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EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

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THE IMPROVEMENT OF EDUCATION

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FROM THE EDITORS

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic was spreading and people around the world found themselves in a different reality characterized by uncertainty and fear of the unknown. The pandemic created a turbulent environment for public schools and a unique challenge for educational planners, policy makers and school leaders. The impact of the pandemic undermined stability and the core routines that have traditionally shaped the daily routines of schools and public educational systems. Although schools have remained domesticated and sponsored organizations, they were not able to maintain their typical routines and processes since governments in many countries, initiated community lockdowns leading to school shutdowns. As a result, students and teachers worked from home and teaching took place online in a virtual setting. These unprecedented times led to fundamental changes inherent to how schools' function, including teachers' roles, the design and execution of lessons, finding alternative ways to meet the basic needs of students, and a significant increase in social emotional learning needs of students. Schools are more than a place for learning, they are the center of the community. Leaders were reminded once again about the inequities that span the globe and the impact of the lack of technological infrastructure that prohibits access to education.

School leaders who were accustomed to operating in a stable organizational environment characterized by relatively little uncertainty, found themselves dealing with great adversity on a daily basis. Rapid change became the norm and an ever-changing landscape became the new normal. Rather than dealing with pedagogical considerations, their main concern became the health and safety of their students and educational staff.

This special issue brings a unique set of manuscripts presenting different perspectives on the educational implications for planning, policy makers and school leaders as a result of the pandemic.

Li and **Chan** highlight the joint effort of the Chinese Government and educators to maintain learning although schools were closed.

Ford and **Alemneh** discuss how increasing Open Education or Open Access resources and the removal of access barriers could increase equity and allow teaching and learning to continue for all, regardless of the ability to attend schools and socio-economic status.

Cash and **Brinkmann** and focus on the way Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) funds supported schools during the pandemic as reported by superintendents, and how they capitalized on these opportunities to advance their planning process.

Özkan, Özkan and **Turan** examine the experiences of Turkish school principals during the pandemic, the problems they faced, their challenges and solutions to these problems and the lessons learned.

Nir focuses on school leaders' coping strategies while struggling to maintain school stability and on the extent to which the extreme conditions of uncertainty and turbulence brought by the pandemic may potentially promote public school's innovation and change as many stakeholders argue.

Adelakun and **Polka** provide information regarding the contemporary health care and current impact of COVID-19 in Nigeria, proposing the use of a classic strategic planning paradigm to mitigate the spread of the pandemic and better address similar catastrophic health experiences in the future.

Özmantar focuses on the experiences of preservice Turkish teachers who took an online practicum course during the COVID-19 pandemic and their perceived effectiveness of this online training.

It might still take a while, but one morning we will all wake up and realize that the COVID-19 pandemic is no longer a source of threat for humanity. Nevertheless, the challenges facing educational planners, policy makers and public school leaders will remain and their influence may become even more intense. Hence, learning to live and cope with uncertainty may be considered a critical aspect of professionals' capacity building if these processes are likely to promote educators' ability to cope with the unexpected and advance their students.

Jodie Brinkmann and Adam Nir
Guest Editors

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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DECLARING WAR ON COVID-19: HOW CHINESE GOVERNMENT AND EDUCATORS ACT

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the joint effort of the Chinese Government and the educators in reacting to the threat of COVID-19 in China to keep learning continue while schools close. The sources of data in this paper are from the most current reports of the Chinese Government, newspapers, televisions and the latest published journal articles. These reports cover the challenges, the immediate actions of the Government and the stakeholders during the toughest COVID-19 period in China. The paper also includes the Post COVID-19 Plan of the Chinese Government to bring normal learning back after the pandemic. The courageous acts of the Chinese Government and the educators to save Chinese education during the pandemic have significant implications to educational planning worldwide.

OVERVIEW

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) as a pandemic disease was detected in China in December 2019 and then it started to spread fast around China. The Chinese Government has taken drastic measures to act on it by closing communities, businesses and schools to prevent its widespread. The Chinese Ministry of Education announced promptly soon after the COVID-19 outbreak the emergency policy of ‘Suspending Classes without Stopping Learning’ (McAleer, 2020; Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2020a; Wang et al., 2020; Yue et al., 2020). Educational institutions have been directed to close their campuses after the winter break because of health threatening issues but to continue their teaching activities. Following the directions of the Chinese Ministry of Education, the administrators and faculty of schools and higher education institutions have taken the initiative to contribute to this pandemic fighting effort by providing quality education to all students despite campus closing (Zhang et al., 2020). This paper reports on the effort of the Chinese government and educators in confronting the pandemic challenges, their determination to overcome difficulties and their far-sighted plans to adjust to the post-pandemic period.

FACILITATION OF SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY ACTION

For years, the degree of trust and coordination between government and educational institutions in China has remained high in comparison with many other international systems. (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2012; Kim, 2016). In major public crises, the Chinese Government has assumed a responsible role and taken advantages of its centralized and unified leadership. In January, 2020, the Chinese Government Central Committee formally established a leading group on COVID-19 to act as its core to comprehensively coordinate the epidemic prevention and control work. The leading group, headed by the Central Committee, is comprised of designated representatives from the major government departments. In the epidemic crisis, the Central Committee has made timely decisions to implement efficient and effective measures by building a unified command system.

The Central Committee worked closely with the State Council in establishing a joint prevention and control mechanism to coordinate the various government departments. Government entities at all levels carried out control strategies, on the basis of population, incidence, and epidemic risk ratings to adjust the risk level of emergency responses and education plans. Education systems at all levels have established a public information communication network to publicize timely information of public concerns (Xue and Li, 2020; Yi et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2020). In higher education, Chinese universities were able to act quickly and responsibly because the Chinese higher education governance is not under the ‘audit culture’ that will limit the university authority in the COVID-19 spreading time (Yang, 2020).

ONLINE TEACHING DIFFICULTIES/CHALLENGES

Schools and higher education institutions shut their campuses and shifted teaching online. Chinese educators were facing a variety of difficulties and challenges including the weakness of the online teaching infrastructure, the inexperience of teachers, the online resource shortages, and the complex environment at home (Yang, 2020).

The Weakness of the Online Teaching Infrastructure

Because of the great demand of teaching needs, online teaching platforms in China such as Cloud Classrooms, Rain Classrooms, and Ding Talk are often overburdened. The network coverage in remote areas is insufficient leading to educational inequity. Then, the adequacy of signal strength is another serious issue. Students in some places had to travel quite a distance to access online classes on mountain tops, the only places they could get an adequately strong online signal for classes (Sohu News, 2020). Additionally, reliable Internet access devices are still the problem in many Chinese families. Some families have more than one child but may have only one device. In China, many parents cannot afford to buy multiple devices for themselves and their children. However, given that Chinese families are generally willing to make sacrifices for their children, they have long been expected to fully prepare children for schooling and step in whenever schools are falling short. As such, equal access to devices and Internet might fall out of schools’ priorities.

Shortage of Online Team Resources

Even before the outbreak of COVID-19, numerous national-, provincial-, and municipal-level online courses were developed with the support of the Chinese government to supplement the off-line education. It was barely able to meet the educational demand of the time. Now, the COVID-19 outbreak has pushed the demand for online courses to the highest. In addition, these online courses contain regional differences, inter-school differences, and subject differences in the limited amount of selected quality courses. Therefore, teachers have had limited choices of available online courses. Many of them had no choice but to copy the offline teaching contents to the network space with no adaptive modifications (Fang, 2018).

Teachers’ Online Ability and Experience

Many teachers were afraid of teaching online because they did not want to show their technology weaknesses in front of the students. They had limited or no online teaching experience. Even though some teachers received various degrees of technical training during the outbreak, they did not have full confidence of delivering the entire course online. After all, teachers’ differing attitudes towards, and ability to learn online teaching affect the adoption of high-end teaching quality of the online teaching. All have an impact on the general effectiveness of online education across the country (Zhang et al., 2015).

Home Environment for Teaching and Studying

Teachers teaching online and students studying online at home could face different degrees of distraction from the home environment. Not all teachers and students are able to find suitable spaces for teaching and studying at home. Some of them may not have adequate hardware and network connection at home. Students' mental health is another challenge educators have to face. Even though some children were happy for a while for not having to go to school, however, they could not stand the loneliness and isolation of simply learning at home. Children may feel stressed, anxious, or lost dealing with the COVID-19 outbreak (Gulati, 2020).

STAKEHOLDERS' EFFORT TO SUPPORT ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING

The Chinese government mobilized efforts of all the stakeholders to implement the country's policy to guarantee the provision of network services to teachers and students, providing teachers with online teaching training, and allowing local governments and schools to deliver online teaching with reference to the local needs. Guidelines were also created by the government to prepare for teaching to be transitioned back to normal face-to-face education after COVID-19 (Yang, 2020).

Internet Structure

Early in March, 2020, China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology asked the country's telecommunication carriers to guarantee the provision of network service resources by widening the broadband coverage in the rural areas and also offering lower rates to poor families. (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020b). The China Education and Scientific Research Computer Network, China Mobile, China Telecom, China Unicom, and China Satellite Communication responded immediately by committing to the maintenance of public service platforms and school networks at different levels (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020c). On the other hand, China Education Television broadcasted online learning programs through satellite to remote areas with weak Internet connections (Gulati, 2020). This government action guaranteed the provision of reliable networks for online education and ensured the access to digital educational resources and online education (Jee, 2020).

Online Resource Support

The government worked on making educational resources accessible to the general public. Efforts were made to increase society's participation in online education. Thirty-seven qualified institutions and Internet companies have been approved by the Ministry of Education to provide online teaching services (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020d). Large technology companies have moved quickly to develop new online educational tools to support teachers and students. The virtual classroom lessons covered basically the 12 academic disciplines. Teachers have been sharp in following up with updated platforms and new study materials. Education content providers have modified their online teaching materials to make it easier for access in places with slow Internet (Ning and Corcoran, 2020). In higher education, the Education Ministry has developed 24,000 free online courses on 22 web platforms, covering both undergraduate and vocational areas of study (Evans, 2020).

Teacher Support

Teacher training for online teaching has been offered by a joint effort of the government education departments of different levels, schools, and teacher training companies. Teacher resource packages have been developed by the Department of Teacher Education and various educational institutions. These packages include practical information on online teaching strategies, information technology

applications, school epidemic prevention actions and contents of local teacher training sessions (Xinhua Net, 2020). Furthermore, the Department of Teacher Education has established an online teaching feedback system for teachers to actively share their online teaching experiences and thoughts. Teachers can discuss with their colleagues and learn from one another. Online teaching technology consultants are also available in every school to support teachers on online teaching (Ning and Corcoran, 2020).

Deliver Online Teaching Referencing Local Conditions

Local education departments and schools are encouraged to adjust their online teaching strategies to local conditions for organizing teachers to carry out online teaching, to develop teaching contents, and to arrange the teaching format (Xue, Li, Li, and Shang, 2020). Since differential regional development exists in China, therefore, the Chinese government has made online education platforms and resources available to all schools and individuals. The government even distributes teaching resources by using satellite TV in areas with limited Internet coverage (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020e). In the teaching process, to develop students' independent study abilities, the teaching pedagogy and time arrangements were adjusted to help students plan to suit their home-based environment. For example, Guangdong province adopted an emergency measure to equip poor students with tablets (Southcn News, 2020). Zhejiang Province issued guidance requiring each class to last for about 20 minutes in primary school and 30 minutes in middle school (Ning and Corcoran, 2020).

Communicate with Parents

Many schools took advantage of the online teaching and learning opportunities to get parents involved in their children's schoolwork. Parents were asked to share their impressions of how their children learn online. Some parents even offered helpful ideas for delivering more effective online teaching. A few parents suggested that teachers could design homework assignments that would serve as practical experiences such as housework or volunteering jobs. Teachers asked the parents to video-tape the students' physical activities at home as evidence of their performance. The parents seemed to be enjoying this kind of connection with the teachers (Ning and Corcoran, 2020).

SPECIAL EFFORT BY HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS TO FIGHT PANDEMIC

The pandemic has offered unique opportunities for Chinese universities to examine their technical capacity for challenges. Universities had to reflect on how they could manage disruptive technologies under severe environments to better serve the needs of education. To quickly address their technological shortcomings, universities negotiated with network providers to strengthen the data plans of faculty and students (Peters et al., 2020). Some went out of their way to ensure faculty and students are poised to continue with teaching and learning.

Zhejiang University (ZJU) is a comprehensive research university serving as an excellent example of higher education institutions to confront the COVID-19. ZJU currently offers more than 5,000 undergraduate and graduate courses to students. Post-lockdown, smart classrooms were made available for teachers to live stream their classes. Since not all faculty members are equally capable in managing virtual classroom activities, ZJU organized many training sessions for over three thousand faculty members. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) specialists were employed to prepare faculty to convert course contents to online tuition (Wu, 2020). The one-stop "Research at ZJU" platform was created to allow scientists and students to collaborate online. ZJU also funded disadvantaged students to enable them to access to online learning (CCTV News, 2020a) In addition,

ZJU provides lecture playbacks and courseware packages for students with weak or no Internet access (Gulati, 2020).

As part of its response to the crisis, China's Ministry of Education declared China's firm determination to adhere to further opening education to the outside world by offering government scholarships for foreign students to study in China. China has been one of the first to make such an official statement about its attitude toward global engagement in higher education in a post-COVID-19 era (Stevenson, 2020).

PLANNING FOR POST COVID-19 PERIOD

The Ministry of Education has worked out a plan for school reopening after the epidemic. The plan has comprehensively taken into consideration epidemic risk levels, traffic conditions, emergency preparedness, school population density, and school age. Staggered plans have been made to reopen schools in a stepwise manner to spread out the peak demands of education resources. A smooth and careful transition has been planned to allow students to progress from home-based learning to normal class learning (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020f). Teachers are encouraged to be prepared to teach normal classes at the post-COVID-19 time by fully making use of the online teaching strategies and to teach in an independent way while drawing on online teaching resources. Moreover, the government has urged students to get ready to quickly transition back to normal class activities. They were asked to strike a balance between work and rest, continue physical exercise, and maintain their physical and mental health. An interim checking system of online teaching was also established by the government to closely monitor online teaching activities along the way. Any information about the online teaching and learning activities will be incorporated to the school transition plan (CCTV News, 2020b).

HELPING TEACHERS AND STUDENTS IN RURAL AREAS

Because of cultural and economic differences in the rural and urban areas of China, the Central Committee understands the online teaching and learning difficulties of the rural areas: limited Internet access; lack of online teaching resources; shortage of hardware and software for teachers and students; and poor level of family affordability to equip for online learning (CCTV News, 2020a; Sohu News, 2020; Southcn News, 2020). To address these online teaching and learning issues in the rural areas, the Central Committee together with all the stakeholders of the anti-COVID group have launched their special effort to ensure equal opportunity of receiving online education by students of rural and urban areas.

First, responding to the request of the China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, China's telecommunication carriers widened the broadband coverage in the rural areas and also offered low subscription rates to poor families. (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020b). China Education Television also prepared special online learning programs through satellite to remote areas with weak Internet connections (Gulati, 2000).

Second, students in slow Internet access areas have received modified online learning materials to make it easier for them to study online (Ning and Corcoran, 2020). In addition, 24,000 free online courses on 22 web platforms have been developed by the Ministry of Education to cover many areas of undergraduate and vocational studies (Evans, 2020).

Third, an online teaching feedback system has been developed by the Department of Teacher Education to provide opportunities for rural teachers to communicate with other online teachers countrywide to share their online teaching experiences and learn from one another (Ning and Corcoran, 2020).

Fourth, a parent feedback platform has also been established to allow parents of rural areas to directly communicate with teachers online. Parents have taken advantage of the feedback system to share with teachers how their children learn at home (Ning and Corcoran, 2020).

Fifth, some provinces like Guangdong have offered special emergency measures to equip poor students of rural areas with tablets (Southern News, 2020). Zhejiang Province also funded disadvantaged students of remote regions to enable them to access to online learning (CCTV News, 2020a). In addition, for students with weak or no Internet access in rural areas, Zhejiang has made arrangement for lecture playbacks and courseware packages to facilitate their learning (Gulati, 2020).

Sixth, due to regional development differences, all the stakeholders of the anti-COVID group have encouraged local governments and schools of remote rural areas to adjust their online teaching to suit local needs. These adjustments could include instructional strategies, class organization, teaching contents and even instructional time (Xue, Li, Li, and Shang, 2020).

CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINA'S EDUCATIONAL MEASURES ON PANDEMIC

What Chinese government and educators have done in response to the COVID-19 outbreak is timely and responsible. While their pro-active effort has yet to be fully evaluated, some of the initial results have shown that at least teaching and learning continue as directed by the Central Government. Meanwhile, Xue, Li, Li and Shang (2020) have taken the initiative to summarize the effort of the government and the educators and identified the characteristics of their educational measures as follows:

1. Forming a governance system under centralized and unified Leadership of the Chinese government.

A leading group on COVID-19 under the leadership of the Central Government has acted as its core to comprehensively coordinate the epidemic prevention and control work. The group has made prompt and scientific decisions, implemented efficient and effective crisis response, and built a unified and efficient command system. Within a short period of time a crisis response mechanism was established to effectively arouse the initiative of all parties. The State Council has played a coordinating role among various government departments to track, analyze and determine the epidemic situation. The education departments evaluate the operation of online teaching infrastructure, strengthen material dispatching and network support, and adjust prevention and control strategies.

2. Building a pattern in which families and schools cooperate to promote educational development.

China has established a working mode of cooperation between the family and the school, advocating the cooperation of school administrators, teachers and parents in promoting a smooth educational development during the COVID-19

period. The school actively communicates and cooperates with parents to provide technical guidance to parents to check on students' home assignment completion. A series of family education curriculum resources have been developed and shared among parents. Through parents' feedback, the school can ensure online teaching quality by understanding more on the students' online learning input, progress and effect. The school and family cooperation has contributed to finding online teaching and learning problems and respond to them in a timely manner.

3. Online education is emerged from an emergency substitute into an important transformation of education paradigm.

The outbreak of epidemic has promoted the widespread use of online education in China. The application of online education simply cannot stop with the end of the epidemic. Because of online teaching in China, the educational concepts have been updated, the teaching methods have been changed, and the teacher-student relationship has been reformatted. Profound changes in education have taken place in China during the epidemic and these changes will serve as driving forces for the transformation of education paradigm.

4. Paying attention to remote and poor areas and disadvantaged student groups

Because of the unbalanced development of urban and rural areas in China, rural network conditions are relatively behind. Children's online learning is seriously affected by the lack of home network and equipment. Offering help to the disadvantaged children, governments at all levels, enterprises and social organizations work together to make sure that broadband networks are unblocked, mobile Internet is publicly available, and free online learning equipment is provided.

DISCUSSION/OUTCOMES OF ONLINE TEACHING

The Chinese Government recognized that it was not easy for schools to be closed but education to be continued. The Government soon mobilized all the stakeholders to include local district officials, school administrators, teachers, parents, community leaders, and technology service providers to join effort to get the problem resolved. All the stakeholders were able to take their responsibilities and contribute to the mission of closing schools but continuing education.

