from the participants' perspective. Participants also created two different mind maps. For the first map, the participants were asked to reflect on their role and then write down any responsibilities they were typically performing on a day-to-day basis prior to the crisis. For the second mind map, the participants were asked to reflect on their role and responsibilities over the course of the crisis. These visual methods were used to help guide the interview which aimed to understand the participants' actions and leadership roles over the time of the crisis.

The semi-structured interviews were guided by a set of questions, divided into sections, that aligned with the research questions. The interviewing team included a translator, interviewer and active listener/ observer and the interview was conducted telephonically. At times English was used but most of the key information was conveyed in Mandarin. First, the participants were asked to refer to the mind map to describe their role and approach to leadership prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e. 2019). Next, the participants were asked about their leadership practice over the course of the crisis. Participants were invited to refer to the mind map and the timeline as they described the way their leadership approach, their role and specific actions took place during that time. Finally, the participants were asked to share their insights on the how different contextual factors

influenced their leadership. The interviews were digitally audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. After the interview was translated and transcribed into English by a Chinese native speaker; the participant was provided a copy for member checking.

As qualitative data collection methods provide data that is ‘glossed with meaning and purposes’ (Cohen *et al.* 2011: 23), it was important to have a specific strategy to analyse the data (Yin 1994). It was determined that the adoption of grounded theory methods, specifically open and axial coding would be appropriate (Strauss & Corbin 1990). The first stage of analysis used open coding which began after any documents were read and interviews were transcribed. This process entailed breaking down the data line-by-line into named concepts by asking questions and making comparisons of the collected data (Strauss & Corbin 1990). The named concepts were then grouped together to form categories (Strauss & Corbin 1990). The second stage used axial coding where the categories were examined for their specifying features such as the condition that caused the category to occur, the context in which it was embedded and the consequences of using such strategies (Strauss & Corbin 1990).

To ensure trustworthiness of the data, limit the potential for bias and manage subjectivity, triangulation, thick, rich description and member checking were used (Cohen *et al.* 2011; O’Leary 2014). Multiple methods of data collection and the triangulations of the data helped to eliminate bias as the data from one method was compared with other data (Cohen *et al.* 2011; Bogden & Bilken 1982). Member checking enabled the participants to read and verify the transcripts and the use of thick rich description helped to illustrate the meaning behind the perspectives and to address the issues related to generalisability of the findings. The described process has been completed in the presented case and the findings from this case follow.

The School Context: Primary School X

The case study school, which is the focus for this paper, will be referred to as Primary School X. Primary School X is a Chinese school in the largest public education sector in the world. In China today, the educational infrastructure includes approximately 281 174 preschools; 160 148 regular primary schools; 52 415 junior secondary schools; 13 964 regular senior secondary schools; and 2 688 universities, serving more than 274 million

students (Ministry of Education of PRC 2019). For individuals, educational success has been long favoured as a means for social upward mobility in China's society. For the state and popular discourses, education is often regarded as a strategy for the nation's salvation and rejuvenation (Jacka *et al.* 2013).

China has a nine-year compulsory education system, providing school-aged children free access to schools from Year 1 to Year 9. Children start their primary education journey at the age of six years, which ends when they complete Year 6. Then majority of them will continue to study at a junior secondary school within the school catchment area close to their household. As there is no longer an organised entrance examination for junior secondary school, entry into this level of schooling has become competitive. It has become extremely important for school children and their parents to have a residential property within the catchment areas of the prestigious schools, so as to enable children to attend the most well-resourced schools. Primary School X is one of these prestigious schools.

The Government in China, at various levels, plays a significant role in monitoring and managing education affairs. In relation to responsibilities for schooling and essential education affairs (including primary school, junior secondary and senior secondary school), there is a vertical hierarchy system. For example, at the national level, the Ministry of Education responsibilities include making and implementing related educational laws, guidelines, and policies for all education institutions; making and implementing the education framework and compiling national teaching materials for elementary education; providing guidance and overseeing school reforms and inspections, to name a few. At the provincial and city level, the Education Bureau provides guidance for moral education; implements educational policies made at the national level; initiates local educational policies and conducts inspections and evaluations; manages and oversees school budgets as well as fund-raising. At the school level, school principals are afforded some autonomy and responsibility. For instance, the latest policy on *Suggestions for Further Advancing the Vitality of School Education* (Ministry of Education of PRC 2020a) identified five key responsibilities for school principals: cultivating citizens for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and nation; improving leadership skills; improving school management schemes; inspiring innovative teaching; and continuing to carry out school reforms for improved education quality.

