

Fighting Public School Crisis: My Role as a School Leader [Principal] During COVID-19 Pandemic

Dr. Sarita Sinha*

Principal, Delhi Public School, Dhanbad, Jharkhand, India

Abstract – A crisis is an unstable time in which a decisive change is awaiting, especially with the divergent possibility of extremely undesirable outcomes. Given the exacerbated inequality in primary and secondary education student access and learning which had already been observed and reported extensively by news media, the COVID-19 pandemic unquestionably qualifies as a public education crisis. School leadership in times of disaster requires strategically and delicately balancing sensitive relational skills with effective and efficient leadership competencies. The COVID-19 pandemic, bringing to the forefront and catalyzing long-unconfronted educational inequities, in addition to economic fall down and deep political differences - which all impact students and schools – has resulted in a complex crisis that requires a fresh conceptualization of school leadership during times of crisis.

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In this context, I **Dr Sarita Sinha**, Principal of largest, culturally plural and economically diverse school of eastern Jharkhand would like to share my leadership experience as head of the institution during the apocalyptic crisis – the COVID 19 pandemic beginning from the time schools were closing in March 2020. As an individual I engaged myself into the comprehensive thinking, planning and practice to handle the compound crisis, in order to generate a rich description and gain an understanding of school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. I explored how a compound crisis may become an opportunity for curing ingrained societal problems. Public school was badly impacted by the pandemic and how to deliver educational learning needs was the greatest challenge for me. I started examining and re-examining existing systemic inefficiencies and cultivated new and different mechanism and mindset needed to confront crisis. In these circumstances I designed course of action based on crisis leadership and transformative leadership framework of school education.

DELIVERING CRISIS LEADERSHIP AND TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP THROUGHOUT THE PANDEMIC

Crises are invasive and painful experiences for educational leaders and all school stakeholders and a mishandled crisis poses the significant threat of negatively impacting an organization. All crises exists three components – threat, uncertainty, and urgency. I identified five categories of school-based crises include short-term crises, cathartic crises, long-term

crises, one-off crises, and infectious crises. To handle this type of crisis I adopted a linear crisis management strategy: prevent, respond, and recover and an open two-way communication for decision making, which minimizes misinformation.

- **Personalised and Pragmatic Communication:** started online classes and learning platform, went hand in hand with communicating all stakeholders. Emphasized the importance of making a personal connection while providing practical information about what was happening, and why. When communicating with teachers and communities, I aimed to comfort people and stay connected. As a Principal I tried “keeping the pieces together, keeping everyone calm, and keeping everyone feeling a sense...we’ll get through this together”. I made myself accessible all the time to assist teachers and students and parents...my goal was always to respond immediately...after the pandemic, the communication absolutely increased and I was fine with it. I understood that this was a different situation.
- **Leading with flexibility, creativity and care:** Facing the unexpected, I shared a mindset open to possibility. The first thing I did was to let the staff know that it was going to be a new normal and that we needed to reach out in ways different than

we were ever used to for like elementary classes. Caring came in countless forms. I celebrated teachers in numerous ways to express my support and to motivate them during a difficult time. In my view the creative, flexible and caring qualities of the leaders helped everyone to cope with the ambiguity and complex demands of the crisis.

- **Bending Rules and shifting priorities:** The pandemic induced crisis forced me to bend rules and shift established priorities and work responsibilities. Moving instruction online became a top priority along with communicating and staying connected with the community. I identified tensions between academic expectations and the new social realities of people's lives. I personally experienced tensions related to addressing academic and social needs with either maintaining or relaxing requirements or rigor. My teachers are largely overachievers, which is a great problem to have. And so, I had to spend a lot of time trying to talk them into a reasonable expectation for student performance, student deliverables, grades, because they were wanting to carry on with their traditional expectations. I have categorically given instructions to my teachers that they were required to teach to standards. They were required to grade as appropriate. The students were required to take assessments. I mean, I tried to make it as "normal" as possible.

RESILIENCE UNDER PRESSURE

I believe in hard work and innovation. I continuously tried to contain the impact of the crisis and survive during the pandemic. This included coping and self-care. Resilience was manifested in also being able to see the possibilities for my school and community going forward. As a leader I were learning from the crisis and sowing the seeds for adaptive growth.

- **Coping and self-care:** In addition to facilitating support for teachers and staff, principals had to tend to their own well-being. My optimistic outlook, background and experience contributed to a positive mindset for my institution. Conducting virtual motivational talks and online training was of great help. Religion and spirituality is the other vital instrument that helped a lot to cope with this global pandemic.
- **Adaptation – learning:** the present pandemic especially for our industry was a great empirical learning experience. I envisioned ways that they could carry forward the suffering and struggles into something positive for my schools in the

future. This would certainly help us to adapt and make changes going forward. I started finding out deficiencies in my system. I realised that, there is urgent need to give more training on the use of technology. I facilitated and amplified how teachers integrating the technology in class room. I also learned how meetings would be conducted in the future by Zoom or Google meets efficiently and raising productivity. I also assured that the virtual classroom must have humanized teachers in the eyes of students and that could help obviate behavioural problem.

SOCIAL OUTREACH RESPONSIBILITY: RESPONDING TO PANDEMIC MY OWN JOURNEY AS SCHOOL LEADER

The COVID-19 has led to a public health emergency of international concern as per the declaration of the World Health Organization (WHO). Enormous threats, at a different level and different extents, have been associated with the pandemic outbreak around the globe. The challenge extends from protecting human being to economic systems and securing the continuity of life itself. Amid the COVID-19 crisis, health resources encounter scarcity and unprecedented pressure; facilities of quarantine and isolation become inadequate with the increasing number of infected and suspected cases; millions of people around the world have lost their jobs; the prevalence of psychological illnesses and post-traumatic stress disorder is raising additional concerns. In my District I observed the situation and channelize my effort and resources to help the needy local community. I associated and involved myself into variety of charitable work during pandemic. I advocated and promoted the concept of Individual Social Responsibility (ISR). Under my leadership we delivered ten thousand ready to eat meals to the marginalised section of society in Dhanbad district throughout the pandemic, distributed sanitizer, mask and personal protective equipment to the front line workers of Dhanbad, donated ten lakh rupees to PM care Fund and many more acts to be supportive for social, economic, social and environmental wellbeing. COVID-19 is a human, economic and social crisis. Immediate ISR investments can have direct tangible impacts through humane support and economic relief for vulnerable and suffering people, frontline workers, and collapsed enterprises.

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Despite the enormity of the challenges that COVID-19 has thrust upon to our educational systems, I personally felt that some "silver linings," or unexpected positive outcomes, had emerge, that would lead to future opportunities for students and staff. The global pandemic and the concurrent

changes in school structures and activities have given everyone the permission to “think about the future of education,” and to question the *status quo*. Changes in almost every area of education are being considered, including new commitments to the collective wisdom of the educational community, new structures of family engagement, expansive integration of technology, the creation of new resources, and, most importantly, a new appreciation and recognition of student voice. Another silver lining from the pandemic appears to have been the explosion of better technology integration across educational systems.

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Corresponding Author

Dr. Sarita Sinha*

Principal, Delhi Public School, Dhanbad, Jharkhand,
India

saritasnh@yahoo.com