

# Need for resurgent educational leadership post-COVID-19 pandemic

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## Abstract

The world order has undergone tremendous change during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that has left a lasting imprint on the education sector as well. This crisis has caused hundreds of thousands of fatalities, tested the limits of health systems, and has put the world in a great lockdown where the global economy is experiencing the worst recession since the great depression (Gopinath, 2020). Due to the closure of educational institutions, the learning activities of billions of students were hampered. There is a great deal of disparity regarding the availability of alternate education resources/infrastructure, and also, the clocks cannot be reversed. Hence, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges in the education sector across the globe are predominantly hovering around back-tracking the learning activities and to cover the lost grounds for the students.

Given this background, this study proposes to examine the impact of the pandemic on the education sector as a whole, and further, it also strives to accentuate the very objective, i.e. the need for resurgent educational leadership in order to combat the stated challenges.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, learning, resurgent educational leadership.

## Introduction

A “Human Rights Watch” report, published on May 17, 2021, has estimated that about 90% of the world's school-going children have had their education disrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Apart from highlighting different psychological plights, which have originated during these testing times, this report also pinpoints that inequality has emerged as a major social issue during the pandemic. This report also emphasized that merely reopening schools will not undo the damage nor even ensure that all children will return to school. The rationale behind such a finding is the fact that the educational institutions were ill-prepared to deliver remote education to all students due to the long-term negligence of different governments in order to provide basic infrastructure for online/remote education to all needy students. Although school closures were considered to be one of the most efficient interventions to prevent the spread of the coronavirus (Haug et al., 2020), many educators and researchers raised concerns about the ill effects of school closures on the academic achievements of students and learning inequalities thereof. For example, Haeck and Lefebvre (2020) estimated that the socioeconomic achievement gaps would increase by up to 30%. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), envisaged by United Nations in the year 2015, reflect the commitment of the governments to guarantee an inclusive quality primary and secondary education to all children by the year 2030. However, a UNESCO (2021) finding asserts that the decades of slow but steady progress in educating more children around the world abruptly ended in 2020, and by April 2020, an unprecedented 1.4 billion students from more than 190 countries were shut out of their schools.

Thus, in view of the above discussion, it is pertinent to identify the viable approaches which can be helpful in mitigating the challenges thrown by the pandemic to the global education system. Accordingly, this review paper strives to address the twin problems, i.e. assessing the extent of damage done to the education sector and, further, looking for the measures which can help in coming out of the menace and cover the lost ground as well. In this context, it is perceived that a resurgent educational leadership will turn out to be handy in bringing the sector out of the bleak scenario and placing it as per the dynamic needs of the day.

## **Method**

This review paper is a result of a genuine thought process developed along the lines of analysis of readily available research literature and data pertaining to the effect of COVID-19 on the global education system. Further, some specific journals of established international agencies and comparative statistics have been assessed in order to accentuate discussions and findings during the research work.

## **Discussion and Results**

The review work by Eacott S., et al. (2020) enunciated that the COVID-19 pandemic has forced major adjustments, often at short notice and definitely, and educational leadership is no exception to that. Many issues and concerns have come to the fore in the wake of the en-mass closure of educational institutions globally. The provision of remote learning, with students learning from home and content delivered via online platforms (e.g. Microsoft Teams) and/or printed packages and phone calls, has been the new norm across the world. Leaving aside the health-related ordeals, the education sector has also witnessed some unforeseen changes with the advent of the pandemic. There has been a phenomenal increase in the use of digital technology, which has equally raised the bar of digital literacy; nevertheless, the institutions are in a fix due to the cost incurred on account of the pre-existing infrastructure of the physical mode of education. Digital literacy has its own set of expenses which are ultimate to be borne by different stakeholders of the education sector. Further, the works of Gonski et al. (2018); Halsey (2018) and reports of OECD (2016); UNICEF (2018) etc., have raised concerns about the inequalities prevalent in the education sector, which have further been exposed during and in the aftermath of the pandemic. The study conducted by Joseph, B. and Fahey, G. (2020) emphasized that the learning aspects of the most disadvantaged students have been hit adversely due to the closure of schools. This situation has further aggravated the inequitable distribution of resources to support learning and the acceptance of variable quality experiences for different groups. It has also been argued that the inability to attend the schools physically has forced the students to have their education compromised. While discussing the effect of COVID-19 on education, Hoofman J. & Secord E. (2021) have asserted that the shutdown has triggered the increasing likelihood of mental health issues among school-going children with age brackets of 6-18 years. Further, this article also discussed that the pandemic might have an ill impact on children regarding their ability to socialize. A World Bank study conducted by Azevedo et al. (2020) also highlighted that the school-going children, teachers and their respective family members had to endure the difficulties emanating from the infrastructure-related issues during the pandemic. Some interesting statistics around the pandemic are being discussed as follows:-

- Prior to the surge of COVID-19, about 258 million children of primary- and secondary-school age were out of school, which rose to about 1.6 billion counts at the peak of school closures in April 2020.
- Earlier the Learning Poverty rate in low- and middle-income countries was 53 per cent, i.e. more than half of all 10-year-old children could not read and understand a simple text. In Sub-Saharan Africa, this figure was closer to 90%. Unless drastic remedial action is taken, it is likely that there will be a substantial setback to the goal of halving the percentage of learning poor by the year 2030.
- Due to learning losses and an increase in dropout rates, this generation of students stands to lose an estimated \$10 trillion of lifecycle earnings (at the present value in 2017 PPP), or almost 10% of global GDP, and countries will be driven even further off-track to achieving their Learning Poverty goals- potentially increasing Learning Poverty levels to 63%. This way, the world is estimated to lose as much as 16% of the investments that the governments make in basic education of marginalized and vulnerable groups, viz. girls, ethnic minorities and persons with disabilities.
- The combination of being out of school and the loss of family livelihoods caused by the pandemic may leave girls especially vulnerable and exacerbate exclusion and inequality- particularly for persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups.

