Agility: an essential element of leadership for an evolving educational landscape

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Abstract

Defined as the ability to think and move quickly and easily, the importance of agility as an essential element in the move forward for leaders of schools and systems postpandemic, as a result of the impact of COVID-19 on children, is examined. The smartness of a leader's continuous interactions with the multi-faceted features of their environment, the very nature of the ever-evolving educational landscape of today, is of tremendous value for the leadership of tomorrow. Through the prioritization of strategic objectives in balanced measure, connectivity through relationships and partnership building, proactivity for effective change management, ingenuity in the optimization of resources over time, and the cultivation of systemness throughout the organization—as aspects of agility—educational leaders have the bona fide chance of a lifetime to transform school systems in the pursuit of achievement, equity, and well-being for the benefit of all students, staff, and school communities. Additional considerations, including barriers to agility, are also addressed as are recommendations for leaders of schools and systems as they navigate the shifts in organizational terrain caused by the disruption.

Key words: pandemic, education, leadership, agility

Introduction

So much has changed in regard to everyday life on Earth over the past year and a half. In society broadly, and the education sector specifically, the nature of the landscape has definitely shifted. With respect to leadership in schools and systems—provincially, nationally, and internationally— the organizational terrain has evolved because of the extraordinary experiences of the pandemic period and is not likely to return to the well-worn physical features of the past. Moreover, it is conceivable that changes to the features of institutions of public education have only just begun because of the impact of COVID-19 on children and school systems. As Harris and Jones (2020) described, the coronavirus has exacerbated issues related to well-being and highlighted how inequalities in public education profoundly affect those in society who have the least. They noted that deliberations to date regarding the closing or, indeed, the re-opening of schools is contentious and largely inconclusive. Further, they claimed that leadership in disruptive times such as these means being able to navigate a different course—creating new pathways along the lay of the land of schools and systems—through the disruption.

Inspired by the wisdom of the late Dr. Robert (Bobby) Moore, an esteemed colleague and friend, Dr. Peter Gamwell (Gamwell and Daly 2017), spoke to the remarkable nature of periods of uncertainty—much like the one taking place at this very point in time. He emphasized the actuality of living in a world of "inbetweenity"—a time between times—where one era is ending and the next has not yet fully emerged. Gamwell and Daly (2017) pointed out that, during these very times, the status quo no longer works; yet, there is no clear path ahead. Moreover, they signaled emerging eras of today and tomorrow are much less likely to wait patiently for the previous era to exit graciously, creating a state of complexity in the now—a time when there are no longer beginnings and endings of eras but rather a continuous confluence of changes. The realities of the past year and a half have placed an exclamation point on the truths of this statement.

The pandemic period has altered the cycle and rhythm of public education that stakeholders of the sector—students, staff, parents/guardians, trustees, federation/union partners, government officials, partner agencies/organizations, as well as members of broader communities—had all become accustomed to over time. A number of these changes, such as the widespread closure of schools and central buildings early last spring and the pivot to remote (synchronous and asynchronous) learning environments system-wide shortly thereafter, were abrupt and almost unbelievable, even as they unfolded. Other changes since that time have been much less sudden and yet impactful, nonetheless. These transformations include the provision of online learning as an alternative, full-time mode of delivery for the foreseeable future, an entire rethink of work from home policies and (or) procedures in school systems, as well as a reflective analysis of missed learning opportunities during occasions that were once called "snow days".

In many ways, both within and across jurisdictions, these reformations of the educational landscape represent a seismic shift in the state of affairs. The continuous transition to online learning at home, in-person learning at school, or a hybrid of both has created more variation than ever before in school systems. This reality not only has the potential to widen existing inequities, but also make to qualitative and quantitative comparisons—already a challenge—much more difficult.