Education conglomeration, also known as ‘running schools by group’, is an approach utilised by the Chinese education authority for the promotion of educational quality and equality. The practice started in 2002. In the city in which the case study school is located, about 85% of primary schools are part of an education group. Since August 2020, Primary School X has been the lead school and headquarter of a newly established education group within the education district. There are three primary schools under the group banner, and it is believed that all three schools in the group will adopt the same types of management, campus culture as well as curriculum and resources.

Primary School X is in a second-tier city in northeast of China which has a population of 8.7 million. The school is a new school; established in 2017. It is a K-6 public, co-educational school with a current enrolment of more than 1 200 students in 36 teaching classes. Most students come from two nearby neighbourhood communities and more than 80% of the students’ parents or grandparents are government employees. The school has received strong financial support from different levels of the Chinese government. For example, the district local government has injected nearly 10 million Yuan (about 2 million Australian dollars) in support of campus development and purchasing equipment. In return, Primary School X has adopted some specific requirements that the district’s Education Bureau suggested. As a result, two essential requirements were included in the school’s mission statement: Striving for Excellence and Education for Internationalisation. Primary School X has utilised its curriculum to achieve the school’s general goals. There are two types of curricula available for students, namely: the compulsory national curriculum that almost every school in China is obligated to deliver and an elective curriculum developed by the school itself to suit the specific needs of its students. For example, within the compulsory national curriculum, the school has focused on English and drama teaching, so as to meet their internationalisation goals, whilst their school-based curriculum, includes courses such as golf, tennis, Chinese ink-painting and model aeroplane classes that cater for the students’ interests.

The School Principal

There were three key reasons Primary School X was selected for the study. Firstly, the research started at a time when diplomatic relationships between

Australia and China had reached a new low in April 2020, because Australia's federal government pushed for an independent inquiry into the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China. Against this backdrop, few Chinese school leaders were willing to accept our interview invitation, and many declined our request for political reasons. Secondly, the Principal of Primary School X was open and supportive of the project and willing to share her experiences during the pandemic. Thirdly, as Primary School X is a model school for urban areas in China, the school's practices and ongoing management of the COVID-19 crisis may be regarded as typifying what many urban Chinese schools would likely enact in these extraordinary times. In line with the study's aim and ethical protocols, the researchers sent the principal consent forms for other members of the management team and school staff to participate, however the principal declined to give consent for other staff to participate.

The Principal was a graduate from a local teacher's college in China in the 1990s and originally trained to be an English language teacher. Her first post was in a junior secondary school where she taught English for 10 years before being promoted first to the role of 'director of teaching and learning' in the same school, and then to deputy principal where she stayed in that position for 17 years. During this period, she was sent to the United States for a year of professional development. Then in 2017, she was appointed inaugural principal to lead an important and prestigious new school – Primary School X.

Initial Findings

Analysis of the data from the documents, timeline, mind maps and interview material identified five categories that illustrate the Principal's leadership approach and role during the time of COVID-19 crisis. The five categories are: reacting to the immediate crisis; finding direction and purpose; acting as a servant; planning intentionally and learning a new way of leading. These categories are related to the lifecycle of the crisis for this case forming a structure for our initial findings which will be discussed next.

The Start of the Crisis: January 2020

Reacting to the Immediate Crisis: 'No time for processing'

The data revealed how the principal felt uncertainty, pressure, and a lack of

control when the COVID-19 crisis began unexpectedly. As the school leader recalled, the Education Bureau in her city made the decision to close all schools without any warning. The principal had been planning for a normal start to school on 10th February 2020 after the end of Chinese New Year on 25th January 2020. However, in late January the Education Bureau directed her to close the school and move the school online for the whole semester. The leader described her reaction as one of ‘shock’ and disbelief. The sudden, unilateral decision by the Education Bureau to close the school created uncertainty for this principal but it also resulted in her feeling burdened with the responsibility of quickly developing a whole-school plan. She reflected that ‘everybody was nervous, especially me. I had a lot of pressure because I was not sure what was going to happen tomorrow [the next day]. But behind me were almost 70 teachers, they were looking at me. I felt the pressure a lot’. This pressure caused her to quickly respond to the crisis, because ‘there was no time for processing...we had to just deal with it’. Thus, the school leader started out by drawing upon her known leadership skills and utilised her typical leadership approach to help manage the sudden turn of events.