Because of the immediate need to take action to address the COVID-19 situation in China, online teaching and learning was launched with no common standards across academic disciplines and regions all over the country. That creates a problem for outcome evaluation during and after the COVID-19 period. Many teachers are still new to online teaching and are performing the online teaching task by trial and error. They plan to go over the same material a second time as and when normal classes restart. However, what they learn from their online teaching experiences is valuable. They could use their initial online teaching contents, resources and activities as a basis for continuous improvement.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has given a boost to China to pursue on online education. Though the outcome of online teaching and learning is still unknown, the trends of future development seem to be clear. As Stevenson (2020) has pointed out that after the COVID-19 period, blended teaching

and learning models will definitely become more common with a reduced reliance on face-to-face format especially in higher education.

Some students have gone through their online learning experience by means of the MOOC in higher education. They were opened to opportunities to access learning materials and classes by best-in-the-field scholars. Even within a school, because of the formation of teaching teams in online teaching, students were able to take advantage of the rich resources of the teaching team in broadening their horizon by learning from different teachers in the same subject area.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

The effort of the Chinese government and the stakeholders in fighting the COVID-19 war to save education is certainly remarkable. While the final outcome of their effort has yet to be determined, the drastic measures they have taken so far offer valuable lessons for educational planners to learn in confronting future crisis. Their practices carry significant implications for educational planning worldwide.

First, the Chinese government together with all the identified stakeholders of this anti-COVID movement were able to pull their effort together to contribute to the cause of continuing education with school closing. The Central Government was able to appoint a special COVID-19 Group to take the leadership of planning and coordinating all the actions to address the problem. It is this centralized leadership that was able to save time and effort in analyzing the disastrous situation and prescribing the right medicine for curing.

Second, the COVID-19 Group was able to act fast in identifying the core of the issue and recommended the course of actions to take in addressing the problem. With the support of the Central Government and the provincial and the local governments, huge amounts of requested resources were poured in to ensure that the recommended measures could be smoothly implemented. No time was lost in coordination, communication, deliberation and administration. Though no formal evaluation of these courses of actions have been made, the effort of the government and the stakeholders at all levels are recognized for providing guaranteed access to network connections to all teachers and students (Jee, 2020), and monitoring the implementation of the online program through teacher and parent online feedback systems with constructive suggestions for improvement (CCTV News, 2020a). All the stakeholders of the anti-COVID group are also credited with the development of the post-pandemic plan that prepares to bring the educational operation back to normal after the pandemic period.

Third, understanding that there are equity issues involved in implementing online teaching because of cultural and geographic differences in China, the COVID-19 Group was particularly aware of the poor and disadvantaged group of students and their families. The Group has exerted extra effort to ensure that the interest of the poor and disadvantage group of students was well protected. The mission was to provide equal online learning opportunities to all students irrespective of their family background.

Fourth, because of the short of planning time, the strategies of closing schools and continuing education were quickly drafted and implemented without an outcome evaluation component. This has become a drawback of this anti-COVID effort. Even though some provinces noticed the lack of evaluation plan later and tried to complement by some piecemeal plan to assess interim results, a standardized overall outcome evaluation plan of anti-COVID effort has not been created. This

missing component of the planning process will become a barrier for outcome assessment at the end of the COVID-19 period.

Fifth, in declaring war on COVID-19, the Chinese Government and the stakeholders started to bring the classes online to ensure continuous student learning. To traditional educators, this online approach to learning seems to be a substitute in time of crisis. What about at the Post COVID-19 period? Will online teaching and learning continue the way it is? Or should it be going back to face-to-face format of instruction? The COVID-19 Group has developed a post COVID-19 plan to indicate the future direction to go and the ways how online teaching and learning can be smoothly transitioned back to a new blended mode of instruction delivery. The COVID-19 Group's far-sightedness in creating the post COVID-19 plan is to be complimented.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented how the Chinese government and educators acted to combat the pandemic challenges, overcome difficulties and craft and implement far-sighted plans to adjust to the post-pandemic period. It also summarizes the characteristics of china's educational measures on epidemic and discusses the outcomes of online learning and implications for educational planning. However, the paper does not intend to provide an exhaustive picture of what happened to public schools and institutions of higher education given the scope of the Chinese context. Outliers and exceptions are likely to exist and it warrants further study.

Planning strategies to meet with the challenges of unpredicted crisis have been most difficult. Educational planners in China need to hastily come up with an emergency plan to deal with the urgencies all over the country. Consideration had to be given to problem identification, resource allocation, implementation strategies, plan modification for changes and outcome evaluation. Chinese Government and the stakeholders of the COVID-19 fighting group have been doing extraordinarily well in demonstrating their best in achieving the mission called upon them to continue learning while closing schools. Even though what they have done still has areas to be expected, the difficult process they have gone through with great courage and determination presents a case study of lessons for universal educational planners to learn.

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EQUITABLE EDUCATIONAL PLANNING: EMBRACING OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES FOR THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA

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ABSTRACT

Educational leadership, whether in PK-12 or higher education, often examine the planning of curricula and materials for equity. Due to the global pandemic that began in early 2020, the planning of instructional materials had to be reexamined due to the travel and interaction restrictions that closed most brick-and-mortar schools, colleges, and universities. Educational leaders around the globe scrambled to assist educators in what was for many uncharted methods of delivering instruction. Educators and students with access to the Internet, an online academic library, Open Educational Resources (OER) or Open Access (OA) resources had the option to continue to move forward with educational endeavors. With an increased reliance on digital materials to meet online instruction demands, those without access to these same resources were limited, if not stopped entirely, from being able to continue their studies and/or research activities. Work was already being done to promote OER and OA prior to COVID-19, however the restrictions put in place highlighted the need for equitable, online access to resources and scholarship for educators to autonomously choose from. The purpose of this article is to go further into the post-pandemic landscape and explore how increasing OER and OA and removing access barriers could increase equity by establishing the ability for teaching/learning to continue for all, regardless of the ability to attend a brick-and-mortar building and regardless of socio-economic status. The lens being used to examine the consequences of the current inequities, as well as the benefits of decreasing these inequities, is that of self-determination theory (SDT), a macro theory of development, motivation, and well-being. SDT also provides one possible framework to promote future research around the increased production and use of OER and OA..

INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies are changing the landscape and methods of conducting business in many organizations, including in academic institutions. Nevertheless, even though there is forward movement, the education sector is largely lagging behind businesses and other industries in adopting new technologies and innovations. In fact, COVID-19 spotlighted disparities across academic operations, especially in equitable access to online resources. Certain digital innovations such as Open Education Resources (OER) and Open Access (OA) could have a positive impact and alter the future of educational planning by increasing equitable options and closing certain gaps. In higher education, faculty awareness of open educational resources, (course materials that are freely available for use, reuse, adaptation and sharing), has grown consistently, according to a study by Bay View Analytics (2020). UNESCO supports both OER and OA through initiatives such as “Recommendations on Open Education Resources (OER)” (UNESCO, 2019) and the Global Open Access Portal (UNESCO, n.d.).

Despite these globally supported initiatives, prior to COVID-19, much curriculum planning remained focused on hard-copy sources with many courses throughout the world taught using books and other materials that were primarily made available to students in classrooms or in library resource rooms. When this method was no longer available because teachers and students had to work at home and many no longer had access to physical resources, the need was amplified for open digital options that could provide the foundation for lessons. For educators and students who were physically going to academic libraries prior to COVID-19, the inconvenience transformed to an insurmountable obstacle when campuses had to shut down. If primary instructional resources had been OER or OA, learning would have continued in a more equitable manner. As it was, many had limited or even no access to resources to keep courses going.

Libraries and classrooms can remain stocked in many items, however, the more that can be made open and available to all, the more equitable learning and research becomes. Increased digital access would allow for learning and research to continue when there is limited or no access to brick-and-mortar libraries or resource centers. This is an international issue, and increasingly academic libraries around the globe contribute to student success in many ways, including impactful collaborations with faculty to incorporate information literacy into disciplines, liaising to departments, and embedding digital resources in courses and groups. The recognition and support of such initiatives is not insignificant and grows steadily, as evidenced recently by the U.S. including billions of dollars in a stimulus package to promote the expansion of digital resources at libraries (ALA, 2021).

At the beginning of the 2020/2021 academic school year, over five months after the start of many COVID-19 related lockdowns, many educational leaders, instructors, and students were as prepared as possible to begin educational activities online. The hope for many was that there would be a return to face-to-face education as soon as a vaccine was made available, and infections decreased. Unfortunately, that did not happen as quickly as many anticipated. Therefore, efforts were expended to continue and improve virtual learning well into the second semester of the academic year. Many educational materials and scholarly works were made available online to help expand educational options, particularly for PK-12 schools, and scholarly communication, particularly surrounding the science of COVID-19 (Alemneh et al., 2020; Schaffhauser, 2020; Tavernier, 2020). Even though these strides were greatly beneficial, gaps in resources still abound. If opening up resources for PK-12 teachers increased educational planning options, and opening up peer reviewed publications advanced the research on reducing the spread of a global disease, would it not behoove other scholarly resources be made available that would advance other areas of equity and research as well?

In addition to the view that increasing OER and OA would directly increase equity, we could examine how increasing these options could contribute additional benefits to the field of education. Self-determination theory (SDT), the lens being used in this article to promote equitable access to learning resources, is a macro theory interested in promoting high quality development, motivation, and well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2017). Supporters of SDT state that individuals need to have the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness met in order to exhibit healthy development, motivation, and well-being. The SDT tenant focused on for this article is that of autonomy and how it is directly linked to motivation and well-being. Simply put, if educators and students do not have the full range of resources to choose from when designing their curricula or completing their assignments, they may not feel autonomous and evidence shows lack of autonomy has a negative effect on motivation and well-being (Johari et al., 2018; Marshik et al., 2017). On the flip side of the coin, for those that have expanded access to educational resources, the need for autonomy is met, frustration is decreased, and higher levels of motivation and well-being are

experienced. Currently many educators still work with limited autonomy due to the inability to access necessary resources. The whole premise behind OER and OA are to increase access and choices for individuals, including for educators who are planning and creating curricula, and through the lens of SDT this could mean enhancing motivation and well-being.

As schools are slowly returning to face-to-face operations, students, teachers, and administrators are looking at ways to redesign the education experience enabled by new practices. Education will be forever changed due to the effects of COVID-19 (Duncan et al., 2020), and not all of the changes need be negative. Since the spotlight on certain iniquities that could be remedied with OER and OA intensified during the lockdowns, educational leaders, planners, and policy makers, could use this illumination as a catapult to increase these resources to lessen the resource gap and therefore make education more equitable across the board. The myriad benefits of OER and OA were recognized long before the global pandemic, therefore educational planners were already including them, however, there is still much to be done to promote both types of open resources and the timing may be optimal. The focus of this article is on how COVID-19 exposed resource inequities and how OER and OA can make planning curriculum more equitable by allowing educators and educational planners more autonomy in the choices of resources they can utilize to build and enhance their curricula.

OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES (OER) and OPEN ACCESS (OA)

Digital technologies such as OER and OA provide scholars with access to diverse and previously unavailable content that span various formats and innumerable technologies across institutions and even nations. OA information is essentially digital information that is online, free of charge, and free, in varying degrees, of most copyright and licensing restrictions. OERs are a type of open access materials that are intended for teachers and learners, and include a wide range of pedagogical resources, such as textbooks, lesson plans, activities, media, and supporting materials. Users can build on OER and/or adapt the material and then redistribute them usually under a creative commons (CC) or some other open license, or even with a complete waiver of copyright or “public domain” (UNT, 2021). OA resources, including peer-reviewed scholarly works, permit users to download, copy, print, display, distribute, search, index, and link to the information. OA resources remain the intellectual property of their creators, who have attribution rights as well as control over the integrity of their work.

The benefits of OER include but are not limited to reduction of costs for production and distribution (Keller, 2021; Wiley et al., 2012), increased access, promotion of independent learning, collaboration (Keller, 2021), and openness about teaching, and social justice (Heller and Gaede, 2016; Henderson, and Ostashewski, 2018). Using OER across departments can also increase collaboration as the faculty can work together to develop the additional course materials (Keller, 2021). The benefits of OA include an increase in citations (Piwowar, 2018), equity, and the generation of new ideas and discoveries, as well as wider availability and accessibility. OA has the potential to increase the exposure and use of authoritative and reliable information (Alemneh et al., 2020). These benefits have a snowball effect of increasing research outputs. This increase in turn improves education, economies, and overall welfare of populations by decreasing inequities for students, faculty members, researchers, and at times the general public.

Inequities in education have been the focus of much research and policy discussions for decades with a specific emphasis on portions of the population that cannot access high quality or even

adequate resources (Carter, and Welner, 2013; Ford, 2019; Kozol, 2012), thwarting and at times frustrating the basic psychological need of autonomy as defined by SDT. This directly and indirectly reduces healthy motivation and affects well-being. OER and OA by the very nature of making knowledge accessible, reduce the gap in resources by providing additional options for educators and students, and in so doing contribute to reducing the gaps in achievement and other academic advancements that may also lead to employability and successes outside of academia. As was stated earlier, COVID-19 shed light on several inequities such as the examples provided below.

Imagine for a moment a high school teacher who has always relied on physical textbooks that remain in the classroom. The books remain in the classroom simply because there are not enough textbooks for each student to have their own. Had this teacher had an OER textbook, this solution would have been solved long before COVID-19, however, he was forced to scramble to locate other options when the physical distancing guidelines were instituted to prevent the transmission of the disease. This teacher was strained to come up with an alternative way to distribute readings to his students. He could not hand out the textbooks for the students to take home, he simply did not have enough books for every student.

Now imagine for a moment a college professor that has always grappled with finding an affordable textbook for her students. She struggled to find one textbook that covered all the material she wished to cover. She would have chosen to have her students purchase two books and use sections from both in her class, but this was too much of a financial burden. In addition, the institution that she works for has little funding for scholarly journal subscriptions and she was unable to supplement the research portion of her course with many of the peer-reviewed articles she would have chosen to use, because they were not open to her and her students but were locked behind a paywall. Once COVID-19 hit and the economic status of many of her students plummeted even lower, she wanted to avoid the already poor textbook option altogether and focused on OA publications. Even though she was able to keep presenting material, she felt that the situation negatively impacted the instruction she could offer and believed her curriculum would have been stronger if she had been able to provide an online open textbook and access to many of the sources not currently open to her.

Both of these imagined educators may have also searched for online education best practices as soon as they realized they were going to have to move instruction to an online modality. The high school teacher struggled to find scholarly literature that he could access because he did not have access to a higher education academic library. The college professor was able to access more resources due to her library access, however, still came upon studies and reviews she felt would have been helpful, and yet, her library was not subscribed to those sources, and they were locked behind the paywall. Both imagined educators represent real-life educators around the globe that function despite limited choices in curricula design and resource use. Both could have improved their curricula, and therefore instruction, and possibly student motivation and well-being, with access to high quality OER and OA resources. Access to more resources would provide genuine autonomy for educators and students. This would have been true before COVID-19, and during the pandemic restrictions, educators would have been able to plan a more equitable and seamless move to socially distanced learning when it was thrust upon them.

From a student perspective, many, even in developed countries suffer when their PK-12 school is unable to provide the textbooks or when their college or university assigns textbooks to be used that are high in cost. Many students are not able to afford updated textbooks causing them to delay purchasing until the courses are weeks in, causing them to share, or even causing them to choose

older editions. If most students in a class have the newest edition of a textbook, but a couple students have an older version because it is available free to them, do they suffer? Open textbooks would equalize the options instructors have when deciding what resources to use, would prevent students from having to sacrifice due to high costs, and would also prevent the frustration of the basic psychological need of autonomy.

REDUCING INEQUITIES

In addition to reducing inequity by increasing choices and satisfying the SDT tenet of autonomy in curricula resources and design, other aspects of increasing the use of OER and OA need to be considered. Institutions of higher education are challenged by external accreditation and many stakeholders may not have a positive outlook regarding the net effects of OER on education in general. Some commentators argue low- to middle-income countries may not have the same highly accentuated beneficial effects from OER as more wealthy countries do; yet other experts generally see the potential benefits of OER as outweighing the possibly negatives. Inequity may not be something that can be completely eradicated, however, individuals involved in educational planning often strive toward equalizing learning in as many ways as possible. Many inequities that have been spotlighted during the pandemic restrictions have centered around access to resources and access to instruction. The need for a strong infrastructure, such as consistent electricity, high speed Internet, and durable and well-maintained computers, are outside of the scope of this article. However, they warrant mentioning because even if high quality OER and OA abound, they are of little to no use to those that cannot gain access due to poor electricity, poor Internet, or lack of functional devices. In other words, governments, institutions, and other organizations need to ensure these challenges have been addressed. This is certainly a problem in the Global South but is also a problem in pockets of the Global North.

As far as OER and OA reducing inequities, a few other items must also be mentioned. For school districts and or colleges/universities, using OER resources might create a more consistent curriculum as instructors might be encouraged to use similar resources and/or collaborate to create the texts and materials that will be used. Particularly during restrictions, OER and OA would allow for students who are forced to stay home, to continue to read assigned texts that coincide with the instruction being offered in their online classrooms. Even for students attending face-to-face instruction, OER could provide an equitable method to disseminate knowledge to all students regardless of the classrooms they find themselves in, rather than the current trend that limits resources to institutional budgets. Students would simply need to be provided a link via email or learning management system or provided a device with the resources already downloaded. It is important to remember if equity is the goal, OER should be downloadable for students who have limited or no access to Internet at home.

It is clear that students suffer who do not have access to educational resources, however, having access to subpar resources can also be detrimental and therefore quality must be considered. If the choices are not genuinely good choices, the autonomy is not authentic, and frustration will still occur. Veletsianos, (2020) argues that open sources do not always help decrease inequities. Those using and recommending open resources should still consider social justice issues such as who the authors are and who are being cited. Citation politics should be considered as open resources could promote research and researchers that are supporting the dominant culture rather than opening up exposure for minority research to be showcased (Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotter, 2018). In order

for inequities to be avoided in production, aspects must be considered such as, who is making the decisions about what materials are important and who is creating those materials.

In addition to OER and OA, another attempt at reducing inequities in education come in the form of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which saw a renewed interest as a means of gaining higher education once COVID-19 shutdowns were implemented. MOOC provider Udemy reported a 425% increase in enrollments from February to March 2020 (Udemy 2021). In sum, increasing OER, OA, MOOCs, and other types of open knowledge sources would allow educators at all levels and in all regions of the world to plan for and establish more equitable curricula through offering an increase in choices.

PLANS TO INCREASE OER AND OA

We have established how increasing OER, and OA would benefit educators and students through increasing options and supporting the SDT tenet of autonomy. In this section practical methods of doing so will be discussed. Views and rhetoric from governments, institutions, other organizations, and individuals can promote or deter both the creation and use of open sources such as OER and OA. Many concerns and misconceptions surround the production and use of open-source scholarly works. Since mystery and ignorance breed unfounded fear, addressing the concerns and dispelling the myths or misconceptions would be a great step toward a wider acceptance of open sources. Some of the top concerns include, intellectual property and copyrights, predator publications, and quality.

