Principal, let's talk about emotions: some lessons COVID-19 taught us about emergency situations and leadership

Oplatka, I. & Crawford, M.
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Introduction

In early 2020, with the appearance of COVID-19, countries in all over the world have enacted specific rules and regulations aimed at preventing the spread of the virus. Thus, in order to keep the number of infections and deaths relatively low, higher education institutions and schools were closed down for a long time, sometimes several times (Scull, Phillips, Sharma & Garnier, 2020). For the first time since World War two, many countries have experienced lockdowns and closures of many services, limiting as many as 1.6 billion young people to on-line teaching (Zhao, 2020).

Although schools closed their buildings, the delivery of education did not stop. Schools, local education authorities (LAs) and Education Districts have encouraged online teaching, being responsible for the access to technology resources for teachers and students. Likewise, those in charge of education have had to ensure that teachers, sitting in their home could deliver remote instructional services for students who were also at home due to many lockdowns enforced by governments worldwide. According to Jameson et al. (2020), these efforts frequently included providing hardware and software resources for teachers (i.e., cameras, microphones, computers that could be used remotely, video-conferencing software, instructional software), as well as attempts to ensure that teachers had access to a high-speed internet connection from off-campus locations. In many respects, the attempts to continue teaching and learning processes via zoom (and the like) seem to represent a desire by education policy-makers to return to normality as quickly as possible (Kayyem, 2020). However, it was a sharp shift to the digital era that resulted in many difficulties and uncertainties.

The new teaching mode has not been without problems and difficulties. First, as extra days in school significantly raise scores on tests of the use of knowledge (Carlsson et al., 2015), the closure of schools and the transition to online teaching was perceived by teachers to decrease student performance and well-being (Fauzi & Khusuma, 2020). For example, Pilipino teachers felt hampered due to lack of facilities, equipment, and capacity building to distance learning education. The length of teaching experience and specialization were very strongly correlated to teachers' readiness to distance learning education (Alea, Fabrea, Roldan & Farooqi, 2020). In

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contrast, Gore et al., (2021) indicated that the disruptions to schooling caused by COVID-19 in Australia did not have the kinds of dire implications for student learning that many commentators had predicted.

Second, while the commitment of principals and school staff to online teaching has been observed in many places (Arar, Sawalhi, Chaaban, Zohri & Alhouti, 2021), many teachers pointed to the difficulty in fulfilling that commitment due to a lack of resources. Varela & Fedynich (2020) examined schools' responses to the pandemic in Texas. They found that,

> School leaders reported confidence in their preparedness to lead instruction, and to support teachers, all students, and parents during remote instruction as a result of COVID-19 pandemic related school closures. In fact, 79% of school leader respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were prepared to lead high quality instruction delivered virtually...where in every other instance, a majority of respondents reported high levels of confidence and preparedness, the question of resource availability is where the data flipped. The results indicated that 63% of school leader respondents believed their campus/district was not prepared with the appropriate resources needed to continue high quality instruction remotely as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such is the crux of the education system: dedication, passion, intention, and commitment, but not enough money to make it happen (p. 7-8).

Similarly, school leaders from five Arab countries in Arar et al.s' (2021) comparative study developed new skills they never thought they would while leading in the digital time brought about by ongoing lockdowns. Likewise, they became more open towards trying new modalities and skills such as using digital tools in their school. It is evident, though, that a great deal of effort has been to facilitate online teaching in a short time, to make sure that both teachers and students have the adequate hardware, software, and internet connectivity resources required to deliver instruction via zoom or related technologies (Gurr & Drysdale, 2020; Jameson et al., 2020). Schaffer Metcalfe and Perez (2020) found that immediate communication from the district office in their study was in place to support and guide school leaders of this urban elementary school district, but they were still incomplete. The school principal they interviewed commented:

> We found out many families did not have Internet service, and many struggled with technology and connectivity with Wi-Fi. We tried to bridge the Internet connectivity gap by providing all families an opportunity to connect with Cox Communications, a local Internet provider (p. 52)