In a recent study regarding the impact of the pandemic on student learning, Dorn et al. (2020) shared that school shutdowns caused by COVID-19 have exacerbated existing achievement gaps. They stated that the learning loss during school closures—described as the effectiveness of novel remote learning relative to traditional classroom instruction—varies significantly by access to remote learning, the quality of remote instruction, support from parents/guardians and (or) others at home, as well as the degree of engagement on the part of students themselves. The results of their study confirm,

however, the troubling reality that the greatest gaps in learning have taken place with historically underserved students and communities.

In their review of homeschooling during the pandemic, Wistoft et al. (2021) confirmed, as one might expect, that different clusters of students experienced teaching and learning in significantly different ways through school lockdown periods. More specifically, their report revealed stark age-related differences. In particular, they indicated that a number of younger students (in elementary grades) had difficulties with the schooling from home situation and that the teaching and learning environment of school lockdowns challenged their well-being and mental health. Furthermore, feedback from surveys provided to parents/guardians of younger learners demonstrated that they too found it much more difficult to balance work, their child(ren), and family life more so than parents/guardians of older students (in secondary grades) for instance. Despite everyone's best efforts, they surmised that many students felt lost at home.

These studies and similar accounts from across the globe highlight that the "timing is right" for an entirely new model—a comprehensive solution for the dated school system—that avoids a "loss of learning" mindset that further perpetuates a system that did not serve all students and was not without its shortcomings (Fullan 2021). As Fullan (2021) posited, the "pandemic phenomenon" may serve to accelerate the search for solutions (as "right drivers" for whole system success) precisely because of the growing dissatisfaction with the status quo and the new perspectives that the COVID-19 predicament provides. The right drivers, working with one another in combination, include: the importance of learning, equity, and well-being as an integrated endeavour as opposed to separate goals; the further development of the social intelligence of educators—the propensity to work with others to achieve common goals; and the establishment of "systemness"—a sense that all stakeholders, at all levels of the school system, play an active part in the solution—with the responsibility for system change through the achievement of established goals, placed equally at each of the three levels of the system—local (district level), middle (regional level), and central (policy level).

In reality, school systems in place prepandemic were somewhat antiquated and clearly not serving the needs of all their clientele. The situation may actually be worse now, in many respects, especially for underserved and (or) vulnerable students and their families. The uncertainty of the times represents both a challenge and an opportunity as educators continue to navigate the shifts in organizational terrain caused by the disruption. It is precisely for these reasons that agility—the ability to think and move quickly and easily—serves as an essential element in the move forward for leaders of schools and systems. The smartness of a leader's continuous interactions with the multi-faceted features of their environment, the very nature of the ever-evolving educational landscape of today, is of tremendous value for the leadership of tomorrow.

Aspects of agility

If agility is what is required to navigate the current state of complexity, how can educational leaders respond? There are five interrelated factors that are worthy of consideration in the context of leading through the pandemic disruption. They are as follows.

Prioritization of strategic objectives in balanced measure

McMullen (2021) built upon the importance of the merger of learning, equity, and well-being in the move forward as educational leaders by stating that the collective priority, above all else, is to facilitate emotional regulation before academic education. He emphasized that it is entirely unwise to focus the narrative on helping students "catch up" on their "lost learning" as this approach has the potential to place unnecessary (and possibly damaging) psychological pressure on children and young adults. In

its place he suggested an intentional focus on play, creativity, and innovation, while also supporting the development of literacy and numeracy in an integrated manner. In addition, Klinger (2020) contributed that navigating schools and systems in a postpandemic world will necessitate flexibility and innovation on the part of educational leaders. Klinger (2020) purported that to support the critical academic, social–emotional, and custodial functions of schools, leaders must acquire and apply new knowledge, skills, and capacities in their planning and decision-making. In short, leaders of school systems today must be prepared to "plan for the unplanned", pivoting as needed based upon evolving circumstances by altering duties, expectations, procedures, calendars, schedules, and operational practices, for example.