Many individuals promoting open sources work diligently to educate academics, administrations, and other stakeholders internationally through presentations, publications, and even an Open Access Week. The last three Open Access Week themes have focused on the need for action on equity and inclusion. In 2018, it was “Designing Equitable Foundations for Open Knowledge.” In 2019, the theme was “Open for Whom? Equity in Open Knowledge, and the last one in 2020 was, “Open with Purpose: Taking Action to Build Structural Equity and Inclusion” (Alemneh et al., 2020).

Support of OER and OA is not a new concept. In 2012, a report by Center for American Progress encouraged governments and institutions to institute a policy that, “All publicly funded resources are openly licensed resources” (Wiley et al., 2012, p. 2). McKenzie (2020) noted that awareness and adoption of OER continues to grow, but the movement could be overshadowed by publisher initiatives like inclusive access. In light of the transformation of scholarly communication, higher education institutions worldwide are increasingly building digital repositories that will enable them to foster a more sustainable publishing ecosystem and make research outputs available via the OA route.

In addition to disseminating information about open sources and constructing institutional repositories, higher education institutions hold a great deal of power in how they show value by how they evaluate the production of open sources for evidence of promotion and tenure (McKiernan, 2017). The trend is to be more accepting and even supportive of open source development as acceptable measures. Also, more OER and OA might be created if there were incentives put in place by colleges or departments to develop necessary skills to produce open sources and/or small grants for those that pursue such publications. Many institutions of higher education express a goal of passing along information to the general public and yet they are not accomplishing that purpose if the teaching materials and scholarly communication their faculty produce is locked behind paywalls

(McKiernan, 2017). An increasingly popular view is that if publicly funded faculty produce manuscripts, then these items should be open to the public.

Specifically, to support the creation of OER, universities can encourage the creation of texts and other materials by instructors for their own courses and for PK-12 courses as well. Educators at all levels could be encouraged to start small by sharing teaching materials (slides, notes, etc.) and maybe even establishing in house open textbooks (McKiernan, 2017). Partnerships could be formed between faculty in higher education and faculty in PK-12 to create textbooks to meet specific needs. This might have the benefit of bridging the gap between the ivory tower and practice in some fields and might also help prepare high school students for entrance into college level work if the partnership's goal is to create college preparatory texts and those writing the text are both high school and college educators. Openstax, an online library of textbooks and resources for both high school and college level courses run by faculty at Rice University, could serve as an example of successful OER production (Openstax, 2021).

In the US, Congress has recognized the role that libraries play in the health of communities, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, the pandemic has exposed the level to which citizens rely on libraries to access resources and services via the Internet. Libraries are eligible for billions of dollars in recovery funding as part of the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) of 2021 passed by Congress. The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) received \$200 million, the largest single increase in the agency's 25-year history. The package also provides billions of dollars in academic, public and school library-eligible programs, including the Emergency Education Connectivity Fund through the federal E-rate program (ALA 2021).

Increasing the use of OER and OA might grow organically as the resources are made available and advertised as viable high-quality options for educators. However, more strategically fiscal and equity policies could be implemented such as requiring or at least encouraging the identification and use of OER and OA materials. Incentives could be provided for educators who identify and use these resources to build curricula.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could examine the benefits and challenges of using open sources, as well as developing them. Empirical research, equity research, program evaluation research, etc., could continue to establish a body of knowledge that would dispel myths and increase the value placed on such sources, as well as explore ways to overcome certain challenges. Examples of studies could include those that examine educator and student motivation and well-being using OER and OA while using the lens of SDT; studies that examine the academic success of students using OER and OA; and comparing student persistence, attitudes, and outcomes before use and after initiating the use of these sources (Keller, 2021). Equity research could be conducted examining achievement or success gaps with and without these sources and programs that use open sources could be evaluated for effectiveness.

As far as studying the development of OER and OA, attitudes toward collaboration and crowdsourcing for development could be examined as well as the benefits to those participating in such group endeavors (Baffy et al., 2020; Fleming et al., 2021). Case studies could be conducted to closely examine experiences of faculty from universities or colleges that choose to go the route of OER textbook development. One such study by Keller (2021) demonstrated that using OER across

departments helped increase collaboration as the faculty worked together to develop the additional course materials (Keller, 2021).

New innovations often need to be studied for both benefits and challenges. The challenges of using open sources are similar to using most new innovations. Innovation is viewed as the application of better solutions that meet new requirements, including unarticulated needs. As educational institutions, including cultural heritage institutions embrace open sources, they are facing unprecedented pressures to ensure privacy and reduce the exposure of their institutions to all kinds of data-related risks. Alemneh and Helge (2020) argue the critical importance of balancing the OA aspirations of higher education institutions with the need for respecting privacy and data confidentiality. Data security is for example, about the technology and policy for protecting confidentiality, integrity, and availability of data during its entire life cycle. In this regard, the potential effects need to be studied and analyzed longitudinally to measure the impact of adoption of OER on various aspects of education, using variables such as grades, completion rates, competencies, and many others.

Much research remains to be conducted that would examine OER and OA at all levels of education, from early elementary to doctoral studies. SDT provides one possible framework for such research by focusing on whether individuals experience higher quality motivation and well-being when provided with increased choices for educational resources. Continued empirical evidence is needed to support the development and use of open sources. The improvements to equity with the increased creation and use of open sources could expand and transform educational planning options and the learning possibilities for students around the globe. Well curated OER course materials can be continuously updated and also customized and integrated with available learning management tools or platforms. Despite improvements in faculty satisfaction with OER, it is evident that much work will need to be done to make the most of these tools for educational planning. Few, if any, true winners will emerge from this global health crisis, yet OER and OA have become even more popular in response to the pandemic, making the topic particularly timely. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic created an almost infinite number of challenges, the many unforeseen benefits are being felt and may be experienced beyond the post-pandemic era.

CONCLUSION

In sum, post pandemic educational planning will look different, but the different view need not be bleak. If educational planners grab on to all that has been learned and all that has come to light through this worldwide experience, education could be changed for the better in the area of access to equitable resources. The focus of this article has been to explore how the use of OER and OA can increase equity and choices, and possibly even motivation and well-being, both in brick-and-mortar classrooms and in virtual learning environments through shifting paradigms of accessible and high quality sources. Autonomy, as defined by SDT, was used as a framework for examining the benefits of increasing authentic, high quality, open-source educational resources. This adds to the literature by further exposing the inequities highlighted during COVID-19 restrictions and provides a possible lens for future research and investigations of policies.

The improvements to equity with the increased creation and use of open sources could expand and transform educational planning options and the learning possibilities for students around the globe. Well curated OER course materials can be continuously updated and also customized and integrated with available learning management tools or platforms. Despite improvements in faculty satisfaction with OER, it is evident that much work will need to be done to make the most of these tools for

educational planning. Few, if any, true winners will emerge from this global health crisis, yet OER and OA have become even more popular in response to the pandemic, making the topic particularly timely. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic created an almost infinite number of challenges, the many unforeseen benefits are being felt and may be experienced beyond the post-pandemic era.

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TIMES OF CRISIS CAN BRING OPPORTUNITIES: EDUCATIONAL PLANNING, FACILITIES MANAGEMENT, AND CARES FUNDING

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ABSTRACT

In March of 2020, the United States (U.S.), like many other countries around the world, faced an international pandemic unlike any other in recent times. Elected government officials recommended or mandated the closing of PK-12 public schools. These decisive actions led to unprecedented challenges, but also unique opportunities for public education. The researchers conducted a three-part research study focusing on school leadership during the pandemic. This article is based on the third part of the study focusing on the perceptions of school superintendents about their leadership during the pandemic in one state in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. This qualitative study is based on the naturalistic inquiry design that affords the researcher the opportunity to study an event in real-time as it naturally unfolds (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Interviews were conducted with Superintendents in February and March 2021. The researchers used a semi-structured interview protocol consisting of nine open ended inquiry-based questions. The purpose was to investigate how superintendents and school divisions were using “The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act” funding (U.S. Treasury, n.p.). Based on the data gathered from this study, it became abundantly clear how superintendents used their CARES funds and what that revealed about their priorities. Spending patterns revealed their unwavering support of students and staff and focused on safety and teaching and learning. Superintendents were strategic in their decision making to ensure the CARES funding was used for the greatest common good, both individually and collectively. Many long-term projects and facilities improvements were now possible because of this infusion of funds. Superintendents used this opportunity to effect change: change in instruction, change in instructional delivery, and change in facility disrepair.

INTRODUCTION

In March of 2020, the United States (U.S.), like many other countries around the world, faced an international pandemic unlike any other in recent times. U.S. federal and state government officials took definitive action to address the growing concerns over the spread of the coronavirus. Elected government officials recommended or mandated the closing of PK-12 public schools. These decisive actions led to unprecedented challenges, but also unique opportunities for public education. Educational planning during an international pandemic looks very different from the typical school district planning cycle.

Public school administrators were tasked with developing comprehensive plans for educating students remotely, some with limited or no broadband Internet access and many with sparse technological resources. School leaders had limited faculty capacity to implement these ever-changing and

expansive plans. As time went on during the pandemic, administrators found ways to bring students back into the school buildings, using complex mitigation strategies to ensure the health and safety of all members of the school community. Along with these challenges came some unique opportunities for addressing long-term needs that have plagued schools for years. This article focuses on the way educational planning has morphed with access to COVID-19 funding and spending opportunities.

The researchers conducted a three-part research study focusing on school leadership during the pandemic. The first part focused on leaders' initial reactions to the closing of schools in March 2020 (Cash et al., 2020). The second part focused on leadership and the reopening of schools during the pandemic September 2020 (Brinkmann et al., 2021). The third part focused on the perceptions of school superintendents about their leadership during the pandemic in one state in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S.

This article specifically focuses on themes and findings from the third phase of the study focused on perceived challenges and opportunities related to a variety of essential responsibilities of superintendents. One of the key questions in the study related to the use of Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) funds. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how the CARES funding supported schools during the COVID-19 pandemic as reported by superintendents in one state in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S., and how superintendents capitalized on these opportunities to advance their planning process.

METHODOLOGY

According to Creswell (2014) and Merriam (2016), phenomenological research is constructed based on participants' knowledge as they make meaning of lived experiences. This qualitative study is based on the naturalistic inquiry design that affords the researcher the opportunity to study an event in real-time as it naturally unfolds (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Instrument

Interviews were conducted with Superintendents in February and March 2021. The researchers used a semi-structured interview protocol consisting of nine open ended inquiry-based questions. Questions included perceived challenges and opportunities during the pandemic related to personnel and instruction. Additional questions focused on relationships with the community and school board, the impact of politics, and the use of federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding. Researchers validated the interview questions using a multi-step review process, which included feedback on the initial draft of the questions reviewed by an expert panel of leadership professionals.

Sample Population

Requests for interviews were sent to 132 superintendents in the state in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. The researchers interviewed 23% (30) of the superintendents in the state. The participants ranged from small to large school districts in urban, suburban, rural, and remote location with a broad range of socio-economic levels.

Data Analysis

Researchers used Zoom audio recordings to generate transcript data. Researchers then utilized a multi-step process to systematically review the data. Data were analyzed and coded using Erickson's (1986) interpretative method of data analysis. While coding, theme emersion analysis (Patton 2015)

was employed to link assertions with participants' responses. Data findings were validated through inner-rater reliability measures.

BACKGROUND ON THE PANDEMIC

By December 2019, the first cases of a new virus were being seen in China. This began the birth and growth of the Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19). By February 2020, the COVID-19 had spread throughout Europe and had entered the United States. In March 2020, schools began to consider the impact this pandemic could have, and by the middle of March, state governors began to either recommend or mandate PK-12 school closures. By the end of March, all states had closed their PK-12 public schools, and with very few exceptions, the schools stayed closed through the end of the school year.

In the Fall of 2020, schools began to reopen, and in the state on which this study is based, most opened virtually. Only a few school districts opened schools for face-to-face instruction. Most school districts that did have face-to-face classes had them on a staggered schedule, in a blended (hybrid) learning environment that also incorporated virtual instruction. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advised that all school employees, parents and students abide by social distancing guidelines including wearing masks, staying 6 feet apart which impacted room capacity restrictions among other requirements. Because of these restrictions, many school districts offered a fully virtual instructional option, and in most cases, the majority of students began the school year fully online. As the school year continued, schools started returning more students to a face-to-face learning environment, with all schools offering that option by March 2021. Many school districts still plan to continue to offer virtual learning option for students in the future.

BACKGROUND ON THE CARES ACT FUNDING

According to the U.S. Treasury, "The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2021 provide fast and direct economic assistance for American workers, families, and small businesses, and preserve jobs for American industries" (n.p.). These funds were distributed to federal, state, and local governments and agencies.

As described in the Federal Register,

The CARES Act provides that payments from the Fund may only be used to cover costs that: 1. are necessary expenditures incurred due to the public health emergency with respect to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19); 2. were not accounted for in the budget most recently approved as of March 27, 2020 (the date of enactment of the CARES Act) for the State or government; and 3. were incurred during the period that begins on March 1, 2020, and ends on December 31, 2021. (p. 4183)

In the Federal Register, a list of nonexclusive examples was shared. A review of that list provided several reasonable opportunities for school districts to access these funds. Those examples included disinfection and other mitigation expenses, food delivery expenses to vulnerable populations, distance learning-related technological improvements, medical leave related expenses, payroll support, and "any other COVID-19-related expenses reasonably necessary to the function of

government” (Federal Register, 2021, p. 4184) within the criteria. Costs related to personnel who were tasked with expanding online learning capacity and instructional effectiveness were also noted as eligible expenditures.

Finally, in the Federal Register, possible questions and associated answers were shared as part of the guidance. In that guidance it was shared that the Treasury, if the state decided to use the presumption, would not require documentation for specific use of funds up to \$500 per K-12 student in a school or school district that could be used for broadband capacity, curriculum, digital devices, ventilation and air filtering equipment, transportation and meal costs (Federal Register, 2021 p. 4192). While this option had some advantages, there were also related limitations.

Use of CARES funds

So how did the superintendents spend their CARES funds? The key uses identified by superintendents fell into the following categories: mitigation and signage, technology devices and access, instructional and student supports, and capital improvements and furnishings. These themes are expanded in the following sections.

Mitigation and Signage

When schools began to reopen in Fall 2020, superintendents’ priorities were health and safety. Having the funds to supply masks, face shields, Plexiglas partitions, and other personal protective equipment (PPE) was important to allay fears as employees and students returned to school. Those measures were accompanied by hand washing stations and hand sanitizers as well.

While the personal protections were important, so was the need for new protocols for cleaning and disinfecting areas. This required both training and additional supplies for custodial and maintenance personnel. In some cases, superintendents acknowledged that contracting cleaning services became the best option for their district to further support the efforts of current custodial staff. Since “transmission of COVID-19 occurs primarily through respiratory droplets, which can spread the virus and can cause infection in others,” (<https://www.webmd.com/coronavirus>), air purifiers were also needed to fight against its spread. Superintendents spent CARES funds on bipolar ionization air purification or other air purification equipment for the classrooms and other areas of the schools.

With the Center for Disease Control (CDC) providing guidance regarding social distancing and protective face coverings, signage became a priority. Not only was it important to require those health and safety measures, it was important to remind the occupants of those requirements. Thus, there was a need for signage about mask wearing, about social distancing, and about other measures necessary in each school to ensure the safety of students and staff, such as posting of one-way hallways with directional signage. Superintendents often linked signage to other mitigation processes, when discussing its need.

Technology devices and access

Many school districts acknowledged that their long-range plans included moving to one-to-one devices for their students. Many were moving in that direction prior to the pandemic, with devices at one or more grade levels, and a few had completed the distribution of one-to-one to all of their students. One superintendent said, “You know, three years ago, most of our teachers didn’t have a laptop and none of our students had a school issued device.” The CARES funding allowed them to move up their plans and complete, in a very short timeframe, the distribution of one-to-one devices to all students. They were also able to offer new or replacement devices to their teachers and other staff members too. Since so much work was being done remotely, employees that previously didn’t

need devices became recipients. Those employee groups included bus drivers and teacher aides, who had now become online small group instruction facilitators.

Since most schools in the state opened virtually, and all have continued to have a virtual option for their students, teachers have needed additional technology devices to successfully deliver online or blended instruction. Many teachers were asked to teach students face-to-face and online synchronously. The teachers were able to acquire additional degree cameras, microphones, smart boards, Promethean boards, and other technological supports to be effective in this new environment.

Both students and teachers in many school districts found that the expansion of online learning for students also required a more robust or at least a different learning management system. The learning platform not only had to be purchased, and that was accomplished through CARES funds, but it also had to be deployed. This meant there was a need for increased teacher support of this new platform they would be using for virtual instructional delivery.

Another challenge in regards to resources and access was for students to have devices for instruction when asked to learn from home. Devices are limited in their effectiveness when Internet access is diminished. In many parts of the state, the rural nature has led to little or no broadband, high speed, Internet access. Even in more populated areas, Internet access could be reflective of wealth or location. Superintendents were faced with equity issues that were ameliorated by the purchase of hot spots for both teachers and students. They also set up wireless hotspots in parking lots and other locations for the convenience of student access and the hotspots also helped their communities at large.

Instructional and Student Supports

Student supports ranged from the instructional to the social emotional and varied by district. An important direct result of the CARES funds was the ability to hire additional staff, on temporary basis, to support small group instruction, tutoring, and classroom management as classes were expanded to support more students with a single licensed teacher. Superintendents looked for ways to utilize current staff in these new capacities and hire additional staff through CARES funding to assist students who may have fallen behind academically or needed extra support. Those challenges were mentioned by several superintendents as a result of the school closings in spring 2020 and the inability to provide equitable access to educational resources for the remainder of the year.

The superintendents often mentioned how they used the spring 2020 and the summer to prepare teachers and schools for the return of some form of school in Fall 2020. They employed teachers over the summer to revamp curriculum and prepare effective lessons for online delivery. They provided professional development to teachers so that their instructional strategies would be effective in the virtual environment. One Superintendent, in thinking about time spent on effecting change said,

“There was never as much change as these teachers have had to overcome in a matter of a few short weeks, so I would say the professional development that we had to stand up was beyond belief.” The professional development in support of instruction was considered a bonus during the pandemic because the superintendents saw it as well received by teachers who were hungry for the skills to do their *reimagined* jobs well.

Support for the teachers was important as they moved through this unique school year, but the concern for students was also heightened, and superintendents sought ways to address their social emotional needs through the use of CARES funds. More social workers and psychologists were

hired in several school districts, and in at least one district, those types of services were contracted to community agencies. The collaboration that occurred through necessity with other agencies was identified as another bonus that came as they addressed the challenges of the pandemic.

Capital improvements and furnishings

School districts are often faced with the dilemmas of choosing among a variety of building maintenance and renovation needs. Funds are rarely plentiful, but CARES funding provided an opportunity for school districts, as they were able to improve air quality through structural changes in facilities. They were able to use CARES funds for leaky roofs, old Heat, Ventilation, Air Conditioning (HVAC) systems, poorly sealed windows, and other structural defects that affected air quality. As noted earlier, they used the funds for air purification systems, including bionic polarization equipment, all of which will be supporting better air quality for many years to come. Many superintendents indicated that CARES funds have made a long-term difference in their facilities. One superintendent said, “Without that CARES money, that would not have been possible.” Another shared that, “Financially, we weren’t there, where we want to be in our strategic plan; the CARES money helped us get there.”

