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Covid Leadership: Increasing capability across a changing digital landscape

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Abstract

Educational leadership has always been closely linked to change and improvement. As Covid-19 quarantine measures brought about sudden changes, the need for leaders to guide and maintain effective instructional practice was pivotal in the success or failure of schools' online learning provision. This paper details one school's approach to managing Continuous Professional Development (CPD) that was focused on developing online teaching competency. It discusses the relevance of that experience in planning for a longer-term provision. It warns of the danger of overgeneralizing lessons learned from solutions which were planned quickly during emergency circumstances and applying that to a very different context, whilst highlighting the need for continuous monitoring and evaluation.

1. Introduction

As pedagogy has developed over the years and legislation has brought about change after change, the education community has started to take for granted the crucial place that Continuous Professional Development (CPD) occupies in the teacher's role. In the UK, being responsible for one's own professional development is included in the teaching standards (DfE, 2016b) and the Department of Education

make clear the role that school leaders have in making CPD both relevant for teachers and focused on having an impact on student progression (DfE, 2016a). The global accreditation body Cognia list one of the standards that institutions are judged by as the leadership's adherence to improving professional practice across the organisation (AdvancED, 2020).

Increasing capability is a core part of any educational leader's role and as needs arise and contexts change, needs-based CPD also shifts in direction. As school closures in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia took teaching and learning from the classroom to the home literally overnight, a sudden need to increase capability in the new paradigm was identified. The competent leaders were those that kept delivering this core part of their role through uncharted waters.

This commentary presents a case study of one K-12 international school in KSA (which is led by the author of this paper) that successfully switched from regular face-to-face teaching to full-time online schooling. Rather than discussing the issues related to technical infrastructure and sourcing appropriate learning resources, the case study explores how the school leadership supported teacher competency growth. As the Kindergarten section of this school implemented a purely asynchronous model and this study is mainly concerned with synchronous study, the grade levels discussed are from grades one through to twelve. Although segregated, with boys and girls sections, the senior management for the school is shared.

This paper offers an opportunity to reflect on how effectively leadership can rapidly respond to novel situations and suggests what needs to be considered when those situations persist long-term. Solutions developed quickly need not be kept just because they work in the moment. Instead, there could be a need to redesign an entire program or procedure in order to give it a stronger theoretical base.

2. Identifying the hidden stars

Many schools practicing a distributed leadership model have already seen the impact that such an approach can have on their professional learning communities (Jambo & Hongde, 2020). A top-down management approach is limited because no senior leader can be an expert in all things and so utilising the expertise of the entire team can unlock a lot of hidden capability. In the context of Covid-19 and the sudden emergency measures that followed, not only did very few senior leaders have significant experience in online pedagogy but there was also very little time to conduct

extensive research in the field before planning accordingly. In the school in this study, early discussions between the leadership and the teaching team revealed that many of the teachers had been teaching online for several years. They had experience with online classroom tools, supplementary online resources and the teaching strategies that were appropriate for the new medium. These in-house experts played a crucial role in guiding the development of plans and in mentoring less experienced team members.

3. Professional development

Informal discussions with school leaders and professionals involved in teacher development in the region brought up some heavy criticism regarding the focus of CPD during the first few weeks of lockdown. They highlighted the fact that most of the questions raised in workshops revealed that educators were primarily concerned with how to deal with the technical aspects of using and selecting the right online tools rather than enquiring about what pedagogy is needed specifically for online learning. These criticisms, whilst factual are not necessarily as negative as they are portrayed by those seeking deeper educational discussions on online learning. Post crisis, many months after the online switch, then more focus should be placed on pedagogy but at the onset of lockdown, technical competency was quite rightfully a top priority. One must learn how to use a tool effectively in the technical sense before moving on to applying it appropriately in different situations. To use an offline analogy, one cannot teach a student how to write a persuasive argument before that same student has been taught how to hold a pen.

Despite this, opportunities were found to develop teaching methodology along with technical competence by engaging teachers in varied professional development activities. Using Kelly (2006) as a basis, teachers at the school were historically encouraged to take advantage of approximately 20 types of CPD activities, however for the Covid-19 online shift the CPD focused on a handful of activities which could be divided into three major stages.

