School leadership in unpredictable times

1 | INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of a new coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has spread globally at a rapid pace and continues to cause agony, sorrow and great concern for very many people all over the world. COVID-19 is not creating just a health emergency but is disrupting society and economy in a wide sense. It has had an important impact on the education sector as well, an impact that may change the way we consider delivering education in the future.

In many countries, children and young people have seen their schools and universities close. Thanks to the immediate vigorous efforts and joint strength of teachers, non-teaching staff and education leaders, many schools and higher education institutions have switched to online teaching and learning. For example, through broadcasting video lessons, enabling digital (self-) tests, peer interaction and peer feedback, and providing online contact with teachers and professors.

Despite the great efforts of many education professionals, COVID-19 creates a perilous situation for many children, young people and their parents. Many of them are faced with interrupted learning and under-privileged students with fewer educational opportunities beyond school are the hardest hit. Those preparing for tests, assessments or exams which are crucial for their future education and career are unsure whether, when, and how examinations will be organised. Disadvantaged children and children with special education needs may be deprived of the extra guidance and support they need to develop and learn. Poor children, who qualify for free or reduced-price school meals, miss out on nutritious lunches. Schools risk to lose sight of dropouts and children in unsafe home situations.

The coronavirus outbreak offers the education sector an excellent opportunity to boost online learning and to use other tools such as TV or radio. Yet, despite the great potential of online learning, there are practical and fundamental limitations. In practice, students may struggle to learn through online platforms alone; not everyone disposes of good online access, adequate devices and appropriate housing. It can contribute to widen the gap for disadvantaged students. From a whole child perspective, education and learning online or through other virtual or non presential means is a poor substitute for the whole endeavour of education. Education is thoroughly social; live interactions and encounters between children, young people, their peers and their teachers or professors are central to education.

The evolution of the disease and its broad societal and economic impact proves to be highly unpredictable, which makes it difficult for policymakers to take appropriate measures. Accordingly, for school leaders, the COVID-19 crisis represents an unpredictable element of the context in which they lead the provision of education in their schools.

The role of school leaders, in uncertain and challenging times such as these, becomes more important in leading, equipping and encouraging (teams of) teachers to provide distance and online teaching and learning and to keep in touch with students in difficult or unsafe situations at home. The articles in this volume show how school leaders are the interface between changes in the external context and the school, and a range of practices they can promote, including teacher cooperation in this new environment to sustain student learning.

This is a prime example of what Michael Fullan emphasises in this thematic issue on school leadership. In his thought piece on the changing nature of leadership, he argues that as the world becomes more complex and

non-linear, and as problems are deeper and more interdependent, there is a need for leaders who can lead and learn in unpredictable situations, and are able to see 'both the trees and the forest'.

2 | IN THIS ISSUE

This issue of the Journal addresses many different facets of school leadership. Particular attention is given to the nature of the work of school leaders; their roles and tasks; leadership practices, and the context in which school leaders operate. The volume has the following organisation: it begins with thought pieces from key scholars in the area of school leadership. The next set of articles provide a comparative perspective in terms of school leadership reforms and in school leadership development. These are followed by analysis of leadership practices in different countries and context.

In all thought pieces and articles included in the first part of the issue, the key role of school leaders in many different domains is emphasised. School leaders play a central role in domains such as the implementation of education policy; reform and improvement; boosting the school organisation; the professionalisation of (teams of) teachers; enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, connecting with parents and local community, meeting the demands of the political-administrative environment and responding to trends and developments—including crises and disruptions in society and the economy at large.

With respect to the latter, we would like to note that all thought pieces and articles included in this issue were written before COVID-19 reached pandemic proportions. Many of the thought pieces and articles touch on the importance of school leader responsiveness and flexibility in unpredictable situations. This implies that courage and steadfastness are needed when facing dilemmas and conflicting interests. The current issue is for this reason particularly relevant for the moment. Indeed, responsiveness, flexibility, courage and steadfastness are part of great school leadership.

The first part of this issue contains four thought pieces and six articles. In the first thought piece, Michael Fullan describes characteristics of interactive leadership; he argues that effective leaders are above all co-learners. Alma Harris advocates 'context responsive leadership' in her thought piece, emphasizing the importance for school leaders to learn about school and system improvement *in context*. In the third thought piece, Steve Munby affirms that context-specific problem solving is key to effective leadership. He unravels the roles of school leaders in leading successful reforms in education. In the last thought piece, Edith Hooge reflects on the important role that school leaders play in making meaningful use of increased school autonomy. She argues that school leaders need—in addition to knowledge of teaching and how to organise education—to dispose of extensive managerial, organisational and tactical skills; strategic insight and political astuteness; and last but not least, show great leadership.