Capital improvements did not stop at leaky roofs and windows, though. Since there was a need to socially distance, additional buses were purchased too. While those buses may not be needed to support social distancing when the pandemic ceases to impact daily lives, they can be used to replace older buses in the fleet. To further address the needs related to social distancing, districts were able to purchase additional classroom seating to replace tables that added to their challenges related to classroom capacity. Again, those new furnishings will continue to benefit schools beyond the pandemic.

SUMMARY

Based on the data gathered from this study, it became abundantly clear how superintendents used their CARES funds and what that revealed about their priorities. Spending patterns revealed their unwavering support of students and staff and focused on safety and teaching and learning. One superintendent shared that there was a “focus on instruction; everything we did was to ensure that we could create an environment that was safe for students to learn.” Superintendents were strategic in their decision making to ensure the CARES funding was used for the greatest common good, both individually and collectively. Many long-term projects and facilities improvements were now possible because of this infusion of funds. Superintendents used this opportunity to effect change: change in instruction, change in instructional delivery, and change in facility disrepair. Superintendents’ spending patterns revealed their ability to make “lemonade out of lemons” (making the best out of a difficult situation) and to “never waste a crisis” (always seeking new opportunities to learn, grow, and improve). These funds enabled superintendents to clearly demonstrate their crisis leadership capacity and unwavering commitment to providing the best educational opportunities for their students.

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WHAT DID THE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS LEARN FROM THE PANDEMIC IN TURKEY? EXPERIENCES DURING THE PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to examine the experiences of school principals in Turkey during the pandemic. The fact that school principals have taken on an active role as guiding the school shareholders in coping with the crisis was the motive for focusing on their experiences. The study based on a qualitative phenomenological approach. Data was collected by way of a focus group interviews. As is the case globally, the pandemic has led to feelings of panic, fear and uncertainty among the people in Turkey. Immediate decisions without shareholder participation and which conflict with each other were taken during the crisis period. In this regard, even though the expectations are not high, establishing local decision-making units and managing them efficiently, developing parent training programs and increasing the technological competence levels, focus on techno-pedagogic competencies on the part of institutions responsible from training and educating teachers and establishing effective communication and decision mechanisms among the school shareholders are among the advancements expected for the post-pandemic period.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has made a deep impact and reshaped social, cultural, economic, and political life on a global scale. It can be predicted that this impact will continue in all areas in the future as is the case in the present. Education and schools are among the institutions that have been affected the most from the pandemic. Many studies have been conducted in international (Azorin, 2020; Beauchamp, Hulme, Clarke, Hamilton and Harvey, 2021; Harris, 2020; Harris and Jones, 2020; Netolicky, 2020) and national literature (Akyavuz and Çakın; 2020; Aytaç, 2020; Çakın and Akyavuz, 2020; Keleş, Atay and Karanfil, 2020; Taşar, 2021) to understand the reflections of the pandemic affecting schools.

Past criticisms on the school have increased with the pandemic. These criticisms on the school focus mostly on statements that the school has diverted from its essential functions thus failing to provide a fair, equal and quality education to all individuals. Schools have been shut down globally during this period forcing school principals and education systems to face dire problems. School principals have directly encountered these problems because schools are the institutions where education policies are implemented. School principals have on the one hand tried to inform the parents, students and teachers on the current situation while on the other hand they have strived to solve many problems by themselves. The problems that school principals faced during this period, the challenges, solution suggestions along with the evaluation of what has been learned during this period as well as the lessons that can be drawn comprise the primary subject of the present

study. The poor have always been the greatest victims of crises. They have again been the social group that has been affected the most from the pandemic which made problems such as social justice in education, social equality and equal opportunity more visible. It has thus gained significant importance to examine the priorities of the school principals during the time of crisis, their strategies as well as the lessons that can be drawn from this crisis. In this context, Smith and Riley (2010) was taken as the theoretical basis. According to the authors in times of crisis, the critical qualities of effective leadership are the ability to deal with uncertainty; determination to question events in new and insightful ways; flexible and quick to react and accept change when necessary; believing that you can deal with the crisis as a team; perseverance, a willingness to take risks and bend the 'rules' when necessary. This study focused on the extent to which school principals were able to manage the process by using their effective leadership characteristics in the crisis period. The aim of the study was to examine the experiences of school principals in Turkey during the pandemic. In this context, the following questions were answered in the study:

1. How did school principals define the pandemic?
2. What do they think about social justice-accessibility and hierarchical disconnection during the pandemic?
3. What did the principals learn from the pandemic: problems, their priorities, and accomplishments during the process?

METHODOLOGY

What Do They Think That They Accomplished?

The present study focuses on how school principals experience the crisis that resulted with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The fact that school principals have taken on an active role as guiding the school shareholders in coping with the crisis was the motive for focusing on their experiences. The study based on a qualitative phenomenological approach. Data were collected by way of focus group interviews rather than individual because of the presence of common problems and the fact that each principal experienced the crisis with the same intensity. Thus, school principals have found the opportunity to make sense of their own experiences through the experiences of others.

The participants were comprised of pre-school, primary school, secondary school and high school principals. In addition, the participants were selected from among individuals with graduate level education in the field of education management considering that they may be better at reading the current situation. The process was continued with eight participants since the data were acquired via focus group interview. Table 1 presents the gender and experience of the participants as well as school type and the defining abbreviations.

Table 1*School Principal Characteristics*

Gender	Year in the role	School type	School Principal ID
Female	14	Preschool	PS1
Male	8	Primary	P1
Female	24	High school	HS1
Female	8	Primary	P2
Female	7	Secondary	S1
Male	19	Primary	P3
Male	14	Primary	P4
Male	8	Secondary	S2

In order to form a group that is balanced with regard to gender, four female and four male school principals were included in the study from different school types and with different professional experiences.

What Did The Principals Learn from The Pandemic?

The principals were informed by way of an invitational e-mail as to the objective of the study, how the data will be acquired, how long the interviews will last and how they will be conducted in addition to the ethical principles to be followed. Interviews were planned with the invited school principals following their declarations of voluntariness with at least one week in between each focus group interview. The interviews were conducted online via Zoom software since face-to-face interviews were not possible due to the pandemic measures. Video recordings were taken for all interviews.

Focus group interviews were conducted in three sessions. The reason for this is that separate sessions are needed in order to understand separately the school principals' first pandemic experiences, their experiences during the process, and how they are currently evaluating with a holistic perspective. During the first interview, the researchers informed the school principals on the focus group interview method and the process in general. One of the researchers took on the role of a moderator and another researcher became the reporter, which was not changed throughout the study.

The first interview lasted 102 minutes. The process from the first COVID-19 case in Turkey on March 11 up to the time when it was decided to switch to distance education at schools was examined during the first interview. The school principals were asked to share their emotions, expectations, concerns, and experiences when they were preparing their schools for the new situation. The second interview lasted 72 minutes. The focus during this interview was on the priorities of the school principals, what they could and could not succeed as well as what they did for disadvantaged students with regard to social justice. The final focus group study focused on the opinions of the school principals on the reflections of COVID-19 on education and the changes that the school concept went through. This interview lasted 87 minutes. Topics from previous interviews were shared prior to this interview, approvals of the participants were obtained and thus it was ensured that they could focus on opinions related with the effects of the pandemic.

Video recordings were transcribed by the researchers after which content analysis method was used by each researcher to reach the acquired findings by way of controlling the fit indices between each topic and codes.

FINDINGS

How Did School Principals Define the Pandemic?

School principals generally interpret the pandemic negatively. Words such as crisis, confusion, chaos, panic, distress, anxiety, and fear of death, concern, uncertainty, disconnection, and miscommunication are among those that school principals used for defining the pandemic process. Even though negative words have generally been used to define the pandemic, school principals have also emphasized its positive aspects such as cooperative learning, achievement and movement.

“The process was very tiresome, but it also taught us a lot. To move together... Who will do what in which order? In addition, it also taught us to take rapid decisions and implement them.” (HS1)

“The process provided us with significant experience. (P2)

In general, school principals believe that the pandemic has been managed well in terms of health and education and that the process transformed the school principals into leaders. This opinion was based on the fact that the school principals felt more at ease with regard to autonomy and taking initiative at their workplace due to the panic and uncertainty present in times of crisis.

Social Justice and Accessibility during the Pandemic

The importance of the socio-economic and cultural level of the parents became more apparent during the pandemic with regard to the students' access to education. In other words, this inequality continued to increase during the pandemic. Another subject that school principals emphasize in relation with social justice and accessibility was losing the students whom they had drawn back to school after long periods of absence. Similarly, the communication issues experienced with Syrian parents prior to the pandemic deepened even further during this period. The opinions of school principals on these issues are presented below:

“We experienced the disadvantages of disadvantageous regions even further during this period” (P3)

“Some students could attend the lessons only when their fathers came back home. To tell the truth, we could not reach Syrian parents and children. We failed to reach them.” (PS1)

On the other hand, a school principal at one of the advantageous schools in an advantageous region (S2) stated that; “Distance education is going good at their school compared with other schools because they have more access to digital amenities”. The opportunity gap observed between the students was especially dominant in schools at neighborhoods where there are families from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Hierarchical Disconnection

The decisions taken by politicians and bureaucrats during the pandemic were declared simultaneously to all schools and the society. Indeed, the official declarations to the schools were made after the public was notified.

“We as school principals learned everything from the television at the same time with the rest of the public. We had no difference. But people expected us to know beforehand since we are school principals.” (P2)

“Delays in the correspondence from the Ministry left us in the dark regarding how we should behave.” (HS1)

School principals stated that there were misconceptions with superior units. Regarding this disconnection, the school principals stated that, “they make their decisions not according to a certain program but based on their educator reflexes through comparisons with what is done at different schools” (PS1).

What Were Their Priorities During the Process?

The priorities of the school principals during the process can be summarized in general as: making up for shortages related with distance education at their schools, establishing coordination between the student-teacher and parents, forwarding the information provided by the Ministry to the related individuals in a timely manner, keeping teacher motivation high and trying to establish equality of opportunity among the students. Some school principals (P1, P4) organized meetings prior to the pandemic for identifying the predictions of the teachers and to raise awareness. Therefore, it can be understood that the priority of the school principals in the struggle against the pandemic is taking the support of teachers. In addition to informing the students about the pandemic, it was aimed during these meetings to design the required digital media which will be used to communicate with the parents considering that they will be very active during this period. It can be indicated that the priorities during this period were teacher support, continuous communication with the parents and raising awareness on the pandemic. The participant opinions on the priorities of school principals are presented below:

“We used the motto ‘No cases, Yes Measures’ and held a meeting for a disease we do not know about” (P1)

“Since the only source of communication will be electronic, all communication groups were made active including the parents for establishing 100% communication.” (P4)

“One of our priorities was to establish an active teacher-parent communication.” (P1)

“Our priority during this period was the teachers. We considered teachers as the source of motivation because they were the ones who established the connection with the parents.” (S1)

The learning habits of the students were tried to be kept fresh in Turkey during the pandemic. “Conducting a question-response survey via WhatsApp, communicating with the students one by one, and sharing the photos of students watching EBA TV at the school website after receiving the required approvals.” (P1)

Problems Encountered During the Process

The school principals stated the lack of a consensus on implementation as the first problem they encountered during the pandemic. It was indicated that there was no consensus on implementation among the Provincial/District Directorates of National Education, school types and schools. It was understood that the lack of a consensus on implementation was apparent in the additional course fees paid to the teachers and pandemic related measures. The lack of a consensus on implementation

regarding additional course fees turned out to be a significant issue when it was considered that teacher motivation was among the priorities of one of the school principals.

“There may be different additional course implementation at two different districts of a province. Some of our teachers did not receive extra payment even though they taught extra courses. (PS3)”

“Conflicts emerged between administration-teachers because of the differences in implementation among schools”

[because there was no consensus of implementation] “Our colleagues requested not the most accurate but the highest additional course fees. (PS1)

“Sometimes we would come together as 5 school principals and tried to understand what is meant by the received correspondences.” (P1)

Technical insufficiencies emerged as another problem. The education information network established by the Ministry turned out to be insufficient for the general public which resulted in disconnections. In addition, live courses could not be planned for each course considering that the system will not be able to meet the demand. This was also the source of the problem of additional courses among the teachers related with technical insufficiencies. ZOOM software was started to be used by the Ministry during the first weeks of the pandemic which was followed by digital security concerns when there were news indicating that personal information may be accessed in ZOOM software. The hardware requirement of the teachers also became apparent together with the students. Indicating the teacher who used the refrigerator as a white board turned out to be a plain indicator of the hardware requirement of the teachers. It was understood that majority of the students and teachers do not have smart devices for joining live courses or that they cannot use them.

Another problem was the increase in the educational gap of disadvantageous and absent students. With the onset of the pandemic, it has become even more difficult to close this gap. The limited internet access of disadvantageous students has led to an increase in the education gap during the pandemic.

School principals stated that the centralistic structure of the Ministry of National Education led them feel the lack of an effective local commission during the pandemic. Similarly, they indicated that the delays in official correspondence resulting from the hierarchical structure related with the centralistic structure as another problem. In addition, school principals put forth that the decisions taken do not have solid foundations, that they are disconnected from the field and that they have been taken with a small group of individuals.

School principals have experienced Turkey-specific problems in two different subjects. One of these was putting into effect the requirement for obtaining a certification in order to improve the hygiene conditions of schools, injection prevention and control processes within the scope of the “Clean School” campaign. Even though the Ministry has taken an important step in the struggle against the pandemic, school principals have been left to face with generating self-revenue under pandemic conditions.

“How will it make the school ready in terms of mask-distance-hygiene. We experienced significant financial issues.” (HS1)

Whereas the second problem was the fact that school principals were forced to take part in filiation teams. School principals worked in these teams without any additional payment, faced with the risk of COVID contact and with thoughts that they are being used as filler materials by performing duties that require low formation. Taking part in the filiation team has also resulted in undesired circumstances on the part of school principals such as the distribution of their personal communication information and entrance to private space.

Because we were in the filiation team] all the neighborhoods learned our personal phone number when we were not even giving it out to our students. (PS1)

What do they think that they accomplished?

Even though school principals stated their opinions on the problems related with being in the filiation team, they were of the opinion that they were successful in pioneering to the public during the pandemic. Some examples on the opinions of school principals on this subject:

This [pandemic] was at first considered to be the problem of healthcare workers, we are public workers... over time I understood that the people in my neighborhood really have no idea what is going on. (HS1)

School principals were also of the opinion that they were good at establishing communication between the school shareholders. A type of communication based on taking initiatives was adopted which enabled them to fill the gap between the information received from the Ministry and the movement area of the teachers. Teacher motivation was kept continuously high thinking that the burden of the pandemic will be on the shoulders of the teachers.

“Teachers were the priority during the process. We considered them as the source of motivation because they were the ones who established communication with the parents. We pulled through with minimum psychological damage.” (S1)

“We conducted effective meetings on how the process should be managed. The experience of our guidance teachers and the fact that they have educated themselves on these subjects made a positive impact on the parents. Our guidance teachers put in significant efforts especially with regard to the socialization of small children, using technological devices etc.” (P3)

Schools integrated more with the community by extending out of the school campuses. In this regard, it can be stated that the social function of the school stood out more.

“We learned that we have to educate not only the students but also the public.” (HS1)

“We saw that the teachers increased visits to the parents. At least all our teachers had the chance to see the environment where our students live, their neighborhood relations, family environment, financial states and their study environments at their homes.” (P1)

What did the Principals Learn from the Pandemic?

School principals indicated that the pandemic helped them to re-question concepts such as education, school, and student. School principals are of the opinion that the pandemic made it apparent that there is a need for significant structural change. Opinions of school principals on this subject:

“It seems that the perspective towards education will change completely.” (P3)

“I think that school principals should improve themselves continuously and receive training in order to cope with crises. I am thinking about graduate studies, but they should advance as far as they can.” (PS1)

“I am of the opinion that the hybrid model will continue to be used even if the pandemic is over. Because the number of students is very high in Turkey and the classrooms are very crowded.” (S1)

“It is important to put into effect on-site management rather than central management.” (P3)

In addition to the aforementioned major structural changes, the school principals have emphasized the need to transform schools into spaces with more participation and communication.

“Our schools have to become places with intensive communication based on cooperation.” (P4)

Because they are of the opinion that distance learning will continue, it is indicated that the teachers should be prepared for the profession better equipped with technological competencies and that they should also be supported throughout their professional lives. In other words, the necessity on the teachers' part to reach techno-pedagogic competence has been emphasized.

“I think that our teachers are insufficient from a technological perspective for the schools of today and tomorrow. The schools of the future and universities that educate teachers should be restructured.” (P4)

The importance of parental support has been understood once again during the rapid transition to distance education with the onset of the pandemic. The shift of schools to homes has made the role of parents in education more distinct. In this regard, the school principals are of the opinion that parental trainings should receive more attention starting with the parents of pre-school children.

“Trainings on sewing, embroidery, and furnishing should be provided to housewives, mothers, parents at public training centers starting with the parents of pre-school children. It is especially important to include mothers in education.” (PS1)

“We should utilize the parents as teachers as well. Let us first transfer the knowledge to them because it is easier to do so since we are dealing with very small children.” (P4)

It is possible to summarize the suggestions of school principals on the future as; school design based on communication and cooperation, teachers with techno-pedagogic attributes in addition to other requirements, actively involved parents and school-parent cooperation. On the other hand, some

school principals have stated that the lessons learned during the pandemic will be forgotten very quickly afterwards and that everything will go as it was beforehand.

“I am of the opinion that the de-schooling public discourse that has gone into effect together with the pandemic is like a fantasy for this day and age that we live in and for the near future. Because we all stalled during this period. I think that the schools will preserve their positions in the near future, in three-five or ten years.” (P4)

It seems as if after the pandemic everything will continue as it was before. (P3)

“Distance education may be continued in some unexpected cases. I do not think that full-time distance education or distance education for some courses will be beneficial. I also think that it will be a dream.” (P1)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As is the case globally, the pandemic has led to feelings of panic, fear and uncertainty among the people in Turkey. Similar to the meanings of the aforementioned words, Azorín (2020) defined the pandemic as a ‘supernova’ that shook the texture of education. Immediate decisions without shareholder participation and which conflict with each other were taken during the crisis period. The fact that the government did not include the school principals and teachers in the decision-making process led to hierarchical disconnections. It was indicated in a study carried out in the United Kingdom by Beauchamp et al. (2021) that it was quite problematic for the ministers to share the related decisions directly with the media prior to informing the schools. As put forth by Schmidt and Groeneveld (2019), higher management focused on emergency decision making processes during the crisis. Processes for informing and involving in the decision-making process were neglected. Hence, this is an indication that the hierarchical communication did not function during the pandemic period. Actually, vertical top-down communication may sometimes be preferred for its speed despite its inefficiency with regard to the professional satisfactions of shareholders. However, it was also insufficient in speed during the pandemic period coupled with its already existing negativities.