3.1 Stage One: Induction and orientation

Programs of significant change require a robust orientation in order to align the entire team to the same vision (Fullan & Quinn, 2015). It also gets everyone speaking the same language. Although an LMS had been used for the best part of a decade and some teachers had already been delivering online lessons, most teachers were unfamiliar with terms like 'asynchronous', 'synchronous', 'flipped' and 'blended' learning. Even some teachers that had familiarity

with the words needed clarification of the correct definition (a significant example being that when one HOD was asked how they implemented flipped learning, the response was that students are given the opportunity to be the teacher). With two days of preparation, the main objective was to get all teachers to the technical competency required to go live on time and in full. The large jump in parental satisfaction scores experienced after the switch could be attributed to the smoothness of the change.

3.2 Stage Two: Workshops and seminars

Stage two could be considered the directly taught element of the CPD program. The expertise for such sessions were not found in abundance within the institution itself and with all teachers engaged in full-time teaching timetables, other sources were needed. Being forced to move all training online meant that training providers were able to offer more workshops to larger groups of participants than has ever been seen in the past. In the K-12 sector, most of the training available was arranged and facilitated by textbook publishers and distributors, mostly because it was freely available and at the end of the year the option of paying for courses not previously budgeted for during in a time of financial uncertainty was not possible.

The leadership team encouraged all of the teachers to attend these workshops and kept them informed about what was available. A minimum number of training hours was not mandated nor was specific training selected and signed to specific individuals. This was due to the pressures that all staff had in managing the new demands on workload whilst teaching from home. Even without any specified engagement amount, a review of the personal CPD records of all staff found that all teachers had voluntarily taken part in at least three online seminars. Some of the most attended seminars were “How to use the Pearson portal”, “21st Century Skills”, and “Monitoring Progress During Distance Learning.” These sessions tended to be a one to two hour online seminars with the trainer. The trainers aimed to introduce practical tools and methods during the session that the teachers could use later on as well as lecturing on the topic.

At the end of every CPD session, a four-question survey was completed by every attendee. Attendees were asked:

1. *To what extent do you feel that you were in need of this CPD program?*
2. *To what extent did you benefit from this CPD program?*
3. *How would you evaluate the content relevance of this CPD program?*

4. *How would you evaluate the effectiveness of how this CPD program was delivered?*

The seminars scored quite lowly, and the qualitative extra comments provided by the attendees showed that although the sessions were beneficial, they did not go to the depth that was alluded to by the title of the training topic. Whereas the topic title would suggest that deep learning on online pedagogy would take place, the sessions were more often a presentation of useful tools. Comments resembling “The Kahoot app was useful, I will try to implement it in my lessons” were common. As mentioned earlier, this tendency to introduce tools and develop technical competency in such an early stage of online learning is not necessarily a negative point.

3.3 Stage Three: Observation and mentoring

During the course of a normal semester, teachers are observed by the academic leadership in both extended formal observations and less formal drop-in sessions. The leadership of the school were particularly concerned with transferring those monitoring procedures online from the first day of synchronous online learning. This was seen as important in order to ensure that leadership had a clear and accurate view of the teaching faculty’s practice in the online classroom.

Through informal discussions with the team and the aforementioned online lesson observations carried out by academic leaders, highly capable online teachers were identified as candidates who could share good practice with other teaching staff. As mentoring is a common practice for supporting new teachers (Kemmis, Heikkinen, Fransson, Aspfors, & Edwards-Groves, 2014) and the new context of online learning put many in the same situation as a new teacher, mentoring was chosen as the most appropriate method to support less capable teachers. Six mentors from various departments were selected, with up to five colleagues assigned to each mentor. The mentoring sessions operated on a two-week cycle where mentors observed the mentored teachers and mentors were observed themselves. The underlying objective was to focus on key development areas with the help of a more-experienced colleague.

Whilst mentoring was effective in sharing good practice, a major obstacle was the mindset of some mentored teachers. Covid-19 made almost everyone a beginner. All of a sudden, a teacher with 20 years of in-class experience was taking the role of the inexperienced learner and a sense of pride can make one unwilling to view new techniques with an open mind. In the Middle East where seniority of years

is well respected, younger mentors were also reluctant to highlight points of development for their elder colleagues. However, it was necessary to do so as whereas department heads would normally take the lead on constructive lesson evaluation, there was limited time to upskill them to be able to drive quality in online teaching.