Finding Direction and Purpose: ‘We had to face the facts’

The situation caused the principal to realise she had to ‘face the facts’. After her initial emotional reaction to the order to close the school and start online learning immediately, the principal started formulating plans. The analysis of the mind maps, timeline and interview data revealed that in these early days her leadership was focused on developing a plan that would provide clear instructions and purpose to the teachers and ensure learning continued. On the mind map the school leader wrote down the word ‘planner’. She shared that when planning for the unfolding crisis she kept the school’s mission, the parents’ perspectives, students’ capacity for self-management and the approach of online learning foremost in her mind. As she planned, she thought about what she ‘could do to assist the students during the crisis’. To develop a plan that would ‘deal with the situation’ the principal called in her assistant principals and the more experienced teachers on the staff, for discussion and assistance. The meetings were focused on ensuring adequate resourcing was available, making decisions about how to approach online teaching and learning and how to communicate all this new information to parents, teachers and students. The result was called the ‘package’. As the

principal explained it, the package gave ‘everyone a responsibility and we had to make it very clear what they were going to need to do’.

Despite their efforts there was a constant uncertainty that this package would be unworkable. As the school leader and the staff were creating the package, new instructions kept being received from the Education Bureau to ‘guide’ the school’s response to the crisis. The guidance from the Education Bureau was focused on protecting the school from COVID-19 and online learning. However, the guidance the school received regarding the online curriculum and delivery often resulted in having to make quick adaptations: ‘they would give us the materials and we would put them up online. But there were some things we could not do with our students, so we had to keep changing our online teaching plan’.

Thus, the first weeks of the COVID-19 crisis in China found the principal and the staff discovering what was effective and what was not, adapting their plan as best they could. According to the principal, an immensely helpful initiative from the Education Bureau in those early weeks was the instruction that principals conduct parent surveys to ascertain the effectiveness of their initial online learning attempts. The survey was a way to assess whether online teaching was meeting most of the students’ and parents’ needs. The survey asked parents questions pertaining to how well their children were responding to online learning, how satisfied the parents were with the content and to provide insights into what aspects could be changed or improved. The principal used the survey findings to set the school’s direction going forward. As a result, she appeared to adjust her leadership approach to more of a guardian or servant role.

As the Crisis Progressed: February – May 2020

Acting as a ‘servant’

As the school began to settle into their new mode of pandemic operations, the principal’s role intensified. On the mind map, she described her role as a ‘servant’. She explained this term as a ‘guardian for every student’ which meant ‘paying attention to people ... especially to what educators can do during this crisis’.

The analysis and triangulation of data from the timeline and interview shows the principal’s shift from ‘planner’ to ‘servant’. After the survey data came back on 15th February, the principal used those survey

results to inform the approaches to teaching and learning within Primary School X. As she recollected: ‘some of the parents were saying the students needed homework. Some parents could stay at home and make sure their students were online, but others needed to go to work’. In order to make this experimental online learning experience similar to the students’ on campus experiences, the school leader altered planned term activities for online delivery. For instance, on 18th February online ‘home visits’ started, on 21st February the principal restarted an activity called ‘Project-based Moral Education’ and on 28th February online professional development started for the teachers. She also responded to the parent survey by having teachers delivering live-streamed lessons rather than only providing pre-recorded materials. Such changes demonstrate her focus on managing the differing needs of teachers, children, and families.

As the work moved online the principal shared how she felt about the pedagogic change: ‘I didn’t feel comfortable. All the work was online. I was wondering if the teachers were really doing what I was asking’. As a result of this concern, she joined every new WeChat messaging group that the teachers created to deliver their online lessons. WeChat was an important tool that teachers used in different ways for online teaching and learning. For instance, some had created one WeChat group for their class, however some created additional ‘small chat groups for students’ who ‘needed extra help’. The principal explained she joined every WeChat group to ‘observe’. If she saw a problem, she would be able to ‘work on it immediately’ and if she ‘found good practices’ she could ‘pass it on to other teachers’. For example, the principal gave an anecdote about observing teachers who started streaming very early; teachers who wrote letters to parents after online teaching; and other teachers who organised specialised chat groups based on individual students’ needs. The school leader shared these good practices and she believed it then became general practice for most teachers in her school. Such examples suggest the principal’s leadership at this stage started to take on a more purposeful approach which is described in the next section.

