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Leading Change in Difficult Times: The Role of Effective Leadership in Confronting Educational Challenges of Coronavirus Pandemic

Ngozi Ibeawuchi^{*}, Uzoechi Nwagbara^{**}, Yahaya Alhassan^{***},
Carlton Brown^{****}

* Postgraduate student, University of East London, Stratford Campus, Water Lane, London, E15 4LZ, United Kingdom

** Associate Lecturer, University of Sunderland in London, 197 Marsh Wall, Isle of Dogs, London, E14 9SG, United Kingdom
e-mail: uzoechin@yahoo.com

*** Principal Lecturer, University of Sunderland in London, 197 Marsh Wall, Isle of Dogs, London, E14 9SG, United Kingdom

**** Management Consultant, London School of Business & Finance, 2 Bunhill Row, London, EC1Y 8HQ, United Kingdom

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Abstract

This paper is based on understanding how effective leadership can be instrumental in confronting (potential) organisational challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic in organisations with specific focus on educational institutions in order to effectively lead change in these uncertain times. As well-known all organisations including educational institutions are currently bedevilled by the COVID-19 (coronavirus) challenges, which constitute obstacle to effective educational leadership. In rising above these challenges and in contrast with the managerially oriented educational management, this paper argues that effective leadership can engender effective change management as well as aid educational institutions to rise above this quandary, which will ultimately lead to better student outcomes and organisational success. The methodology adopted here is based on secondary sources and consequently this paper conceptually makes some contributions to the field of educational management, leadership and change management, which would guide policymakers, academics, institutions and governments in these uncertain times. The present paper concludes by demonstrating how effective leadership aids our understanding of how to effectively confront the evils of the coronavirus pandemic in the educational context.

Keywords: *effective leadership; educational leadership; leading/managing change; coronavirus challenges.*

JEL Classification: *D83; M12; M30.*

Introduction

The world has been plunged into a panic, crisis and uncertain times given the outbreak of COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic, which started in China in December 2019. This strange and anxiety-producing era has caused business to shrink their capacity (McKinsey, 2020), propelled stay-at-home orders (WHO, 2020), created global panic (Harris, 2020) and specifically triggered

leadership test for businesses and educational institutions to survival and compete in these uncertain times (McKinsey, 2020). To this end, this paper is aimed at understanding and interrogating the role effective leadership can play in uncertain times – the Covid-19 pandemic – in order to effectively tackle organisational challenges in educational settings.

It has been argued that effective leadership facilitates managing change successfully in critical moments in organisation particularly in educational setting (Leithwood, 1994), which can lead to successful transformation (Kotter, 1996). Effective (transformational) leaders are vital for any change process including changing educational leadership (Ainscow, Dyson, & Weiner, 2003; Burns, 1978) for change management capacity, motivating followers to go extra mile, organisational effectiveness, stakeholder commitment and leader-follower trust (Rees & Caviglioli, 2018; Ainscow, 2007). Thus, effective/transformational leaders need to have the capacity to drive change within the context of educational system in order to confront the challenges of coronavirus pandemic as stakeholders will be empowered, motivated and encouraged to rise above self-interest than they would (in transactional or traditional context) (Bush & Glover, 2012; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Lewin, Lippitt & White, 1939).

As demonstrated in prior literature, leadership can be defined as a process of influencing, motivating, and encouraging people to act in order to achieve collective goals and shared aspirations (Bennis & Nanus, 2004; Kouzes, & Posner, 1993; Kotter, 1990). This entails that transformational leadership process contrasts markedly with transactional leadership, which is managerially oriented (Yammarino & Bass, 1990; Burns, 1978). This brings to the fore the dichotomy between management and leadership. Whereas management is premised on achieving targets, control, rigid planning and exclusion of stakeholders and/or subordinate inputs, leadership resonates with engagement, vision, and shared goal attainment (Northouse, 2007; Kotter, 1990). Additionally, whilst transformational leadership resonates with capacity building, inspiration, motivation and shared goal attainment, transactional leadership is based on leader-member exchange and commodification of relations (Bass, 1995; Burns, 1978). This paper thus argues that in order to lead effectively in the dark, precarious and fragile educational climate ushered in by COVID-19 pandemic, effective leadership is a prerequisite.