In the first article, Beatriz Pont reports on her literature review of school leadership policy reforms. Observing that governments are increasingly introducing school leadership policies as part of their education reform agendas, this article aims to understand the factors that influence the adoption of school leadership policy reforms.

The following two articles review school leadership practices in different countries. The article by Mariella Knapp illustrates the pivotal role of school leaders in school improvement. She presents results from her interview study of Austrian school leaders. School leaders deal with various and contradictory demands from different stakeholders: school authority, parents, teachers, students, and the local public. School leaders perceived their role in school improvement processes as a balancing act. Knapp uses the term *gap management* for the kind of balancing of interests that school leaders do in their work. David Ng and Choun Wong examine the economic, social and environmental context of Singapore, to gain insight to the values, skills and knowledge that are required for what Ng and Wong term as future-ready education. They ascribe a crucial role to school leaders in creating adequate teaching and learning environments for preparing students for the future.

The last three articles in part I of this issue concentrate on the role and impact of school leaders for supporting collaboration among and professional development of teachers and teacher teams within schools. Mehmet Bellibaş, Sedat Gümüş and Ali Kılınç examine in their article the effects of principals' learning-centred leadership in fostering teacher leadership and the mediating role of teacher agency in Turkey. Bellibaş, Gümüş and Kılınç used a cross-sectional survey of 388 teachers to inform their analysis. Patrick van Schaik, Monique Volman, Wilfried Admiraal and Wouter Schenke, in turn, adopted an integrative perspective on leadership by examining both learning-centred leadership and distributed leadership practices. Schaik and colleagues used findings from ten interviews with school leaders in the Netherlands and a survey of 39 teachers from six secondary schools in the Netherlands, to develop a typology of how school leaders foster collaborative teacher learning.

The last of the articles on the theme of school leadership is by Femke Geijsel, Wouter Schenke, Jan van Driel and Monique Volman. It draws on 28 retrospective interviews with school leaders. The article explores the extent to which, and how, school leaders in the Netherlands encourage and integrate inquiry-based practices in their schools.

3 | PART II

Part II opens with an article by John Jerrim, Luis Alejandro Lopez-Agudo and Oscar Marcenaro, *The association between homework and primary school children's academic achievement: International evidence from PIRLS and TIMSS*. Survey data for twenty-four countries was used for investigating the relationship between time spent on homework and student outcomes. Using a student fixed-effects approach allowed authors to capture differences in homework time amongst the same students across different school subjects. Findings indicate a weak relationship between the amount of homework time primary school children were assigned and their academic achievement. The authors conclude that homework practices need to be improved, as current homework practices do not seem to be producing a positive association between time spent on homework and learning outcomes.

The second article by Ilya Prakhov and Denis Sergienko, *Matching between students and universities: What are the sources of inequalities of access to higher education?* analyses higher education admissions data from the Unified State Exam (USE) in Russia. Matching theory predicts—in the absence of transaction costs associated with university enrolment—a perfect match between the academic achievement of students and the quality of higher education institutions. However, using data on Moscow high school graduates who entered university, the authors identify cases of mismatch. Determinants of the mismatch between the quality of universities and applicant abilities were assessed in this study that focused on the emergence of unequal higher education access. Whilst overall matching is confirmed, individual student achievement is shown to vary by factors that precede enrolment, notably school and family characteristics.

The third article by Světlana Hanušová, Michaela Pišová, Tomáš Kohoutek, Eva Minaříková, Stanislav Ježek, Tomáš Janík, Jan Mareš, and Miroslav Janík, *Novice teachers in the Czech Republic and their drop-out intentions* analyses results from a 2015–2017 survey of novice teacher satisfaction in primary and lower secondary schools. The research focused on teacher drop-out intentions in the Czech Republic. Notably, external factors that influence novice teachers' socialisation and predict their decision to stay in their current school. Findings indicate that school level factors such as school culture and climate, cooperation with colleagues and leadership influenced novice teachers' decisions. Teachers tended to stay in well-functioning schools with cooperative colleagues and good head teachers.

The last article by Heiko Haase, Mario Franco and Eugénia Pedro, *International student mobility in a German and Portuguese university: Which factors in the host institution matter?* presents findings from a survey among 289 incoming international students in two universities: the Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena (FSU) in Germany and the Universidade da Beira Interior (UBI) in Portugal. The study explored factors that determine student satisfaction with higher education institutions that serve as hosts for international mobility. Findings demonstrate

that satisfaction with academic factors was more important for international students than satisfaction with non-academic aspects.

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