The most important acquisition from the period was the fact that it transformed school principals into crisis leaders. Because the school principals had to rapidly put into effect the decisions declared by the government and the Ministry Education while coping with problems such as receiving the support of teachers and parents and keeping the motivations of teachers high. It has been emphasized in the report by UNESCO/ILO (2020) that the support provided to teachers should receive priority for the physical, psychological and social-emotional well-beings of the teachers including disadvantaged teachers considering that they will play a key role in identifying the learning gaps and arranging the educational strategies. Leaders should act fast and with foresight during times of crisis, however they should also be careful when evaluating the options, results and the side effects of the measures taken (Netolicky ,2020). Harris and Jones (2020) indicated that school management during the pandemic includes many uncertainties when they likened it to “walking on a tight rope without any safety net”. The tight rope analogy can be used possible to define the situation in Turkey as ‘dangerous with loads of adrenaline.’

It is important to realize that abiding by the procedures on the part of the teachers despite uncertainties in basic personal rights such as additional course payments and differences between

the procedures implemented at different schools is of significant importance. It is considered that the school principals should also acquire public management skills in addition to their educational leadership characteristics due to the need for the teachers to take on responsibility during times of crisis and the active roles they play in raising the awareness of the school environment. While taking part in the filiation teams have forced school principals to live with anxieties related with being in contact with the virus continuously while it has also made them feel as part of a larger whole as well as providing opportunities to associate their schools with the environment.

Educational inequalities have continued to increase during the pandemic period. It is frequently emphasized that the relations between having access to distance education and having access to technology resulted in making the socio-economic states of the families reflect more on education. However, it can be concluded that coupled with the socio-economic states; the social status, education level and cultural richness of certain connected variables also play an effective role in the process. According to Harris and Jones (2020), the pandemic revealed how educational inequality makes a deep impact on those with the least access. Differences between the students that are due mainly to the lack of digital amenities at home such as computers, internet and smart phones which are mostly related with the family economy played a distinctive role with regard to equal opportunities. In other words, the pandemic further accentuated the inequalities related with access to digital devices and the internet (Harris, 2020). When considered from this perspective, the fact that the social environment of disadvantaged students could not be changed and that it could not be improved through the school environment forced the students to remain locked up with their familial heritages. The limitations imposed on the access to technological devices due to the structure of distance education have been partially prevented through the implementation of TV broadcasting by the Ministry of Education in Turkey. Even though it is not expected that the TV broadcasts will be as effective as live courses, it was aimed to prevent the students from drifting away from education altogether.

The pandemic period provided the school principals with golden opportunities to ponder what is really important in education (Azorín, 2020). However, the predictions of school principals that the lessons learned during this period may be quickly forgotten are well-worth taking into consideration. In this regard, even though the expectations are not high, establishing local decision-making units and managing them efficiently, developing parent training programs and increasing the technological competence levels, focus on techno-pedagogic competencies on the part of institutions responsible from training and educating teachers and establishing effective communication and decision mechanisms among the school shareholders are among the advancements expected for the post-pandemic period.

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LEADING SCHOOLS THROUGH COVID-19: A CONSTRAINT OR AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE?

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ABSTRACT

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic undermined basic routines and typical conduct of schools, introducing uncertainty and instability to an extent that schools had never encountered in the last decades. The current study focuses on leaders' coping strategies while struggling to maintain school stability and on the extent to which these extreme conditions of uncertainty and turbulence may potentially promote innovation and change, as many stakeholders argue. Interviews conducted with eleven school leaders reveal that they have invested efforts to maintain school stability and decrease teachers' and students' stress. They changed school priorities, placing more emphasis on the wellbeing of teachers and students than on academic achievements. They shifted control patterns from centralized to collaborative ones with extended autonomy to teachers. They increased the support they provided teachers and created open communication channels. Although many school leaders viewed the pandemic as an opportunity for change, all of them agreed that schools would not dramatically change. All principals shared the notion that it is more likely that schools would return to their traditional routines and modes of operation with only minor changes after the pandemic is over. Some implications of extreme turbulence on innovation-oriented planning are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Organizational systems strive to maintain stability, assumed to decrease variance among organizational members' behaviors and promote organizational effectiveness. To meet this goal, organizations set and follow routines designed to buffer internal and external pressures and create a stable course of organizational action. This also applies to the organizational behavior of public schools, shaped by routines, which are typical to the educational realm.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic undermined schools' basic routines and typical conduct, introducing uncertainty and instability to an extent they had never encountered in the last decades. This led many educational researchers and practitioners to consider this unexpected and dramatic event to be an opportunity for change and innovation of the schooling system and its inherent routines and processes.

The current study attempts to assess what measures school principals took in order to stabilize their school under the extreme uncertainty and turbulence caused by the pandemic and the extent they consider these newly created circumstances an opportunity to change school routines and organizational behavior.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars generally agree that organizations' effectiveness is related to their stability (Andersen and Mortensen, 2009; Liang and Fiorino, 2013; O'Toole and Meier, 2003; Provan and Milward, 1995).

Research evidence provides a variety of findings supporting this claim. O'Toole and Meier (2003) find that stability among school personnel has a positive impact on organizational performance. Andersen and Mortensen (2009) show that a stable pattern of resource allocation improves organizational performance. Meier and O'Toole (2007) argue that promoting stability is among the core assignments for managers who attempt to shape and improve organizational performance. Provan and Milward (1995) demonstrate that system stability improves network effectiveness, and Liang and Fiorino (2013) show that technological innovation is influenced by stability of government funding. Hence, stability is viewed as a desired feature of organizations and a good proxy for organizational effectiveness.

However, maintaining stability may not be an easy task when organizations encounter environmental turbulence evident in an unpredictable change in the complexity of their external context. Environmental turbulence creates a major source of threat to organizational stability and is considered influential on the relationship between external change, internal change, and organizational performance (Boyne and Meier, 2009). The larger the unpredictable change brought by environmental turbulence, the larger the negative effect on organizational performance (Anderson and Tushman, 2001; Kuivalainen et al., 2004; Li and Atuahene-Gima, 2001; Lin and Germain, 2003; Power and Reid, 2005).

Organizational routines, considered to be well-known sources of inertia (Hannan and Freeman, 1984) and inflexibility (Gersick and Hackman, 1990; Weiss and Ilgen, 1985), are among the main measures organizations employ in order to promote stability and cope with unexpected and hazardous events taking place in their environment. According to the Organizational Routines Theory, every organization is composed of a variety of activities, processes and interactions organized in patterns that tend to replicate themselves while organizations strive to achieve their goals (Feldman and Pentland, 2003; Feldman and Rafaeli, 2002). The repetitive nature of organizational routines allows organizational stability to develop while, at the same time, routines promote effectiveness by enabling organizational members to introduce changes that increase the correspondence of their actions with the changing circumstances (Feldman and Rafaeli, 2002). These routines have the power to turn exceptions into rules and shape organizational and professional behaviors (Feldman and Pentland, 2003). Organizational routines are organized in clusters, each serving a different aspect of organizational goals (Kremser and Schreyögg, 2016). Every cluster contains a number of routines set to meet the complexity of a particular organizational goal, while at the same time promoting organizational ability to cope with internal and external pressures (Becker and Zirpoli, 2008; Howard-Grenville, 2005).

When facing a turbulent and unpredictable environment, organizations may choose to stick to their existing structure and routines, hoping that this will enable them to maintain their internal stability and overcome environmental instability. Such a reaction is supported by the Structural Inertia Theory (Hannan and Freeman, 1977, 1984), arguing that strong internal stability is the best response to a dynamic environment. Any structural change is likely to generate internal turbulence, which in turn adds to the negative effect of external turbulence. Therefore, "organizations that attempt to adapt to each environmental outcome will spend most of their time adjusting structure and very little time in organizational action directed at other ends" (Hannan and Freeman, 1977, p. 958).

Alternatively, the Structural Contingency Theory advocates for an opposite reaction, arguing that organizations are likely to perform better if they adapt their internal characteristics to the features of their external environment (Pennings, 1992). According to this theory, organizational effectiveness

may be maintained only if organizations change and adjust their internal routines and increase their fit to the newly created circumstances. When experiencing a major environmental change, therefore, survival depends heavily on an organizations' ability to adjust (Gordon et al., 2000). Hence, routines are viewed as a source of both stability and change (Farjoun, 2010; Feldman, 2000; van der Steen, 2011).

While routines guide and stabilize organizational behavior in all organizations, in some sectors routines may have a more traditional and widespread nature in the sense that similar routines shape organizations operating in different organizational settings. This seems to be the case of public schools, which have maintained their basic routines unchanged for decades. Similar routine patterns may be evident in various schooling systems worldwide such as the school timetable and curriculum, the division into classes, the examination and evaluation system and the learning tracks that schools offer to students (Elmore, 2004). Routines also shape teaching and learning activities and enable the advancement of students' achievements by allowing educators to better identify problems and change teaching processes accordingly (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009).

The stable nature of public school routines seems to be related to the stability of the organizational environment in which they operate. Traditionally, public schools have served as one prominent example of organizations operating in a rather stable environment. State sponsorship and laws are among the key factors contributing to the stable environment in which public schools operate (Eyal and Inbar, 2003; Mayer and Rowan, 1977). In addition, public schools are domesticated organizations protected by the state. This means that their continuation and funding is rarely determined by the quality of their performance and outcomes (Carlson et al., 1965). Therefore, public schools have served for many years as a prominent example of organizations operating in a rather stable organizational environment. An indication to their stability and unchanging nature may be found in the relatively limited number of significant changes that have shaped public schools over the years. Although many attempts have been made in various educational systems to transform traditional teaching practices, few changes may be found within classrooms (Cuban, 1990). It appears that educational reforms have most often led to first order classroom changes, represented by the development of hybrids of old and new teaching practices. Second order changes at the classroom level have proven elusive (Cuban, 2013).

While most change initiatives in education follow intended efforts for innovation, the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 created vastly different circumstances as it forced change that no one could resist. Creating an extremely turbulent environment for public schools, it produced a unique challenge for school leaders as it has undermined stability and the core routines that have traditionally shaped the daily conduct of schools. Although schools have remained domesticated organizations, they have not been able to maintain their typical patterns and processes since governments in many countries initiated lockdowns leading to school shutdowns. As a result, students and teachers stayed at home and teaching became virtual. This has led to changes in key issues inherent to school conduct, such as teachers' roles, the design and conduct of lessons, or social interactions between students and adults. It has also increased social gaps between students who have computers connected to the web and those who do not (Andrew et al., 2020; Bol, 2020; Jaeger and Blaabaek, 2020). School leaders who were accustomed to operating in a stable organizational environment characterized by little uncertainty have found themselves in a situation in which they had to constantly adjust their school routines and processes (Grooms and Childs, 2021; Harris, 2020) based on government decisions, which in certain national contexts, such as the Israeli one, have changed rapidly and unexpectedly. Their ability to control and monitor teaching and learning that

has always been constrained due to the loose-coupled nature of school (Weick, 1976) has become even more limited. Rather than dealing with pedagogical considerations, the main concern of school leaders has become the safety and health of their students and educational staff (Weiner, Francois, Stone-Johnson and Childs, 2021) and the need to support them (Metcalf and Perez, 2020).

Since there was no way of knowing what the course of the pandemic would be, policy makers as well as school level educators have continuously experienced uncertainty undermining stability and planning for the future. These circumstances were new and unique for school leaders who have little training or experience they can rely on while leading their schools in these highly turbulent circumstances.

Hence, the purpose of the current study is to assess what courses of action school leaders have taken following the extreme uncertainty and turbulence caused by the pandemic. Specifically, it attempts to assess: (1) What were school leaders' preferred coping strategies while attempting to establish stability for their school communities, and (2) How do extreme conditions of uncertainty and turbulence influence the willingness of school leaders to conduct planning activities, which are change-oriented.

METHOD

Participants

This study is based on a qualitative analysis of eleven interviews conducted with eight elementary and three high school principals leading schools in the Israeli public educational system. Two principals lead schools in the Jewish religious stream, one in the Arab sector and eight in the Jewish secular stream. Three principals are male and eight are female. Ages ranged between 35 and 55.

Data Collection

Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Some of the interviews were conducted virtually through Zoom software while others were conducted over the phone. Interviews were chosen as the major data collection method to enable large amounts of data about interviewees' perspectives to be collected relatively quickly and the immediate follow-up and clarification of equivocal issues to be accomplished (Taylor et al., 2015). The interviews were conducted as "in depth," open conversations to "allow the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). At the beginning of each interview, school leaders were asked to talk about their daily reality during the pandemic and its impact on their thoughts and feelings. Towards the end of each interview, the researcher asked the interviewees two questions referring to the core issues of the current study:

- a) What measures did you take in order to maintain stability in your school; and
- b) Following your experiences during the pandemic, are you going to introduce changes in school plans for next year and, if so, what will be their nature?

The use of open-ended questions enabled better exposure of interviewees' personal perspectives, their deeper thoughts, emotions and ambitions (Marshall and Rossman, 2011; Patton, 2002; Rossman and Rallis, 2012). This semi-structured approach allowed the interviews to be much more like conversations than formal events with predetermined response categories, permitting the respondents' views to unfold, rather than the predisposition of the researcher (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). All interviews were transcribed onto text files, which eventually formed the data set.

Data Analysis

Based on the classification of various issues mentioned by the interviewees, a set of themes was identified (Luborsky, 1994). This stage was data-driven and not theory-driven to allow direct examination of the perspectives articulated by the interviewees (Flick, 2009; Marshall and Rossman, 2011; Rossman and Rallis, 2012). Using the perspective of Marshall and Rossman (2011), who see qualitative data analysis “as a search for general statements among categories of data” (p. 111), and the procedures outlined by Marton (1988) and Forster (1994), comments were brought together on the basis of their similarities into categories that differed from one another in terms of the subject matter and meaning that each category represented. This process allowed the generation of common themes and elucidation of the differences between the voices (Cohen et al., 2000; Merriam, 2009). To ensure interviewees' anonymity, pseudo names are used. For every theme, a few representative vignettes are presented.

Context

This study was conducted in the Israeli educational system, which in spite of various decentralization efforts introduced in the last decades maintains its centralized nature (Nir, 2006; Nir, Kondakci and Emil, 2017). To provide readers an idea of the inconsistency of governmental decisions and the turbulent atmosphere that school leaders encountered, the following is an overview of the main shifts in the national educational policy since the outbreak of the pandemic: First cases of COVID-19 were detected in Israel on March 13th, 2020. The government initiated a lockdown and all schools excluding kindergartens and special education institutions were closed. By the end of April, 1-3 and 11-12 grade students returned to schools for five days per week. Classes were divided and students studied in groups of 15. The rest of the students studied virtually from their homes. On May 11th, the Ministry of Education initiated new instructions which stated that starting on May 17th, 4-6 and 7-10 grade students would attend school once a week. During the rest of the week, they and all the others would study virtually. However, the Heads of the local authorities objected to this decision and declared that they were not going to open schools. On May 14th, the government decided that all students would return to schools. Following the high illness rate among students and teachers, many local authorities decided to close schools operating under their jurisdiction. At the beginning of July, the summer break began. All school principals received new instructions from the Ministry of Education specifying what preparations schools were required to make for the upcoming school year. A few days before the new school year began on September 1st, these regulations were replaced by new ones which specified that students in grades 1-2 would study in their original classrooms, while students in grades 3-4 and 11-12 would be divided into groups of 18 and would attend school three days a week. All the rest of the students would continue to study virtually. On September 25th, the government initiated a second lockdown and the schooling system, excluding special education institutions, was closed. On November 1st, 1-4 grade students returned to schools; 5-6 grade students returned to school on November 24th. Five days later, 10-12 grade students returned to school for two days a week, studying via Zoom the rest of the week. On December 6th all students returned to school. However, due to an increase of illness rate, the government initiated a third lockdown at the beginning of January 2021 and all schools were closed again. As I write these lines, the government decided to open all schools although the illness rate is mounting. It seems that this decision is mostly influenced by political considerations, as elections are due in March 23rd, for the fourth time in the last two years.

RESULTS

When school principals were asked to reflect about the outbreak of COVID-19 and its impact on their schools, uncertainty, frustration and shock were frequently mentioned:

"At the beginning it was a huge mess; it was unclear where we were heading" (Tamar).

"Confusion and vagueness were our starting point: What is happening? How can we transform classroom teaching to distance learning in a single day? For some of the teachers this change was like teaching a baby to walk" (Yusef).

"I experienced frustration as I actually lost control: It was impossible to fully understand what was going on. In practice, the traditional school ceased to exist" (Aya).

While COVID-19 was the main reason and source for the uncertainty school principals experienced, many considered the inconsistent regulations set by policy makers to be a main source for their daily instability and turbulence:

"I tried to create an island of sanity in these crazy and unstable circumstances; this was my main goal although no matter how hard I tried, every morning I woke up and found different regulations which created a different reality" (Einat).

"Consistency and planning were out of the question because every day we received new instructions which cancelled the previous ones" (Ronit).

"Uncertainty. Part of it I can understand because COVID-19 introduced a crisis that nobody had experienced in the past. However, it is more difficult for me to accept and cope with uncertainty which follows the malpractice of decision makers evident in contradictory instructions, and unreasonable expectations pointed towards school leaders" (Asaf).

Although public schools are often viewed as traditional and domesticated institutions, these newly created circumstances undermined their core routines and stability. The typical routines of schools became abruptly irrelevant while the inconsistent regulations initiated by policy makers increased rather than decreased their daily uncertainty.

Bridging over Stormy Water

The contextual turbulence following the outbreak of the pandemic on the one hand and the need to maintain schools' organizational stability on the other hand represent two opposing forces. What measures and strategies did school leaders employ in order to maintain organizational stability and promote clarity for students, teachers and parents?

The analysis of interview data shows that school leaders tended to focus their efforts on three core domains while attempting to promote their schools' stability.

Changing school priorities

In the circumstances that followed the outbreak of COVID-19 it was clear to all school leaders that the safety and health of teachers and students should be their first priority and that pedagogical considerations should come second:

"We no longer map students' achievements and we place less emphasis on teaching" (Lidor).

"Health is above all. Pedagogy can wait" (Aya).

"We changed our priorities. In teachers' meetings we don't discuss teaching, rather teachers' feelings and how we can better cope with this crazy situation" (Mira).

"Our school's priorities completely changed. Pedagogy is left behind. Most our efforts are dedicated to maintain and promote teachers' and students' wellbeing" (Asaf).

Promoting individual wellbeing is a notion shared by all school principals. In some schools, this led to the development of humoristic slogans intended to allow better coping with the situation, as Yusef describes:

"Our students came up with a new slogan which replaced the motto of our school: We cannot control the situation but we can control our mood."

In spite of the complicated, troubling and unstable situation, pedagogy was not totally neglected, as Ronit explains:

"Although the Ministry of Education changes its instructions on a daily basis, we decided to focus teaching on two core issues: language skills and mathematics. All the rest can wait. We are aware that the current situation leads to significant pedagogical discrepancies, but at the moment, there is little we can do about it."