Planning Intentionally

The information from the surveys and the observations of the teachers’ WeChat rooms resulted in the principal acting in a more intentional way. In fact, the results from the Education Bureau designed survey prompted her to conduct more school specific surveys dedicated to different year levels in her

school. As the school leader recalled ‘we could see [from the surveys] that when students stayed at home by themselves, they had a lot of difficulty. Some students could do the work but sometimes the students could not. It depended on the students and the family environment’. The survey results showed that the parents were ‘very anxious; they wanted the school reopened’ as many parents found it difficult to manage children’s behaviour at home. As the principal described, ‘they were complaining to us that their child had picked up a lot of bad habits; like playing computer games all the time’. Such feedback caused her to reflect and enact change. As she shared: ‘That made us think ... even though the students were at home and not at the school, we needed to do what we are supposed to do when they are in school’. Under her direction, the teachers at Primary School X began to make plans to try and replicate the in-school experience as a key approach to motivate student learning.

The principal explained that she began to focus her attention on organising co-curricular activities that would offer students more than just ‘subject learning’. For instance, the school leader and the staff decided to restart a project, which had initially come from the Education Bureau, to promote good habits (i.e. personal or academic habits). Given the COVID-19 situation and the feedback from the parents about bad behaviour ‘we asked the students to choose one habit, like finishing their homework every day or helping their mum to clean the house. We wanted them to pick up one good habit and to keep doing it for 21 days’. There were also various key festivals and school events that students would normally participate in which they had missed out on. So, the school moved the festival online. For instance, they held their annual English competition online and had an online concert to celebrate International Children’s Day.

This principal’s perspective suggests that her leadership, at this stage, was becoming more proactive. She was expanding her remit and finding ways to be innovative to provide not only a basic education but an engaging, broader approach to online teaching and learning.

Moving Past the Crisis: May – September 2020

A New Way of Leading: ‘I feel I have learned something from this period’

At the time of the interview the principal had reached the end of the 2020

school year, was on school holidays and beginning to prepare for the September start of the new school year. When asked how her leadership and role had changed, she replied, 'I feel that I changed' and 'I have learned some things from this period'. Her comments demonstrated new insights on the importance of trust and collaboration, an enhanced understanding of the importance of parents and the school staff working together, and a realisation that she would need to adopt a more 'democratic' approach to her leadership going forward.

The principal felt that her leadership approach over the course of the crisis had resulted in improved levels of trust and collaboration between herself and the teachers. As she reflected, 'When we moved to teaching online, I was in a panic because I wasn't sure if teachers were doing their job. I was in deep doubt because I couldn't see them'. She shared how she felt that the COVID crisis 'was a kind of test. Did I really believe my teachers? Were they doing a good job? The answer was that they have done an excellent job After three months I could see that everyone was doing really well, I [learned I] can rely on the teachers ...I felt like I trusted them more than before'.

The ideas of trust and collaboration were carried through to the principal's comments about the role parents play in schools as well. The disruption has made her also realise the importance of listening to parents as a result of their influence. For example, she recalled 'at the start of the crisis when personal protective equipment (PPE) was scarce, my [the students'] parents managed to donate adequate supply of those and that gave me faith as I felt we are all in this together'. As a result of the crisis, the principal's beliefs of 'how important it is that parents work with the school' were enhanced. The principal shared her belief that the parents' perspectives of the school and teachers also changed: 'parents realised how hard it was to teach...they could see how hard the students were working and how hard the teachers were working with them'. As a result, she believed that the school and the parents had developed a 'closer relationship than before' and the principal was determined to 'do more to keep that close relationship with the parents ongoing [going]'.

This principal's insights show a change to her overall leadership approach over the early period of the crisis. As her insight best describes, 'I would have to say that I became a bit more democratic'. Her experiences had also led to the realisation that she will 'need to give them more autonomy

and trust their professionalism’ when school resumed in September 2020. She felt that going forward she ‘will need to listen to the teachers’ more often and ‘to give the teachers more opportunity to talk with me, with each other, to see what they want, to see what they feel’.

Discussion

This case study provides a useful portrayal of how leadership was used to manage and deal with a health-related crisis. Perhaps the most significant finding from this case study is that it suggests that leadership during times of crisis *is* different from leadership during normal times. This is important as the research on COVID-19, at the time this article was written, has been relating a leader’s approach to managing the crisis to what is already known about educational leadership (Harris 2020; Li & Gu 2020; Netolicky 2020). This case study provides empirical evidence showing that making connections between leadership during times of crisis and current educational leadership conceptions may not be as straightforward as it may seem. The presented case study illustrates how educational leadership during times of crisis is not the same as leadership under normal circumstances (Garrañ 2013; Crepeau-Hobson *et al.* 2012; Hemmer & Elliff 2019). Rather the findings support the argument that crisis alters the ways educational leadership is understood and practised (Hemmer & Elliff 2019).