It is evident worldwide that the abrupt need to replace traditional teaching methods with online ones immediately after the lockdown has required all teachers to change learning patterns. However, while 82.6 per cent of teachers in Phelps and Sperry's (2020) survey admitted that online learning systems introduced by the Ministry of Education helped them greatly in conveying learning to students during the COVID-19 pandemic, LEAs had to train teachers to use the remote teaching materials and to develop effective remote instructional software. In fact, the quick deployment of professional development programs to support technology-based remote learning was likely an additional challenge for many.(Jameson et al., 2020). Likewise, teachers had to find the best ways to communicate with families, colleagues, and students who are accessible online (Talidong, K.J.B. & Toquero, 2020)

All these efforts have focused primarily on online teaching while issues of values, emotions, and morality have been marginalized, sometimes even ignored. This reflects, by and large, the dominance of neoliberal ideologies in the last decades, emphasizing student achievement and accountability over any other part of the schooling process. This could be seen as enhanced use in educational technology following COVID-19 accelerating an increasing shift towards further privatization, commodification, or else the automation of education (Mindzak, 2020).

If the main purpose of education is epitomized by grades, testing, pedagogical contents, and achievement, it is unsurprising that many education policy makers around the world believed that the zoom or any similar software could substitute for the on-site teaching and learning processes. Driven by the primary aim of raising cognitive skills and child's varied abilities, many outside education could convince themselves that online teaching would have the same impact on student development and achievement, as if human-teachers had no additional value in the schooling process. Looking at the transition from onsite to online instruction, Mindzak (2020) maintained:

> Moving towards forms of teaching and learning that do not reside in a fixed physical location or place continues to make educators revaluate the traditional classroom with one that is not necessarily limited by considerations of space. Most prominently, educational technology has sought to fill the space left by schools as they have (now increasingly) transitioned to digital modalities. Thus, as educators grapple with developing new pedagogical practices and strategies alongside training with new tools

and applications, the place of education increasingly moves beyond the schoolhouse or classroom (p. 20).

In our view, nonetheless, the 'place', i.e., the setting in which children and teenagers gather together to gain new knowledge and meet their peers is critical for their moral, social, and emotional development, not only for knowledge acquisition and testing. What the pandemic and its consecutive lockdowns and school closures taught us is, first and foremost, that there is no substitute to varied human interactions in the school's yard, corridors, and particularly classrooms. Technology of any kind and complexity cannot substitute principal-teachers, teachers-teachers, teacher-students, and students-students face-to-face interactions and one cannot expect that any online platform can be an arena of the same emotional closeness among school members.

We argue here, then, that the reopening of schools and the return of school members and students to (real) educational settings should be accompanied by greater efforts to manage teachers and students' emotions holistically and profoundly. School leaders should support their staff in coping with a sense of loneliness and frustration many of them have experienced during this period and thereby encourage them to manage their emotions in classrooms and support their students similarly. After all, when people experience long days of quarantines and social isolation, they may develop negative emotions and feelings such as a sense of loneliness or frustration (Dor-Haim & Oplatka, 2021). To cope with these and related negative emotions, they should be supported in their emotion management and regulation when return to their workplace.

Thus, and consistent with Mindzak (2020) who suggested asking how we might do things differently rather than asking how can we return back to doing what we were doing before, we might ask how school leaders could inculcate a sense of emotional closeness in the school and help teachers and students manage their emotion both in times of emergency and afterwards. Our questions are relevant also to higher education institutions, as students' emotions are embedded in learning of any type and level (Arar & Chen, 2021). In raising these pondering on the surface, we may provide professional communities in the digital literacy era with competencies and tools to face emotional distance characterising this era in a more effective manner.

To this end, we outline negative feelings of high emotional distance, loneliness, alienation and frustration which appeared during school closures among

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many teachers and students worldwide. Then, we analyse the desirable role of educational leaders in emergency cases and suggest several practical implications for future periods of uncertainty and crisis in educational systems worldwide.

A greater emotional distance

Whereas education authorities and schools have placed a heavy emphasis on ensuring ongoing teaching-learning processes, less attention has been given to the mental health of both teachers and students who stayed at home, being remote emotionally from one another and denying the unique social climate of physical classrooms. The mental health of many young people who have felt trapped or isolated at home during the lockdowns has the potential to become a greater problem than the virus itself (Harris & Jones, 2020). According to Blaustein (2013), it appears that mental health is being viewed as secondary or unrelated to academic success and the ways to support children who receive behavioural and mental health supports in the school seem to have been marginalized.