In academia (including mainstream, Maintained, academies, special institutions/schools as well as higher institutions) leaders have responded to the catastrophe of the pandemic by closing schools, cancelling graduation and moving their educational and associated activities online as a sense of immediacy sweeps across the entire globe (Harris, 2020). People all over the world are staying home in self-imposed quarantine, social distancing and infection-reducing rules to “flatten the curve” of transmission (Harris & Jones, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic signals a momentous and immediate (leadership) adaptive challenge, which can best be solved by all those impacted working collaboratively to slow the spread of the disease. This conceptualisation of leadership in recent time has been described by Fernandez & Shaw (2020) as “academic leadership in a time of crisis”. Although school leaders (and elsewhere) have a vital role to play in responding to the crisis beleaguering their institutions, in reality, the role of school leaders in establishing a culture of collaboration, trust, motivation, and shared as well as effective leadership, will more significantly, engender effective change leadership (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004; Ainscow et al., 2006).

Faced with the uncertainty and rising intensity of the coronavirus pandemic, school leaders globally have made some tough leadership decisions to strategically lead institutions successfully in these uncertain times (Harris, 2020). These decisions have huge impact on leader-follower dynamics as well as effective leadership, which could negatively impinge on effectively confronting educational challenges of the coronavirus pandemic (McKinsey, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020). The changes brought about by the pandemic also constitute obstacles to managing and leading stakeholders’ interests, radical changes in values, attitude, and beliefs for some stakeholders (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017) as well as entail reinventing a leadership paradigm that could engender new strategies in educational institutions. In sum, a style of

leadership aimed at navigating the trammels of COVID-19 challenges is essentially needed for reinvented, effective educational institutions (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020).

Institutions applying an effective leadership system have benefitted from a greater degree of innovation, agility, effective response and collaboration and could benefit from superior peer-support in times of crisis than is possible in institutions clinging to a managerially driven system, hierarchical leadership and shareholder-centric paradigm (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017; Drucker, 2006). As noted by Harris (2020) the traditional frameworks of autocratic, transactional and disempowering leadership are not result-oriented when humanity, in particular any educational institutions, is faced with the uncertainties, challenges and complexities of the coronavirus pandemic (WHO, 2020). In this paper, the theorising from an authoritarian leader/follower leadership model to a shared and transformational leadership model within schools requires supportive, distributed and collaborative leadership style in which different stakeholders, at different levels and across organisational boundaries to make efficacious and creative input in times of change (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). This reworked model of leadership is fundamental to the ideals of effective leadership as opposed to managerially oriented school leadership philosophy (Rees & Caviglioli, 2018; Burns, 1978).

Definitional Perspectives on Leadership and Theoretical Perspectives

Leadership is often taken to be an essentially contested notion (Bennis & Nanus, 2004); hence, there is no precision on how it can be defined (Northouse, 2007). However, it has been defined as the process of mobilising, influencing, motivating, and inspiring stakeholders (such as teachers, the government, principals, lecturers, and others) to act so as to achieve a specific goal or arrive at a win-win situation (Davis & Ryder, 2016; Kottter, 1990). As contended by Yukl (2006) leadership chimes with the capacity of a leader to build trust, loyalty, collegiality and motivation within stakeholders in order to realise collective vision in educational setting (Davis & Ryder, 2016). It thus suggests the ability of those in the position of authority to influence others to make input and be persuaded by the leader's personal example, qualities and contributions towards achieving collective vision (Bennis & Nanus 2004). In this context, educational leadership entails a process of not only inspiring, influencing and motivating stakeholders who share common values and goals, but takes into consideration the capacity of a leader to unleash within these individual stakeholders the capacity and encouragement to overcome constraints including challenges of coronavirus (Harris, 2020; Kivunja, 2015).