Aya emphasizes:

"Very quickly I realized that we need to change our priorities. First, we need to take care of individual wellbeing, make sure that all students have computers and the basic conditions required to participate in hybrid lessons. I instructed teachers to talk with students about their anxieties and to calm them as much as possible. When things began to stabilize, we began to teach mostly Hebrew, English and mathematics."

Nevertheless, pedagogical emphasis and efforts were mostly placed on students in higher grades:

"Our main concern is to prepare sixth-grade students for their transition to the junior high school. We try to teach them the relevant curriculum so that the transition from elementary school to the junior high school will be smooth as much as possible" (Mira).

Managerial orientation

All school leaders share the notion that it is impossible to maintain their typical leadership patterns in the newly created circumstances. All of them introduced various changes in their managerial orientation and focus which are evident, in particular, in four areas:

- a) *Emphasis on stress and pressure reduction:* The uncertainty brought about by the pandemic created a lot of stress for teachers, students and parents. Stress followed

fear from the Corona virus and the difficulty to predict what would happen next. Therefore, reducing stress became a top priority and a main goal for school leaders even at the expense of pedagogical assignments and academic achievements:

"Initially, we mapped our teachers' personal circumstances to better understand who can come to school and who must stay at home with his own children. Next, we told the teachers not to worry about meeting curricular goals since it was clear to us that teaching cannot be effective. This message enabled us to reduce pressure" (Lidor).

"I followed my own logic and told the teachers to do what seemed to be reasonable at the time. My professional experience taught me that my main contribution would be in reducing the stress which was already high" (Sara).

- b) *Decreasing centralized management:* A second shift in school leaders' managerial orientation is evident in their tendency to become less centralized. The distance teaching that teachers conducted from their homes and leaders' difficulty to monitor the lessons encouraged leadership patterns that increase teachers' empowerment, autonomy and collaboration.

"After a while, I realized that I must loosen my control. Although I tend to be very dominant, I learned to become more flexible, and allow teachers more freedom within the boundaries I defined" (Dan).

"I am less centralized and more collaborative: I share everything with my teachers. This allows teachers to become more involved" (Yusef).

"I set some basic guidelines which allow teachers a lot of freedom and individual discretion. Teachers know what they are expected to do but each one may decide what, how and when to act" (Lidor).

Sara summarizes:

"My control is limited. It is difficult to monitor teachers' lessons. I don't know how much time is dedicated to learning and what is the nature of interactions between teachers and students. I must trust my teachers. I have no other option."

- c) *Support, concern and criticism-free discourse:* A third expression of leaders' changed orientation is evident in their attitude towards teachers and typical discourse. Since the newly created circumstances demanded fundamental changes in teachers' teaching and interaction with students and parents, which in turn contributed to teachers' stress, school leaders realized they needed to support their teachers and encourage them:

"My most important assignment was to support my teachers. They also support each other and I am there for them to assist in any difficulty they encounter" (Sara).

"I constantly send the teachers messages that they are wonderful and that I completely trust them" (Ronit).

Asaf emphasizes:

"Now is not the time for criticism. My main concern is to establish stability and support my teachers. I try to speak with every teacher at least once a week and ask how she is doing, and how I can help. Teachers' wellbeing is our most significant asset."

- d) *Communication*: The ambiguity and uncertainty which followed the pandemic created a lot of stress. Avoiding rumors and establishing a clear and reliable source of information for teachers, students and parents were among school leaders' main actions while attempting to reduce stress and promote school stability:

"There was constantly a lot of false or contradictory information that came from various sources: the media, the Ministry, parents, teachers' unions....So I informed the teachers that they should only refer to information coming from me – all the rest they should ignore" (Aya).

"I scheduled and planned ahead Zoom meetings with parents so that I would be able to provide the most updated information and avoid misinformation as much as possible" (Mira).

Yusef described the systematic measures he initiated to reduce stress through reliable communication:

"Transparency of information was the first step: We shared our dilemmas with students and parents. Next, we focused on personal contacts between teachers, students and parents. In many lessons, teachers encouraged students to talk and share their fears and even practiced various relaxation techniques."

A critical element in establishing stability and reliable communication is transparency. All principals emphasized that sharing all information with teachers, students and parents is key for stability:

"We experienced a lot of instability. The key for success was open and direct communication with everyone" (Einat).

"Teachers who succeeded to create stability in their classroom were those who created and maintained open communication channels with students and parents" (Lidor).

"Transparency was critical: I made sure that all information is shared with parents and that they see the big picture. We created a communication channel, which enabled everyone to ask questions or share information. I realized that the greater the transparency, the higher individual involvement and willingness to assist" (Yusef).

Future orientation

Unlike other planned change initiatives, which often promote the resistance of school level educators, the pandemic created circumstances that school level educators could not ignore. Therefore, various stakeholders consider the pandemic a significant catalyst for educational innovation and change. Such expectations require educators to introduce significant modifications in their teaching and coping strategies that may set a foundation for new organizational and instructional routines.

The perception of the pandemic as an opportunity for change and innovation was also expressed by school leaders:

"The pandemic throw everyone into the water. We had no choice but to adapt. The classroom door is breached now and parents are exposed to everything that takes place during lessons. These circumstances help me to advance various ideas. Even veteran teachers who are accustomed to resisting any change initiative realize they must be cooperative" (Mira).

"The continuation of the circumstances which followed the pandemic is an opportunity for change" (Asaf).

However, when asked to what extent the pandemic is likely to change their school's plans and promote changes, they all assessed that schools would return to their typical modes of operation that existed before the pandemic:

"Teachers, students and parents are all longing to return to our typical routine. Although the pandemic is an historical event, the organizational behavior of schools is not likely to change dramatically. Schools will look the same before and after the pandemic" (Sara).

"Teachers are used to certain routines that are hard to break. They want to maintain these routines because they are familiar with them and familiarity decreases uncertainty and stress" (Ronit).

"I have no doubt: previous organizational patterns will prevail regardless of the impact of the pandemic" (Lidor).

All school leaders shared the notion that future changes are likely to be minor as a result of the system's impositions or because of educators' past habits:

"The basic structure and patterns of schools will not change. We might consider some minor changes: we might cancel the ringing of the bell to indicate when lessons begin or end; we may conduct some of the teachers' meetings via Zoom software, and maybe a little bit more autonomy and flexibility will be granted to teachers. We are nostalgic and, therefore, want to return to our previous habits. The Ministry is conservative and will also encourage schools to reconstruct organizational patterns which existed before the pandemic" (Dan).

"After the pandemic is over, I assume parental involvement in school will increase. We will not be able to return to previous patterns of involvement" (Yusef).

"The only changes will be those we already began to introduce before the pandemic. I hope that now teachers will be more collaborative. I don't think we can totally abandon previous routines and habits" (Aya).

"I am not sure that the Ministry will allow us to perform major changes. For example, I don't believe they will abandon matriculation exams" (Asaf).

Tamar says sadly:

"Teachers' unions have a significant impact on the educational system. I don't

believe they will allow significant alterations to the routines that have traditionally dictated the schooling system."

Hence, it appears that in spite of the pandemic and its dramatic impact on school routines and typical organizational patterns, school leaders predict the pandemic will only lead to minor changes and will not have a significant effect on their school plans.

DISCUSSION

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic introduced uncertainty and instability to an extent that public schools never encountered in the last decades. This dramatic occurrence undermined their typical routines, while introducing intensive stress among principals, teachers, students and parents. Our findings indicate that after an initial shock, school leaders dedicated their efforts to create an island of stability in an ocean of turbulence for their school community.

The tendency to promote stability encouraged school leaders to change school priorities and place more emphasis on the wellbeing of teachers and students than on academic achievements. They dedicated efforts to decrease teachers' stress and shifted control patterns from centralized to collaborative ones, granting extended autonomy to teachers. They increased the concern and support they provided teachers and created open communication channels. Although many school leaders indicated they consider the pandemic an opportunity for change, all of them agreed that it would not dramatically change schools. Rather, they anticipated that most future changes would be minor. They all shared the view that it is more likely that schools would return to their traditional routines and modes of operation after the pandemic is over.

This orientation, which follows the drastic turbulence, instability and uncertainty educators have experienced in the last year, seems to limit change-oriented planning and foster stability-oriented measures. Practically, this orientation leads to rigid thinking, to unwillingness to alter existing routines and, therefore, is likely to undermine change-oriented planning. Although the pandemic created an opportunity for change, the extreme conditions that followed its onset have encouraged educational leaders to stick to the routines and typical modes of operation that have traditionally characterized schools.

Although the Structural Contingency Theory views routines as a source of both stability and change (Farjoun, 2010; Feldman, 2000; van der Steen, 2011), arguing that organizations need to adjust internal characteristics to the external environment (Gordon et al., 2000; Pennings, 1992), our findings reinforce an opposite perspective. It appears that under extreme turbulence and uncertainty, school leaders tend to act according to the Structural Inertia Theory (Hannan and Freeman, 1977, 1984), arguing that any change in organizational structural is likely to generate internal turbulence, which in turn adds to the negative effect of the external turbulence. They strive, consequently, to promote schools' internal stability by preserving their traditional routines and modes of operation and by limiting planning activities that are change-oriented.

It appears, as a result, that in order to shift from preservation-oriented to change-oriented planning, turbulence, instability and uncertainty should not be extreme if school leaders are to adopt different planning assumptions and plan for innovation. Extreme turbulence is likely to encourage school leaders to prefer conservative modes of operation and maintain schools' traditional routines. Hence, limited changes in instruction and other core educational issues are likely to occur.

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THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 IN NIGERIA: STRATEGIC PLANNING TO MITIGATE ITS EFFECTS ON VERY YOUNG CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

The authors of this article identify the status of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria and propose the use of a classic strategic planning paradigm to mitigate its spread until it may be completely arrested. Vaccines have been developed to combat the disease which current evidence suggests is spread by respiratory droplets among people who are in close contact with each other (WHO, 2020). But this presumed mode of transmission has led to concerns in the scientific and medical communities about the disastrous effects the virus may have on the African continent which has historically lagged the rest of the world in the delivery of quality health care especially for some of the most vulnerable populations like children under 5 years of age. This article provides information regarding the contemporary health care situation in Nigeria for such vulnerable populations, analyzes the current impact of COVID-19, and recommends a successful strategic planning paradigm to address similar catastrophic health experiences in the future.

A STRATEGIC PLANNING PARADIGM

The authors of this article recognize that there are numerous theories and pragmatic examples of effective strategic planning processes that have been employed in social institutions and organizations (Bryson, 2018; Chambers and Taylor, 2020; Kauffman, Herman, and Waters, 2002). However, they believe that a seminal theoretical strategic planning procedure for Nigerian leaders to employ is the approach initially articulated by Edward Krug, subsequently, referred to as “Krug’s 4 Cs” for effective planning (Polka, 2007). This approach recognizes that there are four key organizational change concepts that must be addressed when developing strategic plans. These Four Cs are: Cooperativeness, Comprehensiveness, Continuousness, and Concreteness.

Each of those four-strategic planning theoretical framework components are further described and analyzed below in terms of their respective application to the Nigerian COVID-19 health care crisis to provide a pragmatic planning paradigm to assist government policymakers, local state officials, health-care authorities, and educational administrators abate the impact of current and future pandemics.

Cooperativeness

This factor is a key component of strategic planning to effectively manage catastrophes, whether natural or man-made, since it is predicated on the established principle that policies and procedures designed to improve an organization’s or institution’s performance are best developed using an inclusive collaborative process that reflects a shared-decision making consensus with input from a variety of perspectives involving as many diverse stakeholder constituencies and key actors as possible (Allison and Kaye, 2005; Chambers and Taylor, 2020; Dobbs and Dobbs, 2015). Planning for potential catastrophes must not be limited to a single authoritative lens or oligopolist views

that limit policy perceptions and tactical options in developing, implementing, and evaluating opportunities to address the various dimensions of the threat to all citizens (Chatman and Barsade 1995; Rank and Tuschke, 2014).

The application of this strategic planning component in the present Nigerian context requires that Federal government authorities cooperatively coordinate the policy directives and tactical procedures with the state government authorities in each of Nigeria's 36 states. Leaders of government agencies at all levels must work collaboratively with the leaders from health care, education, social services, security, and the various distinct communities including religious sects to develop, implement, and evaluate action plans to address the survival needs of the most vulnerable populations of the country first.

Comprehensiveness

This factor is a key component of strategic planning since it is predicated on the well-researched need to develop policies and procedures that reflect various real and potential intervening variables (people, things, and ideas) that impact or could impact major organizational changes in both the short-term and long-term (Burke, 2018; Carmeli, Friedman and Tishler, 2013; Miller, 2008; Thomas and Abrosini, 2015).

The application of this comprehensiveness strategic planning component in the cotemporary Nigerian context requires that government authorities recognize the inter-relationships between providing adequate health care and health education to all citizens not only during pandemic situations but as a focused policy to improve health care opportunities during those periods of somewhat stable equilibrium. Leaders of government agencies at all levels must develop strategic policies and tactical procedures that reflect a vision for improvement in the ongoing health care experiences as well as planning for the unexpected pandemic experiences like COVID-19. The supply chain for the delivery of health education and related health care services including items such as vaccines and personal protective equipment (PPEs) must be further analyzed and refined to eliminate gaps in delivery and shortages in supply. There must be an emphasized fidelity to appropriate and consistent surveillance and security to guarantee that the most vulnerable populations are provided the services and health care items they need.

Continuousness

This component is predicated on the need to constantly monitor and adjust the strategic plan and its tactical applications based on new context changes by analyzing the effectiveness of the current plan and updating it accordingly (Chang, 2005; Fernandez, S., and Rainey, H., 2017; Karorsa, and Polka, 2016).

The application of this continuousness strategic planning component in the current Nigerian context requires that government officials, health authorities, and educational leaders recognize that change is inevitable and will occur in all societies and organizations either slowly or rapidly via punctuated equilibrium experiences (Amri and Drummond, 2020). Leaders must always be "scanning the current environment" using SWOT analysis assessing their organization's respective current strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to survival (Phal and Richter, 2015). They should also employ the Four Ps of thinking strategically as articulated by Githens in 2019 to assess the sustainability and potential outcomes of their current plans including: possible future (may it happen?); plausible future (could it happen?); probable future (what is the chance of it happening?); and preferred future (what do we want to happen?).

Concreteness

This is a key component of strategic planning since it is based on the need to develop policies and procedures that provide specific examples or tangible artifacts related to applying and further reinforcing the values associated with planned changes and actions (Belu, 2019; Feldman, 2000; Jarzabkowski, 2004).

The application of this component in the contemporary Nigerian context requires that central government authorities coordinate specific policy directives and tactical procedures with the state government officials in each of Nigeria's 36 states using "real world" examples and multiple communication means. Leaders of government agencies at all levels must work with the leaders from health care, education, social services, security, and the various distinct communities including religious sects to develop, implement, and evaluate tangible actions that are understandable by the respective various constituencies in the local context (Harrison, 2021).

These tangible actions include key personal safety health care edicts but with the safety rationale clearly articulated like: mask wearing, social distancing, limitations on social and family gatherings and other such restrictions designed to control the spread of the infection. The policies and enforcement procedures must also be consistently applied to all populations segments so that there is fairness and equity to reinforce trust in the Federal, state, and local government authorities.

However, as the different states and regions deal with such pandemic issues there will be variations in the designations of areas in terms of the infection rates. Nigerian policies and procedures to restrict individual and group mobility and interactions should include specific designations that are clearly explained with practical examples such as those color-coded designations currently used in other countries during this 2020-21 COVID-19 pandemic. It is also imperative that government, health, education, social service, religious, and community officials communicate with their constituents, regularly and comprehensively, by providing details about the degree and intensity of infection rates. Also, they must enthusiastically support and model the procedures to arrest its spread. Leaders in all organizations and institutions need to remember that adage, 'It's important what you say that others should do...but, as leaders, it's more important that you also do what you say'! Leaders need to remember that their followers are always watching them for that congruence between what it said and what is really demonstrated as important via the leader's behaviors.

THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE WITH COVID-19

When the COVID-19 virus struck in early 2020, many predictions were made by scientists and political figures in advanced nations about how catastrophic its effects would be on the continent of Africa and how ill-prepared most African countries were for effective response.

However, the virus lingered in Europe and America before it started showing up in Africa, thus, providing an opportunity for African and international policy makers to take decisive action to minimize its initial impact. When it eventually appeared in Africa, there were some fatalities, however, the expected catastrophe never occurred. Instead, the pandemic reached an initial peak and then plateaued. Ironically, the COVID-19 mortality in Africa has been much lower than that of more advanced countries with better healthcare systems and infrastructure.

On March 11, 2020, the World Health organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic (Cucinotta andVanelli, 2020) and even today, the unanswered questions circulating within scientific and medical communities are:

What are African countries doing right? Are the unexplainable low numbers in many African countries due to “herd immunity”, asymptomatic populations, lower population mean age or simply a lack of testing?

Indeed, what has kept the death toll on the continent of Africa much lower than what has been recorded in the rest of the world so far? More importantly, how has this impacted the already challenging issue of infant and maternal mortality in Nigeria?

Some of the following explanations were offered by Professor Christian Happi (2020), Director of the African Centre of Excellence for Genomics of Infectious Diseases (ACEGID) at Ede, southeastern Nigeria, (Dewast, 2020):

- “A lot of the models drawn at the onset of the pandemic, all got it wrong”.
 - “It is very wrong to assume models based on knowledge that are not accurate or on assumptions that are dependent on data obtained from Europe or the U.S. and transpose it to a continent like Africa; we are genetically different; we are immunologically different”.
- (Dewast, 2020, paras. 19-22).

Recent reports however are showing that infection rates and deaths are slowly rising again in some African countries (Lawal, 2021).

Lawal (2021) highlights how the median ages and life expectancies in most African countries are lower than those in other parts of the world because of less advanced healthcare systems, and continuous issues with communicable and non-communicable diseases. However, Western and other developed nations also have predominantly older populations. He concludes that the disparity is likely a result of the high birth rates in less-developed African countries, naturally resulting in predominantly young populations across the continent who may be more resistant to the pandemic virus. The more advanced healthcare systems in developed nations, on the other hand, enables their citizens to live longer, thus, creating predominantly older population who are more susceptible to the disease (Lawal, 2021).

THE HISTORICAL NIGERIAN HEALTH CARE PROBLEM

Infant Mortality Rates (IMRs) are indicators of a nation's health status and well-being and, sadly, this public health issue has been and is still a major cause for concern in Nigeria. Despite numerous attempts and interventions put in place to combat it, no significant progress has been made in this area to date (Adelakun, 2020). The problem has become more prevalent due to lack of access to healthcare before, during, and after childbirth. IMR is estimated to cause 69.8 deaths per 1000 live births or 1 in every fifteen Nigerian children dying before reaching the age of one. This is approximately 21 times the average rate in developed nations (World Population Review, 2019).