After the teaching faculty had attended even more workshops and training sessions, the program of observations was expanded to incorporate peer observation as well. However, in a highly face-saving culture, it was a slow process to move observers away from making general statements of praise and to focus on helping each other to develop. This was tackled by changing the form used for peer observation slightly from what was used for mentor observation. Whereas the mentoring form had the headings of “*What stood out from the observation?*” and “*Strategies to consider for next time*”, the peer observation form provided a positive and constructive structure with the headings “*Two strong practices observed in this lesson*” and “*Two areas for improvement.*”

4. Measuring impact

Even when CPD does not involve significant financial investment, it can involve a considerable investment of time by the trainer, the trainee and those organizing the provision. In any organization where efficiency is important, measuring the return on that investment is critical to guide future planning and make any necessary modifications. Traditionally, training impact in the school was measured in a number of ways. These methods can be theoretical (by summative written test on the content) or practical (observing the trained skill in classroom visits), output focused (on the teacher’s performance) or outcome focused (on the students’ performance). Workshops in particular are always followed up with some form of trainee evaluation. Some workshops may contain an assessment within the workshop itself. In the past, the school used a summative assessment of all training taken in the form of an end of year training impact test. These methods are acceptable, but they do not measure what was referred to earlier as “return on investment”. More practical measurements can involve observing student outcomes but that too may also have other influences (such as aptitude of the student and parental support) and are not solely affected by CPD. Observing the teacher’s performance within a pre-determined framework can inhibit the teacher’s creativity as he/she will only exhibit the sanctioned practices of that framework (Ball, 2003). This formed the basis of the

rationale for normally using a lesson observation framework that looks at student engagement and behavior in the (face-to-face) classroom.

4.1 Selecting, designing, and implementing a suitable observation tool

Two main observation tools were used by the school’s academic leaders in order to evaluate teaching. A teacher-focused observation that was aligned to particular KPIs related to delivery and a student-focused observation that was initially designed to assess the entire learning environment. The latter was the tool used by the school’s accrediting body, Cognia called *eleot* (Advanced Education, 2020). Whilst a student-focused observation would be a good measure of whether the teaching strategies adopted were effective in promoting student engagement and interaction, it is very difficult to implement in a synchronous online classroom where a large number of students may be not heard and most students are not physically seen. The guidance for the “*Active Learning Environment*” specifically asks observers to look and listen for student discussions and observe group work (AdvancED, 2013). Although this can be achieved with the use of online breakout rooms to a certain extent, expecting a teacher to arrange up to ten separate breakout rooms for paired discussion and monitor them is highly impractical. This makes certain elements of the *eleot* unsuitable for the online classroom. The fact that none of the existing tools of the school were designed to measure any strategies specific to online learning also made them all inadequate to measure the impact of a very focused online teacher training program. This meant that a new tool had to be designed to observe how teachers were implementing the new strategies that was expected from them.

Given the stage of professional development that most teachers were at in the beginning of online teaching and the heavy technical competency focus of most of the offered training workshops, observation criteria were selected that focus on competent use of online classroom tools and maximizing student interaction and engagement. The criteria selected are listed below.

All of the criteria were marked as either being unobserved, observed partially or highly evident. Notably, the final criterion of using the chatbox would normally be covered by the criterion of student participation, however it was extracted in order to highlight its importance so that teachers could focus on it.

Table 1. Observation Criteria

Observation Criteria	Expected teacher/student practice
Uses classroom time with minimal disruption	• Lesson starts/ends on time • Technical issues are dealt with promptly • Resources are ready
Transitions between activities smoothly	• Transitions are logical • There is no significant delay when switching activities • Students receive clear instructions about what to do next
Addresses behavioral issues appropriately	• Negative behavior is addressed without reducing learning time significantly • Students are reminded of behavior expectations when appropriate
Uses digital platform tools effectively	• Camera is used • Mute/Raise hand tools are used • Learning resources are shared on screen along with tools for interaction
Learning objectives are clear	• Learning objective is clear from the beginning of the lesson
Explanation is appropriate to age and stage	• Explanation is not too long • Visual resources are used to support the explanation stage • Explanation is not used where flipped learning would be more effective
Learning objectives are effectively addressed in the lesson	• All activities are aligned to the learning objectives • All learners are assessed against learning objectives
Teacher links to prior learning	• Teacher uses assessment of prior learning prior to commencing new learning • Planning is adapted according to learner needs
Teacher makes real-life connections	• Relevance of topic is discussed with the students
Individual student work is directed or referred to	• Sufficient time is allocated for student activity • Homework/project work is reviewed and discussed
Content is engaging and appropriate	• PowerPoint/Learning resources are designed well with appropriate language • Interactive learning tools are used
All students have the chance to respond and participate	• Selection system is implemented so that all students interact • Interactive tools are used to get 100% interaction from students
Supports individuals that need help	• Student understanding is continuously assessed • Students with difficulty are supported
Chatbox is used for meaningful participation	• Chatbox is used as a tool for all students to respond to the teacher (without relying on the one student at a time using the audio)

Overall, a total of 71 observations were carried out in the first two weeks of online learning across 12 grade levels with up to four classes per grade. Observations were conducted by department heads and academic supervisors, and all departments were observed. Smooth transitions between activities and teachers using the digital tools effectively were identified as areas of particular strength across the school. Supporting students that required extra assistance and making real-life links was a general weakness. These areas were highlighted for focus in the stage three mentor observations. More specific departmental weaknesses were analyzed for HODs to address with their teams. For instance, the science department in boys' classes were particularly weak at using the chatbox for student interaction.