Prior literature stipulated that there are three main types of leadership including democratic, *laissez faire* and autocratic styles. Democratic style is inclusive, engaging and participatory; while autocratic leadership is characterised by exclusive and authoritarian organisational culture and precludes stakeholders' voice, views and inputs (Northouse, 2007). Finally, *laissez faire* leadership style resonates with delegating duties and/or responsibilities, but with the intention of assessing how subordinates carry out such responsibilities by the leaders (Bennis & Nanus, 2004). Nevertheless, *types* of leadership are different from *theory* of leadership; the latter deals with different ways of conceptualising leadership styles (Spillane, 2005). Correspondingly, available studies have identified a number of theoretical perspectives to interpreting leadership styles/types (Northouse 2007; Kotter, 1990), which are highlighted below:

- Trait theory;
- Transactional theory;
- Great man theory;
- Behavioural theory;
- Transformational theory;
- Contingency theory;
- Situational theory;
- Participative theory.

Given the remit of this paper, see Northhouse (2007) and Bennis & Nanus (2004) for more detail on the phenomena of leadership and management, which are related but different notions (Huguet, 2017; Goleman, 1995; Bass & Avolio 1994).

Effective Leadership and Leading Change in Educational Setting: Contextualising COVID-19 Challenges

Effective leaders have been identified as integral in organisational success (Covey, 1989) as they enhance organisational capacity, effectiveness, change process (Kotter, 1990), as well as promote leader-follower dynamics, stakeholder commitment, and trust (Rees & Caviglioli, 2018). In sum, effective leadership is correlative of transformational leadership. Wood (2019) is of the opinion that effective leadership is a corollary of inclusive school management as well as genuine collaboration between relevant stakeholders based on shared vision, mutual respect, handling conflict collectively and pursuance of mutual benefit of all (Rees & Caviglioli, 2018). In addition, effective leaders create and foster a sense of autonomy in stakeholders (Bennis & Nanus, 2004) empowering them to tackle educational issues in the COVID-19, such as, answering to parents, lecturers' demands, school governors, student outcomes and making sure teaching and learning are effectively and efficiently carried out (Harris, 2020). Admittedly, achieving these in a virtual world is very challenging; however, effective leadership goes extra mile in connecting people to act without self-interest and to rise above any challenges (Kotter, 1990). These leaders should have open doors; communicate effectively; lead by example; empower and collaborate from a distance but with the sole aim of ensuring that there is a productive outcome for all (Harris & Jones, 2020).

Thus, effective school leadership finds expression in educational context in which professionals have confidence in the leadership style of their leaders, recognising their individual voices and inputs, which can enhance collective efficacy and positive student outcomes (Wood, 2019; Bandura, 1977). Consequently, such leadership style resonates with removing barriers to learning by valuing all stakeholders of a school community. Without any equivocation, the concept of effective institutional leadership is predicated upon social justice, democratic principles and capacity building, which are enshrined in international policies and documents (UNESCO, 1994). As contended by Huguet (2017, p. 98) effective educational leadership is a "paradigm of successful school performance" and a type of "focused leadership" (p. 97), which anchors it ideals in leadership that works because it is engaging, transformational, context-bound and based on the rhythm of the moment.

Harris (2020, p. 324) identifies such leadership style in "COVID-19 – school leadership" as "distributed, collaborative and networked leadership". Also, Harris & Jones (2020) observed that such leadership style resonates with continual engagement, routine collaborative meetings, adaptive leadership and mutually respecting viewpoints between stakeholders with a view to seeking positive student outcomes and best practice (Ainscow, 2007). In such setting, effective pedagogical focus is not just transforming learning and teaching by going virtual, but steeped in advancing the philosophy of effective leadership, a paradigm of school leadership accelerating expected results in uncertain and difficult times (McKinsey, 2020). Broadly, effective leadership is a corollary of transformed educational institution (Rees & Caviglioli, 2018). This argument finds accommodation in what Spillane (2005) calls "distributed leadership", which is a distributed, collegial and empowering leadership, a prerequisite in the contemporary organisational world, where trust, motivation, leadership by example and emphasis on collaboration are significant to rise above the pandemic challenges (Harris, 2020).