Combined with the overall weak healthcare system, COVID-19 is causing major disruptions in health care delivery and is straining human and financial resources. The country lockdowns are causing a decline in visits to healthcare centres as pre-natal and post-natal mothers are fearful of exposure to the virus. Nigeria also has an expansive informal sector in which micro and small-scale retailers depend on daily wages. Therefore, lockdowns are difficult to institute and monitor as evidenced by the government's inability to enforce social distancing, wearing of protective equipment, and shelter in place orders.

In 2017, the World Health Organization conducted a Joint External Evaluation (JEE) of International Health Regulations (IHR) to assess the capacity of countries to prevent, detect, and actively respond to public health risks. Not surprisingly, Nigeria's performance in the prevention and response categories was very poor (Dixit et al., 2020). In the prevention category, results indicated that the country had very limited capacity to prevent biological, chemical, or radiation health risks and in the response category, it had a limited capacity to respond to a sudden health risk such as the coronavirus. In the detection category, however, results indicated that the country can detect new health risks via real time surveillance and also has laboratory capabilities to test for the disease (Dixit et al., 2020). There is a growing commitment by Nigerian policymakers to address gaps in the healthcare system, and a need to strengthen evidence-based planning for resource allocation and utilization particularly during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. Punctuated equilibrium, as articulated by Baumgartner and Jones, identifies those social systems are stable over long periods of time, however, they are occasionally "punctuated" with unanticipated rapid periods of change (Amri and Drummond, 2020).

Implementing a strategic planning process such as the one suggested by the authors will help mitigate the effects of future punctuated equilibrium experiences as evidenced by a similar successful approach employed by the Nigerian government during the Ebola epidemic of 2014.

THE NIGERIAN COVID-19 REALITY

By July 2020, the number of COVID-19 cases in sub-Saharan Africa was steadily climbing, Nigeria however had not faced the high increase in case numbers and deaths from the novel coronavirus. According to the director of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, Chikwe Ihekweazu (2020) only 33,000 cases and just under 750 deaths among its over 200 million citizens had been recorded. He also admitted that testing was not carried out regularly because implementing testing and control measures across the diverse nation of 36 states would be challenging, therefore, the true toll was likely to be much higher (Vrieze, 2020). Furthermore, Nigeria has a history of disease outbreaks and a reputation for concealing or under-reporting data due to political, socioeconomic, or health system factors.

Using the punctuated-equilibrium theory as a basis, COVID-19 highlighted that inadequately addressed antecedent policy problems such as evidenced in the weak healthcare systems in Nigeria will worsen the impact of crises, ultimately making overall policy responses more difficult. The pandemic also revealed that when the need arises, policymakers can move very quickly to effect change and where there is political will and focused corrective planning, problems of this magnitude can be addressed very quickly.

Eventually, the COVID-19 pandemic will undoubtedly increase mortality rates not only directly due to its devastating effects on health alone, but it will also likely increase mortality rates indirectly. In a society like Nigeria with limited health care, the virus will compound the problems for those who have little or no access to basic health care services.

COVID-19 IMPACT ON INFANT AND CHILD MORTALITY RATES

According to the World Health Organization, the interruption of services that normally support mothers with breastfeeding has been tremendous around the world (United Nations, 2020). Health services that would normally provide maternal child health have in many cases been diverted to support COVID response, leaving families uncomfortable with the notion of going into healthcare

facilities for fear of contracting COVID (United Nations, 2020). Infection prevention measures, such as physical distancing are extremely difficult to enforce and community counselling and mother-to-mother support services have dwindled, thus, creating diminishing confidence in breastfeeding and an opportunity for the breast-milk substitute industry to take advantage of the crisis. As the COVID-19 pandemic progresses, healthcare systems are taxed, and the already insufficient number of health care workers are being diverted to respond to issues related to the pandemic. Under these circumstances breastfeeding can provide the key natural protection to the lives of millions of children but to achieve this new mother need the support of health care providers to influence prenatal attitudes and post-birth breastfeeding plans.

Lack of trust in the system and increased reluctance of women to use healthcare facilities results in lower coverage of antenatal care for mothers. And lockdowns, curfews, and transportation disruptions continue to impact individual mobility. Also, many Nigerians believe that the virus does not exist, or if it does exist, it only afflicts the elite as there is no evidence of everyday people contracting or dying from the illness. This mistrust of government officials and health care personnel continues to complicate efforts to curb the spread of the disease in Nigeria.

Njoku (2020), reported that an analysis by researchers from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, predicted the potential impact of COVID-19 on infant and maternal mortality in 118 countries, including Nigeria. They projected that in Nigeria, deaths of up to 173,000 children under the age of five could occur within six months due to reduced routine healthcare services coverage, particularly vaccinations. These estimated deaths would be in addition to approximately 475,200 children who already die of other causes before their fifth birthday at the same timeframe. Therefore, the slow but steady progress Nigeria is making to end preventable under-five child mortality would be reversed by this COVID-19 punctuation.

According to Ijeoma Onuoha-Ogwe of UNICEF (2020), before the pandemic, 70 percent of Nigerian infants were not being breastfed resulting in them missing out on potentially lifesaving protection provided by exclusive breastfeeding. Today, misinformation about COVID-19 and groundless fears of transmission through breastmilk is discouraging mothers from breastfeeding their children. This is a major concern as it impedes recommended exclusive breastfeeding and its early initiation after birth causing children to miss out on colostrum, also known as the first natural vaccine.

There are also indirect effects on mortality which can occur because of disruption of maternal and child health services. COVID-19 has disrupted the global pharmaceutical and medical supply chain worldwide. The lack of infrastructure to produce vaccines in Nigeria and the country's low buying power prove to be a disadvantage in ensuring that the supply chain is steady (Robertson et al., 2020, p. E901-E908). Due to this economic reality and the already broken healthcare system, increased infant, early childhood, and maternal deaths are inevitable particularly in hard-to-reach remote areas of this country.

Immunization in the Fight to Reduce Infant Mortality

The Pre-COVID-19 assessing levels of infant mortality in Nigeria was complex because it required actual knowledge about infant deaths (Adelakun, 2020). Many births and deaths are not recorded particularly in semi-rural and rural areas with few people registering the cause of death of an infant often due to illiteracy and rigid cultural norms. The lack of information about these deaths compounds the government's actions to take required steps and develop plans to deal with the mortality rates in this most vulnerable population.

Vaccines are the most effective preventive health measures in reducing this issue, and the introduction of vaccines for routine use on infants and high immunization coverage particularly in many high-and middle-income countries has resulted in drastic reductions in vaccine-preventable diseases (Omer et al., 2009). Omer et al assert that the expanded program on immunization (EPI) in these countries prevented more than 2 million child deaths from communicable diseases each year since its initiation in 1974. They highlight how the government policies of the United States and interventions, like the immunization requirements for school entry, have contributed to high vaccine coverage, low levels of vaccine-preventable diseases, and herd immunity induced by high vaccination rates.

This presents added challenges to the situation in Nigeria during this pandemic.

In an article by the World Economic Forum (2020), reference is made to 2019 data which showed there were already 14 million 'zero-dose' children who had missed out on vaccines entirely. They identified a number of middle and low-income countries including Nigeria which have been impacted by COVID-19, thus creating a range of new vulnerabilities (Fleming, 2020).

Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General asserts: the greatest threat to progress in combating vaccine preventable diseases, is disruption to immunization programmes from the COVID-19 pandemic (Fleming, 2020). Now more than ever, it is more of a priority to reduce unnecessary strain on a struggling health system.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM NIGERIA'S SUCCESS QUASHING AN EBOLA OUTBREAK

As the world languishes in the throes of the pandemic, the spread of the disease remains much slower in Africa than it is in Europe and North America. Nigeria has survived a number of epidemics in the past and the World Health Organization (WHO) described the country's success in avoiding 2014 Ebola epidemic as "a piece of world-class epidemiological detective work" (Courage, 2014). In Lagos, with a population of over 20 million, success and the arrest of the spread of Ebola was attributed to the vigorous and rapid public health response from the State Government and a vigilant medical doctor, Ameyo Adadevoh who isolated the index patient very quickly. Unfortunately, she lost her life to the disease, forcing the country to immediately put the following procedures in place:

- Fast and thorough tracing of all potential contacts
- Ongoing monitoring of all these contacts
- Rapid isolation of potentially infectious contacts (Courage, 2014)

However, even with some notable successes, Nigeria's public health authorities often cover up or respond slowly to outbreaks because of the high-cost implications ultimately causing unnecessary loss of lives.

CURRENT SITUATION IN NIGERIA

On March 2, 2021, through a partnership between CEPI, Gavi, UNICEF, and WHO, in efforts to ensure equitable distribution of at least 2 billion doses of the vaccine globally by the end of 2021, Nigeria received 3.9 million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine. This AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine is the first of many more deliveries expected (Warigon, 2021). The plan was to enable the National Primary Health Care Development Agency (NPHCDA) to commence the vaccination of Nigerians

in priority groups, starting with frontline health care workers. Sadly, the initial limited supplies of COVID-19 vaccines opened opportunities for theft, embezzlement, and diversion like the issues encountered in 2018 where over one thousand people died of meningitis, because officials stole vaccines destined for affected communities (United Nations, 2020).

Unfortunately, Nigeria's reputation as a corrupt nation has led organizations such as Pfizer to carry out background checks on everyone involved in the process of transporting and providing security for vaccines. The challenge with COVID-19 vaccines, however, continues to be surveillance during distribution, because the Nigerian governance model for medication allocation and the general security systems are weak (United Nations, 2020).

Corruption risks in the COVID-19 vaccine distribution are not just a governance challenge, they are a direct threat to public health. Any corruption scandal will inevitably shake public trust in the vaccine, which can lead to low usage (Cuadrado, 2020). Already, there are allegations of racketeering at vaccine centres in Lagos, Nigeria with accusations of the Federal government not fulfilling its promise to deploy, "Vaccine Accountability Officers" to centres to ensure accountability. Staff at some centres are allegedly collecting bribes from foreigners who can afford to pay and get in front of the line, leaving a majority of the neediest, to be turned away when the maximum daily numbers have been reached.

SUMMARY OF COVID-19 IMPACT

Even though Africa is still behind the COVID-Infection and Death Rate Curve, nothing can be taken for granted and governments need to plan for another unpredictable future infectious disease punctuation. There is still a possibility that in the coming months, millions of Africans may become infected with COVID-19. Imperial College London Researchers recently estimated that the virus could kill 300,000 people in Sub-Saharan Africa alone, resulting in extensive economic cost and severed supply chains (Oqubay, 2020). To date, Johns Hopkins reports 2020 COVID-19 data as follows: 147,899 deaths and 161,737 recovered cases in Nigeria (Johns Hopkins University and Medicine, 2021).

The pandemic has not only exposed Nigeria's inefficient health policy, but it has also exposed many other areas of neglect, for which the country is grossly underprepared. Applying the punctuated equilibrium theory to the COVID-19 crisis, important lessons about proper crisis management, strategic planning, and long-term solutions can be learned by policymakers. Short-sighted, temporary solutions clearly do not work. It is important that policy reforms resulting from the COVID-19 crises are wisely crafted. It remains to be seen if future health policies in Nigeria will be based on the harsh lessons learned through COVID-19 to mitigate risks from further crises. The choices which the Nigerian government makes in responding to this pandemic will directly affect health and the livelihoods of its people, it is, therefore, crucial to focus on reducing the effects of disruptions in its health care system and to plan accordingly using best planning processes and procedures.

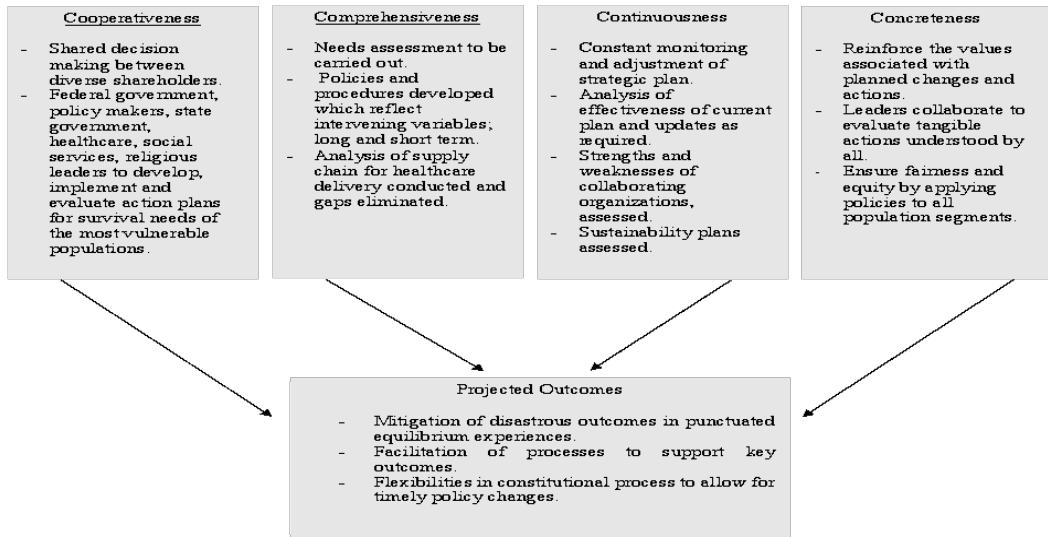
Presented below is a strategic planning paradigm, based on Krug's Four C Approach, that should be employed in Nigeria to help mitigate the impact of COVID-19 and future punctuated equilibrium experiences. See Figure 1 below.

CONCLUSION

The authors of this article believe that key policymakers, administrators, community leaders, and others involved in addressing the health, educational, and economic issues associated with the current pandemic should employ the basics of Krug’s Four Cs: Cooperativeness, Comprehensiveness, Continuousness, and Concreteness.

Figure 1

Strategic Planning Paradigm for COVID-19 Abatement in Nigeria Based on Krug’s Four C Approach



Continuousness, and Concreteness in their strategic planning. The consequences of not doing so are deleteriously illustrated in this article by the Nigerian history and current health status, especially the statistics related to those most vulnerable citizens, children under five years old and their mothers.

LIMITATIONS

Locating published material pertaining the impact of COVID-19 on infant and maternal health in Nigeria was challenging, more data is required to show the full extent of the impact of COVID-19 on women and children, essential reproductive, maternal, and neonatal health services. With more data, better conclusions can be arrived at, and more specific and practical policy recommendations can be made to improve the current situation.

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PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE IN THE ERA OF NEW-NORMAL: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected the whole world, has caused great changes in social, cultural and economic life. All sectors had to adapt to the new conditions called new-normal. Schools were also completely or partially closed during this period. Education services have begun to be provided at all levels with distance education tools. Practicum, an important component of teacher education, has also been moved to the digital environment. This study aims to delve into the experiences of preservice teachers who took the practicum course online during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was designed as phenomenological research and the data were collected through in-depth interviews with 13 preservice teachers. The phenomenological analysis yielded three themes in explaining participants' experiences of online practicum: adaptational gaps, fruitful challenges and realization of potential improvements. Implications of the findings with regard to planning of practicum process considering the next-normal were shared.

INTRODUCTION

Announced as a pandemic in March, 2020 (WHO, 2020), COVID-19 spread the whole world except for a few island countries in a short time. The pandemic imposed certain restrictions and hence regulation of a different lifestyle has emerged all over the world. This was named as new-normal. Unfortunately, schools have been closed as part of these restrictions over 180 countries. 1.64 billion students around the world have been affected by school closures (UNESCO, 2021). The number of days schools were closed varied depending on the quality of distance education and class levels. Yet, according to the OECD Report, (OECD, 2021) schools were closed for an average of 60 days across all education levels. In Turkey, however, the duration of school closure exceeded 100 days, going well beyond the reported average. School closure resulted in academic, social and economic side effects at a global level. According to the human capital index, for instance, students are expected to experience a learning loss of 0.3 to 0.9 years. Furthermore, it is predicted that approximately 6.8 million students will drop out of schools, leading to an increase of 2% in out-of-school population (TEDMEM, 2020). Finally, the World Bank estimates the impact of school closures on the economy to be around \$10 trillion (UNICEF, 2021). In order to mitigate the impact of all these negative effects, each country took certain measures to manage the crisis

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Detection of the first case on March 11, 2020, led to the suspension of face-to-face instruction at all school levels in Turkey. Education at K-12 levels continued synchronously and asynchronously via Education Information Network (MoNE, 2020a). In higher education institutions, programs moved to the digital platforms and theoretical courses continued with online tools for synchronous and asynchronous teaching. For the applied courses, Higher Education Council (HEC) approved the intensification of the lessons with evaluations through assignments, projects or any other assessment tools deemed appropriate (MoNE, 2020a; HEC, 2020a; HEC, 2020b). As a result of the consultations between HEC and Ministry of National Education (MoNE), it was decided to continue preservice

teachers' practicum experiences on digital environments. Against this background, this study aimed to delve into preservice teachers' experiences with online practicum courses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Wide-scale health epidemics such as the Black Death (1350), Cholera (1817), Spanish Flu (1918), HIV/AIDS (1981) resulted into social epidemics. In the wake of AIDS/HIV crisis, Philip Strong (1990) has written about epidemic psychology. Strong (1990, p. 250) argues that the early response to deadly epidemics with large, unexpected, or particularly devastating consequences produces a peculiar psycho-social form, and he calls this epidemic psychology. He mentions three consecutive and overlapping stages describing this psycho-social form: fear, explanation and action. This model also provides a useful tool to talk about the state of education services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Opening or closing the schools creates a fear on stakeholders in that there is infection risk when schools kept open or learning loss when closed. In the second stage, policymakers make decisions on the basis of recommendations from the health boards and provide explanations to justify their decisions. Finally, in the third stage, there comes the act of school closure. This unexpected and unprepared situation has pushed educational institutions to develop new alternatives to continue education services.

The search for alternatives is not new in epidemics. For example, the first open-air school movement, isolated from the city, started in Berlin in 1904 during the tuberculosis epidemic (Pruitt, 2020). Similarly, with the closure of schools in the COVID-19 pandemic, education services were provided in different ways. Alternatives such as distance, hybrid or small-size face-to-face education have been used in different countries depending on, for instance, intensity of COVID-19 cases, the age and needs of students, access to technological tools and human resources. During the first period of the epidemic, many countries also implemented measures such as suspending extracurricular activities, extending the holiday periods, and allowing students to return to classes gradually, for example, by age group. Strategies such as organizing students in shifts (alternating), combining face-to-face and distance learning were more widely adopted at K12 level (OECD, 2021). However, due to the fact that the epidemic lasted longer than expected and there was no hybrid or face-to-face education opportunity, especially for higher education, internet-based applications were used together with traditional communication tools such as television and radio in the distance education process both in the world and in Turkey (UNESCO, 2020).

Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT)

The first obvious alternative among the options was distance education which did not require students and teachers to be located in the same physical space. The necessity of maintaining social distance as well as accumulated experience and familiarity gained over the years at higher education (see Falvo and Johnson, 2007) contributed to the adoption of distance education by many institutions. Experts in the field of educational technology have defined many concepts such as online learning, e-learning, m-learning, distributed learning, blended learning or homeschooling under the concept of distance education. However, education services provided in distance during the pandemic can be better described as 'emergency remote teaching' (ERT) (Murphy, 2020, p.492). This is because distance education is an optional, planned activity based on theoretical and practical knowledge that aims to minimize the operational/psychological distance in order to facilitate the continuity of teaching and learning. However, ERT is a compulsory, temporary and survival-oriented practice implemented in times of crisis, using all available resources, including synchronous and/or asynchronous tools

to ensure continuity of education (Bozkurt and Sharma, 2020, p.2). Became implemented in a revolutionary rather than evolutionary way, ERT was found to be a better description of distance education model adopted in Turkey, and in fact in many other countries as well.