A study conducted among university students during the COVID-19 pandemic found that online teaching might provide them with adequate levels of knowledge and data literacy competences. In contrast, however, it could not provide them with appropriate communication and collaboration competences (Scull et al., 2020). Therefore, the students faced a heightened risk of feeling isolated, especially when they could not meet face-to-face with their peers and tutors.

Social isolation, according to Poletti (2020), is likely to be intensified by socioeconomic differences in terms of suitable places to do homework, electronic devices, internet access, owned books, and parents' capacity to sustain children along this period off-school. Particularly, the learning process among children with special education needs and with intellectual disability, may be more affected by the prolonged interruption of daily routines due to school closure. Additionally, the impact of the pandemic has increased socioemotional and financial stress among many families, which in turn could make it difficult for children in these households to focus adequately on academic tasks (Phelps & Sperry, 2020).

Using the concept of emotional distance can help us further analyse the emotional experiences of teachers and students during online teaching. Emotional distance (also called subjective distance) is defined as "individuals' cognitive and affective representations of the distance between them and their team members" (Wilson, O'Leary, Metiu & Jett, 2005, p. 6). Thus, during the lockdowns, when

teachers and students have communicated one another via online mechanisms, they were likely spending and sharing diverse activities together but at the same time were lacking emotional closeness. Emotional closeness is the extent to which "an individual feels intimate and discloses his self to another individual" (Seibert, Kraimer & Liden, 2001, p.4). Put another way, the extent to which they could feel intimacy and enjoyment of relationships was extremely limited, given the reasonable constraints of online communication that is performed from distance and lacks face-to-face interactions. This may also be because the focus of online working was to do with a process of learning which was not explicit about relationship enhancement. Time needs to be taken in online working to focus on, and enhance working relations as well as the teaching work that needs to be completed. Building relationships virtually is difficult but can be done.   We shall return to this point when we discuss the reopening of schools and the preparation for emergency situations in the future.

Negative emotions among teachers

COVID-19 has changed the lives of many people around the world who had to stay at home in times of lockdowns or quarantines. The abrupt pandemic created fear, trauma, depression, frustration and anxiety to people, especially those who lost their loved ones in that period.

Recent research on teachers and teaching during COVID-19 outbreak indicates similar findings across the globe. A survey of language teachers from many countries (e.g., Europe, North American, Asia) found that the rapid conversion to online teaching, the blurred lines between work and home coupled with the omnipresent concern for the health of family and oneself, has produced high levels of stress among language teachers worldwide (Maclntyre, P.D., Gregersen, T. & Mercer, 2020). A study from England focused on two different stressors among teachers. The first was uncertainty related to the announcement of full or partial school closures, resulting in immediate demands and planning for what might happen next. The second stressor concerned worry for vulnerable pupils and their families. English teachers also reported feeling emotionally overwhelmed by the alterations they were experiencing but not higher levels of workload (Kim & Asbury, 2020). To face the new situation effectively, they tended to employ emotion-focused strategies, particularly seeking emotional support from colleagues and venting to each other.

Similarly, Filipinos teachers were found to be worried about the safety of their loved ones and even their lifestyles because of the fears due to the pandemic.

Although they have demonstrated a positive outlook in life amid the COVID-19 outbreak, they were still susceptible to the anxieties since the pandemic is still ongoing worldwide. However, at the same time the teachers claimed they were well aware of what to do to cope with their educational, social, and personal anxieties (Talidong, K.J.B. & Toquero, 2020). An illustration of the teacher's negative emotions during the pandemic was Lapproth, Federkeil, Heinschke and Jungmann (2020) who examined the well-being of German teachers:

> [The teachers] experienced medium to high levels of stress. More than 50 percent of them spent more than four hours daily on remote teaching, with secondary grammar school teachers experiencing significantly more stress and working more hours daily than special education teachers. The vast majority of them experienced technical barriers, but most of them felt able to cope functionally with the stress. Female teachers experienced significantly more stress, but coped with it more often in a functional way; teachers used more functional coping strategies when they expected external factors as barriers for distance teaching… (p. 450).

One may assume that the primary negative feelings shared by teachers during the pandemic were stress and pressure and therefore the adoption of effective cognitive and emotional strategies is sufficient when reopening the schools. But, as stress and pressure may be related to other negative emotions that are prevalent among teachers (e.g., anxiety, anger, frustration, sadness, personal distress) and result in higher levels of professional burnout (Oplatka, 2009), educational leaders should pay attention to a wide variety of emotions when managing teachers emotion during and after school closures. We elaborate on this below.