Indeed, the findings from this case study appear to affirm past claims that crisis requires an organic approach to leadership; one that is tailored to distinct circumstances of the crisis (Liou 2015). These findings align with such claims by illustrating that relying on ‘normal’ leadership practice or understandings during a crisis are not enough to serve the needs to the school’s community. In this case, the leader’s approach shifted, expanded and, ultimately, changed as she navigated how to best guide, support and provide direction to students, staff, and parents over the course of the crisis. These shifts involved herself and teaching staff increasing their work responsibilities in the school community inside the school as well as offering more outreach to their neighbourhood community. These initial findings also underline the importance of context and the ways in which contextual factors can influence a leader’s approach (Hallinger 2018). In this case, the study’s findings indicate how the institutional context, in this case the Education Bureau, influenced her approach to leadership over the time of the crisis. The

findings show how she used the rather autocratic system of the Education Bureau to her advantage. The mandated surveys and learning packages inspired her to create new approaches to engage her students. This relates to how the case study illustrates how the school's internal context, that is, its culture and organisational behaviours, can shape a leader's approach (Sutherland 2017; Tarrant 2011). For this principal, the surveys led her to engage with the parent community more conscientiously, continually listening and responding to their concerns, which in turn led to an enhanced perspective on the role of parents within the school community. Additionally, the influence of personal level factors, specifically the leader's personal attributes and understanding of leadership, was also evident in her approach to leadership. A surprising discovery from this preliminary case study was how her resilience, in the face of adversity, influenced how she managed the crisis.

Another interesting observation is how this case study and its findings correlate with what is currently known about leading during a crisis in schools (Striepe & Cunningham 2021). The findings reinforce how, in the initial days of a crisis or in the immediate aftermath of a crisis, school leaders are often forced to make quick decisions that can result in imperfect decisions (Bishop *et al.* 2015; Striepe & Cunningham 2021). An additional parallel, is how these findings support the importance of school leaders collaborating with staff and parents during times of crisis (Notman 2015; Striepe & Cunningham 2021). In this case, the study's findings suggest how working closely with staff and listening to the needs of parents are crucial to effectively navigating the challenges the crisis imposes. Moreover, the findings affirm the idea that in times of crisis, leadership should not be planning *for* others; rather, leaders should be planning *with* key stakeholders (Education Review Office (ERO) 2013) as the leader collaborated with her staff, guided by information from the Education Bureau and listening to the feedback from parents. Additionally, this principal's focus on providing timely, clear communication to parents as well as staff reflects another identified characteristic of leading during crisis: the need for clear and open channels of communication between key stakeholders (Striepe & Cunningham 2021). This principal's experiences also reflect how a crisis in schools results in the transformation of normal school leadership roles or responsibilities (Striepe & Cunningham 2021).

As there is limited empirical research on educational leadership during times of crisis, particularly studies on a health-related crisis, this paper

provides important empirical evidence of how one leader managed and dealt with a health-related crisis. Additionally, the presented case is significant as there is currently little research on how Chinese school leaders have dealt with the crisis. Having said that, we acknowledged that these are initial findings, of one case set in one Chinese school, and are not applicable to all school leaders located in China or in other contexts. We also acknowledge that these findings are related to leadership during a health-related crisis and may not be applicable to other types of crises. However, we argue that the findings are useful for researchers in the field of educational leadership; especially those who are currently leading schools through this pandemic and for leaders who may experience crisis in the future.

Recommendations

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school leaders' day to day work illustrates the need to generate case studies that illustrate how leaders dealt with the crisis. Given the principal's assistance from and reliance on staff it would be important to include a range of leaders' perspectives, such as teacher leaders and middle leaders, in order to create a better understanding of leadership during times of crisis. Additionally, given the role that schools, staff and leaders have played over the course of this crisis it would be worthwhile to examine how leadership has been employed support, mental wellbeing, community cohesion and connectedness during times of crisis. More broadly, it would also be beneficial for the field to conduct more research on school leadership in different types of crises. Such studies would provide further insight into the extent to which leadership during times of crisis is different from current theoretical models and close a gap in the field's current understandings.

Conclusion

This paper offers a preliminary picture of educational leadership during the COVID-19 crisis in China. It has shown how crisis requires leaders to change their normal approach to leadership and adopt new roles in order to respond effectively to the circumstances of the crisis. In this way the findings of study enhance the current body of scholarly and empirical research on leadership during times of crisis. Given the rise in special interest groups and network

meetings, along with special issues on the topic of educational leadership and COVID-19, it can be assumed that much more will be learned about how leaders have managed this current crisis across a range of international contexts.

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