The strengths identified in the lesson observations loosely aligned with the perception of students' parents. 149 parents were surveyed about their satisfaction with the online learning program. They responded on a 5-point Likert scale with an overwhelming majority (70%) being satisfied or highly satisfied with the lesson explanation and a lesser majority satisfied or highly satisfied with the level of teacher-student interaction (67%). However, these opinions may be very lenient as this school was able to start online learning a week before many schools in the region, using a reliable system. Many of the local national curriculum schools started a week later and experienced system crashes in their first week. The very fact that their children were in classes whilst others were not may have caused a higher satisfaction overall.

The tool was effective in assessing those that were comfortable in the online classroom and those that were not but was not so strong in measuring the variations between that. This could be due to the fact that only a three-point scale was used for each criterion and that there was no detailed rubric adopted. It was able to show improvement over time but there is little evidence to show that that improvement was a result of CPD or whether it was just natural improvement resulting from experience.

4.2 Limitations of the tool

Designed in a hurry, there were many limitations with the observation tool that was developed. Knowing these limitations should help with the design of a more reliable and accurate tool. The observation criteria were determined by selecting criteria from the existing tools of the school which were still relevant for online classes and expanding those to include criteria on using tools to engage, support and manage students. Due to time constraints, there was no reference to research on best practices in online teaching.

The research in that area was also limited and not immediately accessible at the time of designing the tool. The growing body of research in this area means that far more robust tools can be designed in the near future. A further limitation in the tool design is that it went through no process of piloting and calibration by multiple observers. With very large banks of recorded lessons being created, there is now a great opportunity to test any observation tool thoroughly before adoption. The last limitation was not in the tool itself but in the expertise of the observers. By default, heads of department were responsible for observing the observations of their team and offering comments for improvement. But there was little time to grow the capacity of that supervision team which may have resulted in inconsistent observations from department to department.

5. Next steps

Planning for a new paradigm of online learning requires appropriate framing of past experiences. Everything done in early 2020 as a result of sudden quarantine was done in a rush, planned and executed by people trying their best with little specific experience in online learning. Research into purely online learning was limited. Plans were developed based on little prior knowledge or experience of best practices. In schools, although digital learning had been practiced to a certain extent, a full online provision had never been explored except in a few homeschooling settings. An example of these constraints can be seen in the online teaching platform that was selected for the school of this study. With only two days to both plan and train the team to open online, selecting a simple tool that could be grasped easily by all was a top priority. With a whole summer's induction period to get teachers prepared for 2020/21, those same learning concerns could result in not selecting the same simple tool again, instead investing more time in training teachers to use a tool that offers more safety and security for young learners.

After a summer of engaging with research in online learning, many have been able to adopt more sophisticated approaches in their planning. For this school, this was adopting a flipped learning strategy. Essentially, the gap of reduced sessions will be covered by moving the explanation portion of the lesson into an asynchronous session and using the synchronous time to increase interaction with the teacher (Smith, 2020). This change in approach, which is based on research gives a completely different starting point when designing a new observation tool. The tool can now be designed taking into account best practice and be aligned with effective online pedagogies whilst also taking advan-

tage of recent software updates. For example, using more collaborative tools like breakout rooms. Taking all of this into account will ensure that lesson observations are fully aligned with the educational philosophy of the institution.

The benefit of increased preparation time also allows for a comprehensive training plan for leaders. The year can begin with an induction on the online teaching best practice that informed the creation of the observation tool. Leaders can be trained on what to look for, completing observations of the same lesson in order to ensure that their scoring of observations is aligned. These alignment sessions can take place throughout the year and especially when large variances are found between different departments.

Such a rapidly changing field requires a high level of flexibility. Evaluating at the end of the program to see how effective it was will not go far enough in driving improvement. Rather what is required, is a continuous evaluation cycle which constantly drives improvement. With new research, the very nature of that evaluation may have to change as well in order to align with targeted practices. A robust evaluation tool is one that can cater for all practitioners at whatever state of development they are at, starting with a foundation of strong technical skills developing into an effective online educator implementing the best online pedagogies.

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