Emotional leadership in emergency situations

Crises are frighteningly common. Hurricanes, tornadoes, tsunamis, floods, pandemics, wildfires, and terrorist attacks has always impacted on human communities, as do acts of violence and murder. Regardless of the nature and characteristics of the crisis, the more sensitive that emergency workers are to the emotive (affective) component of the job, the better served the community is as it recuperates and finds its "new" normal (Guy, Newman & Ganapati, 2013). In times of the pandemic, though, teachers and educational leaders should also be referred to as emergency employees.

In order to understand the emotional role of educational leaders during emergency situation (e.g., COVID-19), we read the literature about employees in emergency organizations (e.g., the Red Cross, firefighting services). It is evident that

emergency responders (e.g., firemen, ambulance staff) are called upon to manage their own emotions as well as those in distress and other constituencies. An example we receive from the case of the Aurora, Colorado Theatre shooting. Guy et al. (2013) used this case to exhibit the emotive aspects of emergency response. They explored emotion management among police, emergency medical personnel, and victim assistance counsellors, and public spokespersons, and showed how emotion management is a critical part of their job. They explained:

> … While the desirable state is for workers to keep their emotions in check, be empathic to those directly affected, and exhibit grace under pressure, that often means suppressing their emotions and dealing with them later or not at all. The sights they see, the sounds they hear, the scents they smell, are often horrific, always emotionally intense… Responders and spokespersons must manage their own emotions as well as the emotions of those affected by the event (p. 17).

Similarly, emotion management in medical emergency calls is a professional social sensitivity initiated and carried out by call-takers when interacting with callers. Hedman (2016) found that an overall strategy of call-takers in medical emergency calls includes employing varied emotion management practices concurrently. Thus, call-takers typically react sensitively to callers' emotions through specific and recipient designed practices of emotion management. For example, call-takers are oriented to see emergency events from the eyes of callers and thereby use their emergency response expertise when performing emotion management in medical emergency calls. They are routinely, though, able to stay calm and composed and organize their conduct so that the calls are moving towards to overall goals of the medical emergency call of making an informed ambulance assistance decision and preparing for the arrival of the ambulance services. Likewise, when callers become worried and agitated the call-takers maintain their professional emotional neutrality, stay calm and reassure callers that they have emergency response operations under control.

It is apparent, thus far, that emotion management through calming practices will likely to decrease one's anxiety in emergency cases. Of course, these emergencies are a time limited experience, and one of the features educational leaders have had to cope with is the uncertainty of when the educational emergency will end, and how it will affect the school community. This added complexity in the emotional arena means that solutions that have worked in the past may not be viable or useful. The

educational leader has both to manage their own fears and anxieties and those of the wider school community, which can, if not carefully managed, become overwhelming. Anxious students and teachers, for example, will generally benefit from extra emphasis on supportive calming statements by their educational leaders (and teachers in the case of students). This form of emotion management includes what Haidt (2003) named 'moral emotions.' He defined it as "emotions that are linked to the interests or welfare either of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent" (p. 853).

In this sense, educational leaders are motivated by this kind of emotion to care about the well-being and the interests of teachers and students, particularly when they are emotional distanced from one another, closed at home and communicate via the zoom. After all, staff meetings, coffee catch ups or corridor chats with colleagues, a natural aspect of every teacher's work life, have gone in times of school closure. In other words, moral emotion in the form of caring for others is especially important for teachers and students when their face-to-face interactions have been replaced by virtual communication and online teaching. Human interactions in the school have simply vanished overnight, as Harris and Jones (2020) indicated. Considering educational leaders' well-being and emotion management, they further claimed that,

> Self-care and consideration must be the main priority and prime concern for all school leaders. Leading a school through the changes and challenges that accompany COVID19 and post COVID19 will require school leaders who put their own health and wellbeing first, so that they will be able to help others. Increasingly, school leaders are managing the emotional responses of others to this crisis including anxiety, frustration loss, and anger. Consequently, self-care must be a priority for those leading schools at all levels (Harris & Jones, 2020, p. 245).