Practicum

In Turkey, teacher candidates are prepared to the profession through 4-year undergraduate programs. During their studies, preservice teachers attend to courses clustered under three categories: educational sciences, general cultures and field-specific content and pedagogy. The programs include 141 credits for theoretical and 14 for applied courses. Practicum experiences constitute 12 credits of applied courses given in the last year as school replacement (HEC, 2018). As part of their practicum studies, preservice teachers are expected to prepare a portfolio based on their reflections and observations about the mentor's and students' one day at school, mentor's partitioning of the lesson, employment of teaching methods and techniques, classroom management, evaluation of student learning, duties of school principals and school relations with the close environment/society (HEC, 2010).

Practicum appears to be an indispensable part of teacher education programs around the world (White and Forgasz, 2016; Ferrier-Kerr, 2009). It plays a complementary role bridging between theory and practice in teacher education (Loughran and Hamilton, 2016, p.18) and hence considered as an important opportunity for preservice teachers to develop teaching competence (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Practicum is valuable for preservice teachers to experience the actual environments of their future workplaces (Flores, 2016). Pre-service teachers also learn from their observations of mentors. In addition, it helps develop teaching and reflection skills in associating the theoretical knowledge acquired in universities to experience-based learning at school (Becker, et.al., 2019).

The research, however, warns that expected benefits are not readily available through the practicum. For instance, Ryan et.al. (1996) investigated the purpose and structure of practicum. Their findings revealed certain difficulties including theory-practice gaps, lack of planning in practicum organization, problems with mentors and supervisors as well as field-specific application of theoretical knowledge. Similarly, preservice teachers in Hascher et.al.'s (2004) research experienced serious difficulties in terms of receiving feedback, planning and preparation, developing reflection skills on the quality of instruction as well as faced with hardships in their relations with other teachers and class. Therefore, planning, implementation and evaluation stages must be managed effectively in order for practicum experience to realize the expected benefits.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Practicum with an important place in teacher education all over the world has begun to be implemented as an ERT format during the COVID-19 pandemic. The practicum has become one of the most focused issues for teacher educators, education-planners and policy-makers in the era of pandemic. This study will contribute to our understanding of online practicum experiences from preservice teachers' perspectives. In addition, the study will offer suggestions for reshaping the practicum in the period called 'next-normal'.

RESEARCH QUESTION

This study delves into preservice teachers' experiences of online practicum during the COVID-19 pandemic and particularly attends to the following research question: What are the pre-service teachers' experiences about online practicum?

METHODOLOGY

This study attempts to understand preservice teachers' online practicum experiences gained through ERT. To this end, the study adopted a qualitative approach and employed phenomenological research method. The phenomenological method is found to be useful to reveal the essence of the lived experience of the participants by approaching the obtained data from different angles and perspectives (Creswell, 2007). In this process, the researcher attempts to synthesize the meanings and essences from data of the lived experiences through intuition and reflection, which eventually leads to the creation of ideas, concepts, and understandings (Moustakas, 1994). This method was used to make sense of online practicum experiences of the participants in their own subjective realities and to make inferences relevant to research purposes.

Participants and Context

In this study, while selecting the participants, a purposeful sampling approach was employed. 13 preservice teachers taking part in online practicum were selected. The participants were enrolled in mathematics teacher education program in a large southeastern university in Turkey. The practicum continued for 12 weeks, and the participants followed the mentor's classes for 4-hours in each week. Mentor (mathematics teacher) was teaching at secondary level and conducted lessons online via Education Information Network. Preservice teachers' practicum works are evaluated by both mentor and supervisor from the university. Practicum works were assessed on the basis of 9 written reports of the participants as well as their attendance to the online classes with the mentor. The report topics were as follows: teacher's, students' and principal's one day in the school, mentor's teaching and partitioning of the lesson, examinations, the classroom management, the use of activities and evaluation of student work, school rules, relations with society and the organizational structure of the school. In order to prepare the reports, the participants were asked to observe, interview and research.

Data Collection Tool and Procedure

In this study, data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Four aspects of educational programs (Tyler, 1949; Taba, 1962) guided the preparation of interview questions: goal, content, teaching approach and evaluation. The participants were asked to make evaluations about each of these aspects of online practicum that they experienced through ERT. These dimensions provide an overview of the challenges and opportunities associated with the practicum. While preparing the questions, the views and reflections of two experts from the field of "Curriculum and Instruction" on the items were obtained. Afterwards, data collection tool was piloted with two pre-service teachers to make judgements about the clarity and relevance. Interview questions were finalized by making necessary arrangements in line with the feedback received.

The interviews were conducted with 13 participants immediately after they completed the online practicum and submitted the expected reports for assessment purposes. Interviews were carried out on Zoom and recorded with permission. It was stated to all interviewees that the data obtained from the interviews, in line with ethical guidelines, will only be used for research purposes and will not be shared with the third parties.

Data Analysis

Phenomenological analysis requires a teamwork. The analysis team for the study consisted of three experts, two in education sciences and one in mathematics education. Transcriptions and video-records of the interviews were shared among the team members before data analysis. The analysis team had meetings periodically to work on the data and share their insights.

Data analysis was carried out in six stages suggested by Creswell (2007). The first stage is called Epoche/Bracketing. At this stage, the researchers noted their personal thoughts, experiences and perspectives about ERT and practicum. During the second stage, called horizontalization, analysis team made a list of significant statements relevant to the phenomenon under investigation, i.e., practicum experience via ERT. In the third stage, meaning units or themes have been designated by studying the significant expressions listed before. In the fourth stage, textural descriptions were created, that is, the most suitable verbatim quotes to reveal students' evaluations. At the fifth stage called structural descriptions, the "how" of the participants' online practicum experiences were examined. The last step of the analysis process, textural and structural descriptions are synthesized into a composite description in such a way that reflects the "essence" portraying the meaning of the experience.

Trustworthiness and Credibility Measures

Trustworthiness was enhanced through member check, conducting analysis with a research team specialized in their fields, eliminating biases at the beginning of the process, repeated collaborative work cycles, independent analysis and transparency. In the textual description phase of the phenomenological analysis process, the verbatim quotes obtained from the participants' evaluations are selected and shared with the reader in the findings for the purpose of credibility.

FINDINGS

The analysis yielded three main themes relevant to participants' online practicum experience: adaptational gaps, fruitful challenges and realizations of potential improvements. Explanations and necessary quotations on these themes are presented below.

1. Adaptational Gaps

It was clear from the data that the participants expected to experience a face-to-face practicum. They reported certain gaps between the expected face-to-face and actually experienced online practicum works. All these gaps were somehow related to the participants' adaptation to the online practicum. The reported adaptational gaps included planning, mentor roles and theory-practice balance. With regard to planning, the participants stated that they were not well-equipped to follow online courses as they were, at the beginning, illiterate of Zoom and other digital platforms. They mentioned that technical difficulties created obstacles to fully benefit from the practicum. Secondly, there were some uncertainties about the mentors' expectations and time schedules. Such uncertainties seemed to cause tension and discomfort. In this regard, P2 (i.e., participant 2) stated that:

There were many deficiencies in the planning. It was not clear when I was going to join mentor's online lesson. We were not expected to teach this semester, but the mentor was texting a message at 11 pm, asking me to get ready for online lesson tomorrow morning. There were uncertainties. I learned a lot, but I wish it was systematic and well-planned.

Another important result is that mentor roles should be adapted accordingly in the ERT format. Preservice teachers and mentors communicate more easily during face-to-face practicum. Both parties could socialize and share professional experiences in various places at different occasions such as during the lessons breaks, at the end of the lessons, in the teachers' room and/or school yards. However, in the online practicum, the opportunities for socialization and professional sharing became restricted to the confines of online lessons after which their communications often had an end. In this respect, P10 stated that:

The teacher (mentor) has followed her program. She didn't do anything extra for us. Maybe if we could hold meetings once in a while, we could focus on and talk about different things. If she had meetings with us, we could have asked what we didn't understand.

Participants also expressed their wishes to see how theoretical knowledge gained during teacher training period put into practice. During the interviews, they mentioned that they expected to achieve a pedagogical growth with regard to, for example, classroom management, material design, attention management, effective teaching methods and communications with students. However, they stated that their experiences during online practicum did not allow them to gain practical skills in all these areas. In this respect P3 stated that:

My expectations were partially met. I don't know what the classroom management will be like. You do "mute all" in the zoom. We couldn't learn how to use teaching materials....the excitement in the first weeks later disappeared. We did the same things over and over again.

2. Fruitful Challenges

It has been observed that the ERT practicum experience challenged the participants, but these difficulties were instructive for them and offered meaningful development opportunities. This has been the case for many as they presumed that online teaching would be on the agenda even after the pandemic. In this regard P7 and P10 made the following statements respectively:

It is not clear what the future will be like. Maybe I have to go through the same process (online teaching) in the future. It prepared me. Even teaching was done online with the cameras on, students joined the class-works. And I was also part of it.

If we prepare in advance for the online course, we could use the time quite efficiently. Instead of writing fractions on the board, we can project them on the screen. I enjoyed and saw new things... but the teacher has to use technology very well. I have to improve myself in how to get student attention.

All participants stated that they would prefer face-to-face practicum. However, they mentioned that well-structured online courses could also be efficient. In this respect, P8 commented that:

I saw a positive relationship with students, care given to them individually... children expected encouragement constantly. The teacher did so. I observed and experienced how teaching could be done, how the authority secured...Even if online, I saw that the teacher could discipline and control the class. I got it now there's always a way for efficient teaching.

Participants have experienced practicum in two separate groups at the same school with different mentors. It was observed that mentors had positive/negative effect on preservice teachers' experiences. P11 and P8 stated the positive contributions of the mentor as follows:

In the beginning I was very excited and scared. But the teacher was very understanding. We all had difficulties, but she waited for every opportunity. She

even arranged her home for online education. She helped us in all matters. We always asked her while writing the reports. I gained confidence.

I had a low expectation for practicum. But the teacher was very diligent. Despite the busy schedule, she made us very active. She taught in different ways. She taught on board, with video and slideshows, many different ways.

3. Realization of Potential Improvements

The evaluations of the participants about the online practicum were generally that the best was done under difficult conditions in this extraordinary period. However, they made suggestions in terms of duration, timing, assessment method and content on the basis of their experiences regarding online practicum. P9, for instance, made the following suggestions:

Practicum could have included more than 4 lessons a week. Each lesson lasted for 25 minutes... We could have spent more time with the students. I would love to do teaching; I have insufficiencies but I learned a lot from the lessons.

P2 made criticisms about the timing of the practicum. She stated that if the practicum experience could have been provided in earlier years, it would have been more beneficial for their growth and professional preparation.

We are very stressed because of graduation and exams. Practicum could have been much more beneficial, had it been in our third year; it was our most relaxed time at the university.

Having the practicum assessment made by both the mentor and supervisor was considered appropriate. However, participants stated that the content of some assessment reports was not suitable for online practicum and that assessment should have been spanned over the semester and done formatively. With this regard P2 and P10 noted respectively that:

We prepared very generic reports. For example, there was a report about the school environment. I looked at google maps and tried to write something seemed relevant. We wrote reports about the school principals without ever seeing them.

The assessment could have been done through regular meetings. We could've met every 2-3 weeks with mentor, supervisor and internship group. The reports could've focused on whatever happened online lessons in the pandemic.

Students stated that practicum content should have been digitalized and that at the beginning of the semester, technology competency was not adequately addressed. In this regard P4 made the following comments:

Online practicum was very difficult at the beginning. I did not know how to use Zoom or z-book. Those who knew how to make a YouTube video and how to prepare an online exam were comfortable, but I had a hard time. It took some time for me to get used to all these.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study point to three emergent themes: adaptational gaps, fruitful challenges and potential improvements. The first theme was related to adaptational gaps. During the pandemic, many alternatives have been developed to conduct lessons at all levels. Delivered on digital environments, the conduct of theoretical courses was relatively less problematic. However, applied courses like practicum which requires real classroom experiences lead to unique challenges (Moyo, 2020). In this respect, the participants reported similar difficulties observed by Ryan et al. (1996) almost 25 years ago such as poor planning, problems with mentors and supervisors as well as field-specific application of theoretical knowledge (see also Hascher et.al., 2004). Hence it is apparent that the same difficulties continue to remain regardless of whether practicum is conducted online or face-to-face. Moreover, poor online teaching infrastructure, orientation gaps, lack of guidance and support, and insufficiencies in digital teaching competencies (Carrillo and Flores, 2020) seemed to have added up to the problems encountered during the online practicum experience. As the current situation of online practicum was, in a sense, a form of ERT experience, these problems were, to some extent, expected and even understandable. However, reported problems in this study indicate the necessity of a reconsideration for the readiness and preparedness of Turkish higher education institutions in terms of digital infrastructure and human resources (Çalkoğlu and Gümüş, 2020). These reconsiderations could act as important triggers for the regulation of adaptational efforts to the new-normal.

The normal, new-normal, next-normal trilogy emphasized by Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) forces us to reconsider the truths we know in the context of education planning. Preservice teachers' difficulties in adapting to the online practicum were, in part, due to the fact that their preparational period (about 4 years) and all their previous educational backgrounds were shaped completely according to the old-normal. Their experiences in the era of old-normal instilled them with certain expectations which in turn influenced their evaluations, and hence gains, of the online practicum. While some of the participants found the online practicum useful, others expressed their expectations of a face-to-face experience. There were those wishing to perform a trial teaching in an online environment, but also those finding online lesson observations sufficient. It could be argued that preservice teachers, in different contexts with different influences, experienced a tide between the "real practice" and "ideal(ized) practice" (Flores and Gago, 2020) and hence oscillated between the two in their evaluations.

Despite the reported adaptational gaps, participants also found ERT practicum experience fruitfully challenging, that is, online practicum offered meaningful development opportunities. This was mainly related to the participant perception that even after the pandemic, online education will maintain its place in the education ecosystem as an alternative. However, the data suggest that in order to transform ERT into a practice of distance education, curricula should be carefully planned with the introduction of relevant and necessary changes in line with the next-normal with regard to four dimensions: goal, content, teaching approach and evaluation. The advantage of students exposed to ERT is that majority are digital natives and hence familiar with the technology. Before the pandemic, many students were active users of many digital platforms such as social media channels, online streaming services, video sharing websites and e-communication applets. Findings indicated that preservice teachers' digital backgrounds made a difference while engaging in online teaching. Findings also suggested that those lacking in certain digital skills quickly realized, and openly accepted the importance of those skills and stated to have compensated and hence adapted to the digital requirements during the online practicum. Hence this situation poses an opportunity for

policy-makers, decision-takers and content-developers to create an effective learning environment by taking advantage of youngsters' digital competencies and/or swift adaptational capabilities.

The third theme emerging from the analysis was concerned with potential improvements that could be introduced to online practicum. Participant suggestions made it clear that they expected a flexible structure in terms of duration, timing, assessment methods and mentor/supervisor selection. The preservice teachers in this study stated expectations to make their own choices and take the responsibility of their own learning. In many teacher education programs, the responsibility for the practicum is largely left to the mentors at the school rather than to preservice teachers. The quality of the gains from the practicum experiences hence depends very much on how the mentors organize the learning context (Hascher et al., 2004). In this study, it was clear that participants' satisfaction with the practicum was, to an important extent, determined by the mentor's approach. Therefore, depending on the available resources, providing alternatives for student teachers to work with different mentors and student-centered organization of the practicum schedule could help eliminate inequalities in terms of learning opportunities. Preservice teachers appear to get more involved into online practicum process when assessment and evaluation methods and criteria are adjusted by taking into account the nature of the activities developed within the scope of the practical components of the programs (see also Flores and Gago, 2020). With the implementation of such changes, preservice teachers believed to have better prepared to the demands and conditions of the next-normal.

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INVITATION TO SUBMIT MANUSCRIPTS

The editor of *Educational Planning*, a refereed journal of educational planning issues, invites the submission of original manuscripts for publication consideration. *Educational Planning* is the official journal of the International Society for Educational Planning. The audience of the journal includes national and provincial/state planners, university faculty, school district administrators and planners, and other practitioners associated with educational planning.

The purpose of the publication is to serve as a meeting place for scholar-researcher and the practitioner-educator through the presentation of articles that have practical relevance to current issues and that broaden the knowledge base of the discipline. *Educational Planning* disseminates the results of pertinent educational research, presents contemporary ideas for consideration, and provides general information to assist subscribers with their professional responsibilities.

Manuscripts preferred for inclusion are those from practitioners, reports of empirical research, expository writings including analyses of topical problems, or case studies. Unsolicited manuscripts are welcomed.

The following criteria have been established for the submission of manuscripts.

STYLE: All formatting should adhere strictly to the current guidelines set in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association.

LENGTH: The manuscript, including all references, figures or illustrations, charts, and/or graphs, should not exceed 20 pages. In addition, an Abstract (between 150-500 words on a separate sheet of paper) describing the focus of the manuscript should be included at the beginning of the manuscript.

WORD PROCESSING: SINGLE-SPACE all text using TIMES NEW ROMAN with a 10 point type. Headings and sub-headings should be in ARIAL with a 10 point type. Provide 1.0 inch margins top and bottom, and 1.5 inch left and right, with 1.0 inch header and 1.0 inch footer. The body of the manuscript must be no wider than 5 ½ inches to fit the paper. Lengthily tables, drawings, and charts or graphs should be scaled to the dimensions given and should preferably be camera-ready.

FORM of SUBMISSION: Send the manuscript to the Editor electronically in Microsoft Word as an attachment to an email. The email address is: tchan@kennesaw.edu

The manuscript should include the following:

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Author(s) name, mailing address, telephone number, email address, and fax number

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Text of the manuscript not to exceed 20 pages, including references, tables, etc.

If the manuscript does not meet the guidelines exactly, it will NOT be reviewed and will be returned to the author.

Author(s) name or any other identifying information should not be included on the abstract or the manuscript. Authors are responsible for copyright clearance and accuracy of information presented and submission implies that the same manuscript has not been submitted to other publications.

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ORGANIZATION

The Society was founded December 10, 1970 in Washington, DC. Over 50 local, state, national, and international planners attended the first organizational meeting.

Since then its continued growth demonstrates the need for a professions organization with educational planning as its exclusive concern.

PURPOSE

The International Society for Educational Planning was established to foster the professional knowledge and interests of educational planners. Through conferences and publications, the society promotes the interchange of ideas within the planning community. The membership includes persons from the ranks of governmental agencies, school-based practitioners, and higher education.

MEMBERSHIP IN THE SOCIETY

Membership in the society is open to any person active or interested in educational planning and the purposes of the Society. To join the Society or renew a membership please complete and submit the enclosed form.

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