Effective leadership motivates, empowers and ensures concerned stakeholders act from within. These leaders do not just plan to achieve organisational aim and objectives alone; they create and foster autonomy in stakeholders/partners challenging them through personal example and

involvement to tackle problems (WHO, 2020). Effective leaders serve as a conduit for developing stakeholder agency and voice, which is crucially needed as the morale, commitment and inspiration of teachers, lecturers, and others are waning in the wake of the pandemic (McKinsey, 2020). This situation is crucial as everybody's voice matters for a sustainable, collaborative and effective leadership. By implication, effective leaders detest top-down, hierarchical leadership style, which negates collegiality and empowerment, which are critical success factors for leading change effectively (Kotter, 1996).

Furthermore, effective leadership involves result-oriented leadership practice rather than concentrating attention on leaders, their roles and functions as well as structures and routines (Rees & Caviglioli, 2018). Consequently, leaders are thus expected to rise above these difficult educational times by engaging in contextually-situated, relational and distributed leadership rather than being fixated on the old and the tried that supports the status quo (Spillane, 2005). Principally, effective leadership puts leadership practice that celebrates inclusion and voice amplification of concerned stakeholders at the centre stage (Spillane, 2005; Camburn, Rowan & Taylor, 2003). Extant literature advocates that such leadership model takes into serious consideration multiple players and/or stakeholders not just school 'leaders' but all involved in the "community of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991) including the government, teachers, lecturers, students, parents, regulators and others, whose voices matter in supporting learners in the era of coronavirus pandemic in a co-ordinated, efficient and result-oriented manner (Harris, 2020; WHO, 2020).

The above contention parallels what Bates (2015) identified as a promotion of "structured conversation" by providing an opportunity and/or platform to engage directly with students and lecturers to discuss collaboratively ways of tackling the challenges of these times through "networked leadership" rather than "traditional leaders[ship]" (Harris 2020, p. 324). The former detonates with leadership interaction rather than action as well as endorses the ideals of decentralised and flatter organisational structure and practice (Harris, 2013, 2020) as it supports empowerment and capacity building resulting in "joint activity and joint practice" (Harris, 2020, p. 325; Kotter, 1996, 1990; McKinsey, 2020). Conversely, traditional (managerial leadership is motivated by keeping the status quo as well as rationalising organisational leadership practice on the basis of emergency, economic constraints and market ratiocination, which de-emphasise contextual leadership and pragmatic practice. We therefore argue here that networked leadership, a metonym for effective leadership is fundamental to all planning and implementation of leadership policies in educational setting in the wake of COVID-19 leadership epic test for organisational survival as organisations globally are geared up for this leadership "re-set" and organisational renewal.

Nevertheless, too often, debate around effective leadership does not provide the required answer to school transformation and leadership; hence, it is glossed over that multiple players take responsibility for school leadership without a consideration that such leadership styles are shaped by organisational values, culture and new ways of doing things (Sergiovanni, 1997; Leithwood, 1994). Consequently, the conceptualisation of leadership style in educational setting in the wake of the pandemic should reshape organisational code of practice, culture and values (Kouzes & Posner, 1993). Kouzes & Posner (1993) argue that organisational culture and values constitute moral compass that guide decisions and actions including leadership actions; they are ineluctably the bases that provide equilibrium during crisis, chaos and transformation.

In this direction, Kouzes & Posner (1993) noted that organisational culture and value systems create an inner compass for solution in social interaction and transformation process as they symbolise the magnet that attracts stakeholders as well as a glue that holds members of educational institutions together by shaping what they do (Hofstede, 1980). As a result, leadership scholars (see Kotter, 1990; Hofstede, 1980) have stressed the significance of values and/or culture in facilitating effective leadership in educational settings (Bush & Glover, 2012). Broadly, what should shape leadership style in this era is reinvented school value system and

orientation mediated by the realities of the pandemic challenges for a successful school leadership (Harris & Jones, 2020).

The foregoing proposes that leaders in educational settings have the capability to impact their followers in the context of new, reinvented leadership and organisational culture (Kotter, 1990). Therefore, the impact of a leader's leadership style on subordinates and various actors is a prerequisite for motivating and leading stakeholders in realising the objectives of teaching and learning in schools, where effective leadership is needed to transcend the trammels of COVID-19 (Harris, 2020). Additionally, such effective leadership style resonates with the mantra of "inclusive turn" (Ainscow, 2007) in educational settings for shared and democratised school leadership. It also impact giving attention to students with varying degrees of ability and competences for optimal development and growth.