It is the sensible, sound perspective of educational leaders that ensures the prioritization of strategic objectives related to achievement, equity, and well-being in balanced measure, especially during these uncertain times, that is needed now across schools and systems. That is, the integration of these fundamental goals is crucial for all students, staff, and school communities served moving forward, so that any one of these key pillars is not neglected at the expense of the others. Their integration— in a reasonable, timely manner that is differentiated from school to school and system to system—will provide stability for institutions of public education in both the short term and long term.

Connectivity through relationships and partnership building

Love (2020) argued that leaders can play a significant role in abating the disconnect and loneliness that may be felt within organizations as a result of the pandemic period. To reinforce interpersonal and organizational connectedness amongst stakeholders and to reduce stress and anxiety for employees in particular, important practices that leaders can put into place include: acknowledging the current reality, creating scheduled opportunities for check-ins and face-to-face time, maximizing training opportunities appropriate to the current context, and leveraging mindfulness and meditation practices. Beyond the strengthening of relationships amongst stakeholders, internal and external to the organization, these practices have the potential to increase productivity, especially in times of uncertainty. These times call forth the grace in all of us, especially those of us who lead Love (2020) concluded, in a centred and respectful manner to navigate the uncharted territory together.

In her review of two phases of education reform strategies in Ontario over the past two decades, Campbell (2021) delineated the importance of working partnerships in the approaches to educational system reform developed and implemented province-wide. Specifically, she clarified that partnership among the government, the education sector, and related stakeholders in schools and systems has been a mainstay of policy development and implementation and is one of the key reasons the jurisdiction is recognized globally as a high-performing education system with below-average inequities for students from lower socio-economic status backgrounds and for immigrant students. Interestingly, Campbell (2021) shared that the initial focus on working in partnership amongst stakeholders with priority goals to improve student achievement (from 2003 to 2013) has been followed by a shift to a new collaborative professionalism with a widening priority focus on equity and well-being as well (from 2014 to 2018). The steadfast attention of educational leaders in schools and systems on the importance of productive working relationships and partnership building speaks to the merit of connectivity and genuine collaboration, particularly in times of anxiety and instability. The co-establishment of priorities and co-construction of initiatives, including the development of shared understandings and the implementation of common strategies amongst all stakeholders, creates synergies that ensure the conditions for healthy, vibrant organizations emerge.

Proactivity for effective change management

Leithwood (2013) identified proactivity as a practice that is especially important for leaders of schools and systems in his review of strong districts and their leadership. Defined as the ability to stimulate and effectively manage change on a large scale and under complex circumstances, showing initiative and perseverance in bringing about meaningful change, this personal leadership resource is indispensable. As Leithwood (2013) described it, because of the context in which they lead, educational leaders need to anticipate future demands that might require significant organizational adaptation. Leithwood (2013) confirmed that this is particularly the case for system-level leaders as they manage entities that have larger organizational size, greater operational complexity, and greater interaction with a wider environment. Lynch (2020) also believes that effective educational leaders are proactive in nature because they have a "do-it-yourself" mindset and approach challenging situations with enthusiasm. Lynch (2020) specified that keys to proactivity include being able to find and isolate potential issues before they become full-fledged problems. For an educational leader, this ability requires a thorough understanding of the organization as well as the internal and external forces and pressures that surround it. This allows schools and systems to avoid major crises and operate with disruptions minimized to the greatest extent possible.

The management of an effective change process—including the procurement of knowledge and skills through capacity building of staff, incentives, and resources to make meaningful change take place as well as detailed elements of a plan of action to see it through to fruition—requires careful consideration and forethought in addition to initiative and perseverance, as mentioned above. With respect to the volatility of the times, their unpredictability and uncertainty, proactivity as a leadership practice is as vital as ever. School and system leaders will undoubtedly need to adeptly mobilize the resources required to manage complex change in an increasingly effective and efficient manner to avoid the confusion, resistance, and frustration that has commonly ailed education-related change processes in the past.