On the basis of discussions made hereinabove, it can easily be deduced that the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown a crisis situation to every aspect of mankind, and the situation warrants robust leadership to effect resurrection in every walk of life. Organizations, the world over, are not alien to crises; hence there is no dearth of conceptual models, and sensible frameworks that aid and assist business leaders to come out of those situations. Educational leadership, as a concept, has evolved from the very principles/theories of business management only and owing to the dynamic nature of these principles/theories, the role and function of education leaders have been reformed and remodelled from time to time. Joubish, M.F. and Khurram, M.A. (2011) emphasized that the educational system of a country should meet the individual and collective needs and aspirations of its people; it must be so designed as to equip them with the capabilities of making their lives more productive according to their talents and interests. Accordingly, educational leadership calls for some attributes for effective decision making, implementation of appropriate policies and continual improvement of students' learning. Chance, P.L. and Chance, E.W. (2002) have described some of the stabilizing characteristics or preconditions of educational leadership as follows:-

- a. Success according to traditional definitions.
- b. Safety, attendance and building maintenance are well in hand.
- c. Good communication between the site and the community.
- d. Team spirit.

An article on study.com summarizes the following about educational leadership:-

- It should have characteristics which include behaviours, styles, and leadership traits.
- It should have concepts which include management vs leadership, power, coercion, conceptual frameworks; and

- Activities or practices of educational leaders should include approaches or ways of leading.

Going forward, it is pertinent to mention the observation of Bagwell (2020) that the pandemic is rapidly redefining schooling and leadership (p. 31), and thus he advocated for leaders to lead adaptively, build organizational and individual resilience, and create distributed leadership structures for an optimal institutional response. Deitchman (2013) has described that leadership concepts should emphasize trust, decisiveness with flexibility, and the ability to coordinate diverse stakeholders; traditionally, educational leadership should also vouch for these attributes.

From this standpoint, it is imperative to discuss how a resurgent educational leadership policy will cater to the needs of identified problems, i.e. to arrest the damages done to the education sector during the pandemic and play a pivotal role in smooth functioning of the education sector given the renewed challenges in the aftermath of the pandemic. While addressing these twin challenges, it is worth mentioning the key responsibilities of educational leadership by Pont B. et al. (2008) (p. 44), as follows:-

- It should be focused on supporting, evaluating and developing teacher quality.
- It should set learning objectives and implement intelligent assessment systems.
- It should be able to make strategic use of resources and their alignment with pedagogical purposes.
- It should be beneficial beyond the school borders.

In the preceding sections, we have discussed that the concept of educational leadership has evolved along the lines of business management. Hence, it becomes imperative to find out whether the different attributes of business management remain applicable to educational leadership or not, specifically in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. Understandably, different governments and international agencies have intervened to check the spread of the virus, and the remote working concept has been established as the new norm. Educational leadership can leverage this norm by way of showing greater resolve along the lines of assigned responsibilities. It is another known fact that, apart from health concerns, the world is witnessing economic and social perils. In these testing times, education leaders ought to be more resilient in policy-making, distribution of resources and execution of jobs at hand so that the direct beneficiaries, i.e. students, should not feel neglected. This way, they can help the students to counter numerous psychological challenges which have a direct bearing on the pandemic.

Overlooking the magnitude of damage done or returning back to the pre-COVID stage is not within the limits of human might; given the fact that the world is gradually coming out of the clutches of this pandemic, the onus of bringing back the education sector at desired level shifts back to its very leaders. Undoubtedly, the education sector has witnessed very dynamic changes, especially; the adaptability of the education sector in terms of mode of functioning and the same could not have been achieved in the absence of robust and resilient leaderships across the countries. This phenomenon can be described as an extension of the concept of Business continuity management in the education sector. Thus, we can arrive at the fact that the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic demanded a box approach from all quarters of the world order, and the resurgent approach of leadership would fit the bill for the educational sector in the aftermath of the pandemic.

## Conclusion

The challenging times in the aftermath of a pandemic require education leaders to provide clear direction and effective communication. They are further expected to exhibit collaborative working by way of engaging in adaptive leadership. It is imperative for business leaders to encourage all stakeholders in crisis situations. Educational leadership has largely been perceived as a management concept; hence it ought to play a strategic role in order to address the common challenges of all affected stakeholders, viz. teachers, students, staff, parents, logistics providers etc., in the face of the pandemic. They should be encouraged by the leaders to embrace changes (Marshall J. et al. (2020)). In the words of Koehn (2020), the leaders and their teams must acknowledge the fears of everyone and move forward by encouraging resolve and resilience. Educational leaders must be laced with such attributes in order to deal with new logistics and protocols of the education sector.

Hence, in a post-COVID-19 world, the resurgent educational leadership should be there, in place so that the strategically ideal perspective of education can be achieved with the help of all stakeholders. Resurgent educational leadership will further help in capacity building and developing technology infrastructure, which will push it to rise to any crisis situation in future.

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