Re-Conceptualising Leadership: Effective Leadership as Pedagogic Praxis

Building on previous conceptualisation and empirical evidence within the context of educational leadership for inclusion education and effectiveness (Harris & Jones, 2020; Bates, 2015), we therefore argue that leading change in the current dispensation calls for pedagogic and management paradigm shift (Palaiologou & Male, 2019). This perspective and debate detonate with what Sahu, Lal & Mishra (2010, p. 1) refer to as "a changing paradigm shift" in the discourse of "COVID-2019" for more effective, ethical and morally mediated leadership practice. It calls for critical reflexivity (Harris, 2020), emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995), ethical leadership (Brown, Treviño & Harrison, 2005) and uncommon, practical judgement about the centrality of involving all and sundry in bringing genuine, sustainable change (Kuzemko, Lockwood, Mitchell & Hoggett, 2016). Kuzemko et al. (2016, p. 102) labelled this leadership "through goal oriented governance" framework.

Rearticulating leadership within the ambit of the above imagined theoretical landscape is not a call to arm, but a collegial, empowering and pragmatic leadership style that promotes normative conduct through interpersonal relations, effective initiatives and de-personalised actions that chime with putting people into leadership and management positions who will promote walking the walk as much as talking the talk (Kotter, 1990). It also requires reciprocity and mutual respect for subordinates' wellbeing, differencing perspectives and context and team building as well as capacity building (Bates, 2015). Therefore, by challenging people (teachers, assistant, leaders and others) to rise to the occasion and work collaboratively, pragmatically and effectively (Spillane, 2005), the atmosphere of transformation will be materialised and ensconced leading to a genuine change in educational institutions inside out (Kivunja, 2015; Bates, 2015).

Effective Leadership and The Way Forward

Given the changing nature of leadership phenomenon in educational settings attendant on the vagaries of COVID-19 challenges and shifting organisational policies and practices as a consequence, the concept of educational leadership has been made a top priority globally (Harris, 2020). Harris & Jones (2020) thus argue that one of the surest ways out of this educational, organisational and leadership *cul de sac*, is tapping into the energies of effective leadership, which can serve as a catalyst for effective change management in times of crisis as it has the capacity to refine school outcomes (Deloitte, 2020; Harris, 2020). Turnsek & Pekkarinen (2009) observe that this thinking resonates with a style of educational leadership that is geared "towards the democratisation of policies and practices" (p. 24) for smooth and effective transition to the new normal. This contention finds timber in the philosophy of the

Department for Education and Skills' (2004) *A New Relationship with Schools*. Notably, analogous studies have stressed that effective leadership within the remit of greater interdependency and capacity building through effective leadership will be instrumental for knowledge development, sharing and dissemination (Kivunja, 2015).

Leadership theorists and scholars have long highlighted the importance of effective leadership in driving desired changes in educational settings (Bush & Glover, 2012). Consequently, this paper builds and extends this model of leadership philosophy (Bates & Bailey, 2018; Leithwood, 1994). In addition, building on the logic of "inclusive education" (see Davis & Ryder, 2016; Ainscow, 2007), effective leadership supports a leadership model that is grounded in supporting best outcomes irrespective of natural abilities as well as manifest in enhancing quality of pedagogies, policies, and implementation procedures, which could lead to rising above the challenges posed by the pandemic. This leadership philosophy is critically required for reinventing school curricula and pedagogies as well as approaches to school leadership in the present time. Using the lens of effective leadership, McLenskey & Waldron (2015, p. 68) declared that "effective leadership makes schools truly inclusive" and result-oriented "in disruptive times" (Harris & Jones, 2020, p. 243). Consequently, "in a time of crisis, leaders must act swiftly and with foresight but also with careful consideration of options, consequences and side effects of best solution" (Netolicky, 2020, p. 1). Above all, such school leadership style is aimed at building the confidence level and trust of all stakeholders to rise above the tidal waves of coronavirus pandemic.