Ingenuity in optimization of resources over time

There are many changes that will persist in schools and systems postpandemic. Arundel (2020) proclaimed that the acquisition of technological devices that move school systems closer towards a 1:1 ratio of devices to students is but one consideration for educational leaders, especially if emergency closures become increasingly routine. Human resource practices, particularly for teacher recruitment and retention, is another area that Arundel (2020) specified will require the use of creative and innovative approaches, including new staffing redesigns and supports to meet the versatile teaching and learning environments of the times. Teräs et al. (2020) also urged educational leaders to think carefully about the decisions they make regarding the technologization of their systems, in light of the unprecedented push to online learning, to be sure that digital learning solutions remain driven by best pedagogical practices first and foremost.

Financially, Hargreaves (2021) believes that educational policy beyond the coronavirus pandemic will advance in one of two possible scenarios: an onrush of austerity that makes deep cuts to public education leading to more inequity or, alternatively, education investment to pursue prosperity that establishes better quality of life for all. Hargreaves (2021) insisted that inequality can be reduced instead of increased, that the digital divide COVID-19 has exposed can be closed instead of opened further, and that technology can be utilized to enhance effective instructional practices as opposed to replacing it through blended or hybrid technology. Through prosperity, Hargreaves (2021) explained, primacy is given to quality of life alongside or even ahead of economic growth. This approach, which includes investment in public education, will support the most vulnerable learners and protect disadvantaged students' opportunities for upward mobility.

The optimization of resources (human, material, and (or) fiscal) will require inventiveness and resourcefulness on the part of educational leaders in the future. The pressures that institutions of public education will face, whether through externally imposed austerity measures or internally driven challenges that result from the provision of increasingly adapted modes of delivery (such as online learning options through virtual schools for instance), will require ingenuity in the optimization of resources to serve the ever-expanding needs of learners over time. The clever handling of resources will surely be essential to the strategic accomplishment of the objectives set out for the achievement, equity, and well-being of students and staff in school communities.

Cultivation of systemness throughout the organization

Returning to the right drivers for whole system reform, as Fullan (2021) envisioned, systemness is defined as the sense that stakeholders have of the importance of their contribution at all levels of the system; indeed, that they are the system. Stakeholders—as individuals and (or) groups—interact within the system, learning from and contributing to it, as the system itself evolves. These stakeholders ultimately have both independent and interdependent responsibility for changing the system.

Through coherence making, Fullan and Quinn (2016) described how educational leaders achieve shared understandings about the work in schools and systems. More aptly, they explained that the intent of coherence zeroes in on pedagogy and examined the impact and the causal pathways that result in measurable progress for all students. The coherence framework that Fullan and Quinn (2016) proposed consists of four essential components: focusing direction (which builds collective purpose), cultivating collaborative cultures (which develops capacity), deepening learning (which accelerates improvement and innovation), and securing accountability based upon capacity built from the inside out. Alignment, conversely, refers to the consistent and complimentary arrangement of policies and procedures, practices, and protocols as infrastructural elements of schools and systems.

The development of shared mindsets through coherence and the implementation of policies and procedures, practices, and protocols in a complimentary manner via alignment of infrastructure facilitates the cultivation of systemness in schools and systems. During uncertain and unpredictable times, educational leaders can leverage systemness to ensure stability to manage the move forward.

Additional considerations

Of note, the move forward will also need to rely on fundamental principles of the past that remain of value such as integrative thinking—a decision-making process or methodology that frames and solves real-world problems by balancing the tensions between opposing (or seemingly opposing) variables as a new approach to tackling challenges of the day. Martin and Austen (1999) explained that viewing problems holistically, rather than piecing out their constituent parts, creates new possibilities—without making costly trade-offs or forcing the choice of one good idea at the expense of another—by rethinking and recombining elements of the issue to reach a better solution in the end. The practice of systems thinking, identified by Leithwood (2013) as especially important for leaders of schools and systems in his review of strong districts and their leadership, along with proactivity, supports an integrative thinking model. Defined as the ability to understand the dense, complex, and often reciprocal connections between different elements of the organization and the foresight to engage the organization in likely futures and consequences for action, this personal leadership resource is equally invaluable for educational leaders. The coordination of programs and (or) services offered to students and their families, for instance, will need to be increasingly seamless for institutions of public education to navigate their futures adeptly. The provision of supports for positive mental health and well-being is also an area that will most certainly require thoughtful consideration and careful integration so that the needs of students, staff, and school communities are addressed adequately.