No doubt, the pandemic and its consecutive lockdowns and school closures have increased pressures and stress in the school. The principals themselves are in a ambivalent situation. They must cope with the school community and its members' emotion, as well as with the need to build professional capital communities that are based on effective and holistic emotion management. How they deal with uncertainty in life is a key component to their emotional self which may well have been amplified by the nature of the pandemic. Principals have to look outward whilst at the same time managing their own emotions, and gaining support where needed. As Bottery (in

press 2021) suggests they 'have to develop frames of mind which can better negotiate this uncertain and unpredictable future."

Emotional leadership, then is a complex but vital component for the principal which involves placing more emphasis on emotion management in school to facilitate schools' reopening and classroom teaching. The practical implications of how to go about attaining this goal are the focus of the next section.

Emotional leadership: Some practical implications

We began this paper by highlighting the importance of emotional role in educational leadership that is oriented towards caring for teachers and students during and after school closure. This is related to evidence of high pressures and stress and a sense of loneliness amid students and teachers during school closure and online teaching. But, the question of how to do it in practice remains an area for discussion and debate. The next part of this article takes forward some ideas that may help the discussion move forward.

No one knows whether COVID-19 is a sole phenomenon or the first pandemic in a series of pandemics. Therefore, it is necessary to prepare educational leaders and teachers for emergencies, in general, and for management of themselves and others during emergencies, in particular. Special attention should be given to the means by which leaders can minimize feelings of emotional distance and increase a sense of emotional closeness among teachers even in times of school closure. Personal conversations and face-to-face encounters in the school (liable to the permitted number of people in one room) or in the school's yard could facilitate teachers' feelings of isolation and alienation during school closure.

As suggested in Crawford (2009) this sense of community is at the heart of a school's emotional life. In a situation where the boundaries change, emotional connection can still be found online, as we have seen with families connecting during the pandemic. Leaders need to be able to steward the online space in the same way as they would in person, and bring together online those supportive aspects of their role. This can be anything from quizzes and relaxing activities, to small discussion groups on wider educational issues of the time. This is also an opportunity for leaders to work with others more experienced in the virtual to make forward strides in learning and teaching.

As many institutions were caught off guard by this pandemic, so there are few or no guidelines for planning and delivering mental health services to children with

trauma-related issues (Phelps & Sperry, 2020), educational leaders should revise or plan in advance how to communicate with unprivileged families and with students with mental disabilities even in times of lockdowns. Procedures of support from distances should be developed and planned and every teacher should have a role in emergency; for example, calling several students every day, supporting parents of students with special education needs, and so on.

Open discussion of the emotions that leaders and teachers may display during emergencies and those that can cause difficulty, can be a key part of the school's emotional interface. This will help devise emotion rules in the school and help find the ways to highlight the importance of emotion to students and their families when the school is closed and after reopening it. Due to high levels of pressure and stress among teachers and educational leaders during online teaching and school closures, there are developmental activities that can help them cope with the downside of performing emotionally intense work such as mitigation and recovery efforts. School principal may want to consider hiring professional in this field to prepare school staff for future emotional stress caused by the unexpected.

The most difficult aspect for many leaders, due to pressure from outside the school, is to put the cult of achievement aside. We urge educational leaders to look at how time can be devoted to moral and emotional development to help children and teenagers overcome the difficulties they have faced during a host of lockdowns, quarantines, and school closures.

Finally, some attention should be placed to leaders' own mechanisms of emotion management in emergencies. After all, educational leaders have suffered much pressure and stress during school closure and virtual online. Policy-makers and superintendents should, therefore, provide new and senior educational leaders with tools to manage their emotions effectively (e.g., displaying calm and acceptance rather than anger and frustration), particularly in times of uncertainty and anxiety.

Future research should explore emotion management practices of educational leaders in more detail to help policy-makers and others in education, plan adequate procedures to allow schools to address emotions, both positive and negative, effectively. Particularly, researchers may want to examine far reaching effects of the pandemic crisis on emotions in educational leadership and teaching and on emotion management in classrooms. Further empirical attention should be given to changes in schools brought about by online learning and new digital arrangements introduced by

and large during the COVID-19 crisis. Likewise, consistent with the digital ear in higher education (Arar & Chen, 2021), further research is required to explore the connection between the digital revolution in education and leaders and teachers' emotion management.

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