Based on the analysis undertaken in the preceding sections of this paper, we offer here our own perspective and/or vision in terms of the main principles and frameworks in which the leadership of educational institutions should be framed and operationalised in order to confront the dilemma of COVID-19 pandemic.

- Leading compassionately

This is one of the veritable means to actualise the vision of educational leadership as argued in this paper. Compassion refers to a great and deep consciousness as well as appreciation of the difficulties and challenges that people (academics and others in educational institutions) face with the wish to relieve it (de Zulueta, 2016). Notwithstanding the fact that the process of actualising compassion could be daunting and complex, showing compassion often comes naturally and helps in relieving difficulties. It is often provoked by ethical principles and emotional intelligence, which are central to leading effectively (Goleman, 1995). Compassion is inherently reciprocal; and if its tenets are infused into organisational culture and practices would lead to virtuous spiral, which is at the heart of business ethics and morally oriented leadership that will bring effective leadership and management of people in educational institutions. Therefore, developing leadership style and framework in order to lead effective change in the pandemic requires acknowledging and making provision for the challenges and difficulties of people working in an anxiety-laden context. This vision is at the heart of effective leadership in times of crisis (Binagwaho, 2020).

- Leading authentically

Authentic leadership is a core component of leading effectively in the era of COVID-19 pandemic. At the core of this leadership approach is building the leader's legitimacy via the instrumentality of honest relationships with followers by valuing their inputs and voices, which are built on a sound, moral and ethical foundation. Authentic leaders are positive individual and leaders with truthful self-concepts who advocate relational transparency, openness and genuine actions that will elicit leadership by example. Authentic leaders demonstrate internalised moral perspective, self-awareness, and balanced processing. It has been argued that authentic leaders positively impact job satisfaction and commitment that are needed in this era (Leroy et al., 2012).

- Leading adaptively and democratically

Another issue that is central to our take on leading effectively in this challenging time is adaptive and democratic leadership. Adaptive problems include those issues with no ready answers. These problems are manifest in the pandemic, for example, transition to online teaching and leadership and social distance dilemma and so on. The crop of leaders needed at the moment are those who have the humility to understand and appreciate that they do not possess all the answers to deal with the current state of affairs engendered by the pandemic. This also entails that both leaders and followers (partners) have to work collaboratively to share the responsibility of finding imperfect solutions, while recognising that it may well take a long time, with some process of trial and error to find “best” solutions. Further, democratizing tasks to be done in this regard is pivotal as well as listening to all relevant stakeholders and voices. This implies empowerment, engagement and democratised debate and dialogic between leaders and partners to stave off mistrust and suspicion and subsequent lack of co-operation.

Broadly, the above vision translates into providing appropriate wellbeing programmes, training, mentoring, coaching and sustaining high levels of trust as well as mutually supportive and compassionate interpersonal connection. It also entails developing and supporting the sharing of skills, knowledge, responsibility and workload across silos. This vision of leadership detonates with enabling and equipping individuals to experiment without fear of reprisal, to view errors as opportunities for learning and improvement and to reflect on their practice and professional conduct. In this sense, duties, responsibilities and supportive relationships need to be integrated into a coherent unity, which would create a space for genuine dialogue amongst students, teachers, managers, the institutions and other stakeholders.

Conclusion

This article has shed light on the centrality of effective leadership in leading (effective) change in times of crisis as seen with the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated challenges. The pandemic and its associated challenges have radicalised organisational practices, culture, values and *modus operandi* including leadership practice and style. Consequently, this paper contends that these challenges could be transcended in educational settings if “leaders” at whatever level and status engage in collaborative, democratised, distributed and transformational leadership, which celebrates the ideals of win-win logic, mutual benefits and best school outcomes for all stakeholders. Against the backdrop of the transactional, traditional and managerially driven leadership agenda that percolated pre-coronavirus era, this paper has argued that transcending the trammels stemming from this era (the COVID-19 epoch), can be achieved through effective leadership for reinvented schools. It is hoped that the insights shared here could engender a way of conceptualising and practising leadership in educational settings (and in the organisations) for a successful transition to “post-coronavirus era”, when organisations will emerge stronger, more agile, successful, innovative, creative and resilient to fight similar happenstance in future.

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