As Leithwood and McCullough (2016) affirmed, leadership development programs that build the capacity of the leadership cadre within schools and systems—including principals and vice-principals, managers, and teacher leaders as well as supervisory officers and directors—is one of the most influential and impactful investments that institutions of public education trying to manage complex change can make. For professionals in both preservice and in-service contexts, leadership development will need to be sustained, and most likely enhanced, in the postpandemic reality. Knowledge, skills, and expertise that educational leaders develop for their own capacities—individually and collectively—will be increasingly vital in preparing leaders of schools and systems for the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous times they will assuredly experience. Leadership for equity, diversity, and inclusivity is a pertinent and timely example of a lens of leadership that will require individual and collective commitment over time. It is essential that educational leaders continue to learn about bias awareness and critical consciousness, for example, in the move forward as reflective practitioners.

Barriers to agility

There are many barriers to agility that educational leaders may encounter in school systems. Cross (2017) highlighted a lack of urgency as one of the most significant hurdles an organization might experience. Described as a struggle in short-term planning and (or) the communication of priorities within the plan, leaders of institutions of public education that lack agility do not have a clear vision of the activities to be completed over the next 12 months that will address the needs of the day and lay the foundation for success in the long term (three to five years ahead). Often coupled with a lack of urgency is the obstacle of unclear timelines. Systems that are unable to prioritize the array of initiatives or projects underway will undoubtedly err in the timelines designated to execute these tasks effectively and efficiently.

Other barriers to agility include a deficit-oriented culture, where leaders within these systems have become accustomed to a legacy of failure which breeds overly cautious, risk-averse behaviour. In these organizations, "no" is often a typical response to promising ideas that emerge from within, as Cross (2017) explained, making true innovation a rarity.

Furthermore, the notion of endless debate amongst senior leaders of school systems—without accompanying action—can summarily squelch attempts at thinking and moving quickly and easily as can a lack (or misuse) of resources and skills as they undermine the organization's ability to be agile.

Conclusion

It has often been said that vision matters most when clarity is missing. With respect to the leadership of schools and systems—provincially, nationally, and internationally—the terrain of organizations has most definitely changed because of the global pandemic. The ability to navigate a different course of action through the disruption, creating new pathways along the lay of the land that represent school systems, requires agility on the part of educational leaders—an ability to think and understand quickly and to move smartly through the ever-evolving educational landscape. With respect to a leader's continuous interactions with their multi-faceted environment, agility is especially valuable as time is often a scarce resource politically and pedagogically.

Interestingly, Gamwell and Daly (2017) disclosed that the realities of the current state of complexity are further confused because, during these uncertain times, changes push and pull in a multitude of directions all at once, making consensus building a daunting task to accomplish. This state of complexity makes future trends all the more difficult (if not impossible) to predict—yet another veritable challenge for educational leaders looking to lead their schools and systems.

Chen et al. (2021) acknowledged that COVID-19 has induced the largest remote learning experiment in history over the past 12 months. Their examination of the remote experience on student learning, from the perspective of practicing teachers on the front lines, leaves many wondering as to how the sector deciphers the long-term impact of this protracted learning experiment. Chen et al. (2021) are convinced that the long-term implications of the pandemic will depend on the steps that school system leaders take now to mitigate and address the damage that has already been done. They suggest the offering of high-density tutoring or more personalized mastery-based programs, for example, as supports for students who may have fallen behind. Chen et al. (2021) stated definitively that a return to the status quo is a much less compelling option as educators have the opportunity now to reimagine a more equitable and resilient school system for all children. Further, Zewde et al. (2020) proclaimed that decisions made today in the context of COVID-19 will have long-term consequences for the future of education. Zewde et al. (2020) also stated that although COVID-19 has revealed vulnerabilities across the globe, it has also surfaced extraordinary human resourcefulness and potential. Zewde et al. (2020) urge that this is a time for pragmatism and quick action and that the choices ahead cannot abandon scientific evidence, nor can they be made without principled judgement. These choices must be based on a humanistic vision of education and development and human rights frameworks through notions that include the advancement of global solidarity to end current levels of inequality.

As the dust begins to settle on the newly created pathways through the terrain of our institutions of public education, next steps in the move forward for educational leaders will begin to take shape. Through a flexible yet focused approach that integrates the five interrelated factors outlined above as aspects of agility, educational leaders will surely find their own way through the disruption. Harris and Jones (2020) identified the importance of context-responsive leadership as well as crisis and change management as essential skills to navigate the paths ahead. Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) added that despite the chaos the pandemic has created, it has also unleashed energies of innovation and collaboration as well as a spirit of problem resolution through open professionalism and the utilization of digital opportunities to enhance existing professional capital and community, that all have the potential for significant positive impact.

Undoubtedly, the road before us will also require dedication and discipline on the part of educational leaders themselves. Interactions with the multi-faceted environments of schools and systems will need to be growth-oriented and opportunistic. In the current context, Quinn et al. (2021) confirmed an "asset lens" that recognizes strengths and invests belief in stakeholders, including student voice and staff expertise, will acknowledge learning gains as opposed to gaps solely. These interactions will build upon existing strengths in education, as well as in society more broadly, and appreciate all that has been acquired through the coronavirus era to resist the temptation to "snap back" into the old normal. This is an especially important point for consideration as life prepandemic was not smooth for all stakeholders, particularly underserved and vulnerable populations, as previously noted. A growth-oriented and opportunistic perspective will ensure that public education does not fall back into the "ruts" of past terrains—that new pathways are truly created for the complex and diversified roads to be travelled. The resilience shown by students, staff, and school communities in persevering with respect to both learning and well-being, to the greatest extent possible over the past year, represents but one example of a strength to celebrate—a true reflection of the robustness of our school systems prior to the disruption, imperfect as these systems may have been.

Recommendations

To navigate a bold, new course of action through the disruption—one that is value-added for all students, staff, and school communities—the following recommendations are suggested for

educational leaders of schools and systems either to be continued if already in place or started anew in the move forward:

(1) strategic integration of key aspects of learning, equity, and wellness in balanced measure in improvement planning processes at the school and system levels;

(2) thoughtful establishment of a strengths-based relationship approach to the interaction among students, staff, and school communities;

(3) competent coordination of effective change management processes—including the proactive mobilization of knowledge and skills, motivators and incentives, as well as resources and plans of action—required to respond aptly to the ever-evolving educational landscape;

(4) continuous reflection upon and refinement of the allocation of resources (human, material and (or) fiscal) in an increasingly differentiated and equitable manner for students and staff in schools; and

(5) careful creation of places and spaces for individuals and (or) groups within school systems to provide their unique contributions as an integral part of systemness throughout the organization.

The extraordinary experiences of the pandemic period have created the bona fide chance of a lifetime to transform school systems in the pursuit of achievement, equity, and well-being for the benefit of all students, staff, and school communities. Through the agility of educational leadership, a remarkable opportunity exists to make it happen.

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Author contributions

PB conceived and designed the study. PB performed the experiments/collected the data. PB analyzed and interpreted the data. PB contributed resources. PB drafted or revised the manuscript.

Competing interests

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Data availability statement

All relevant data are within the paper.

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