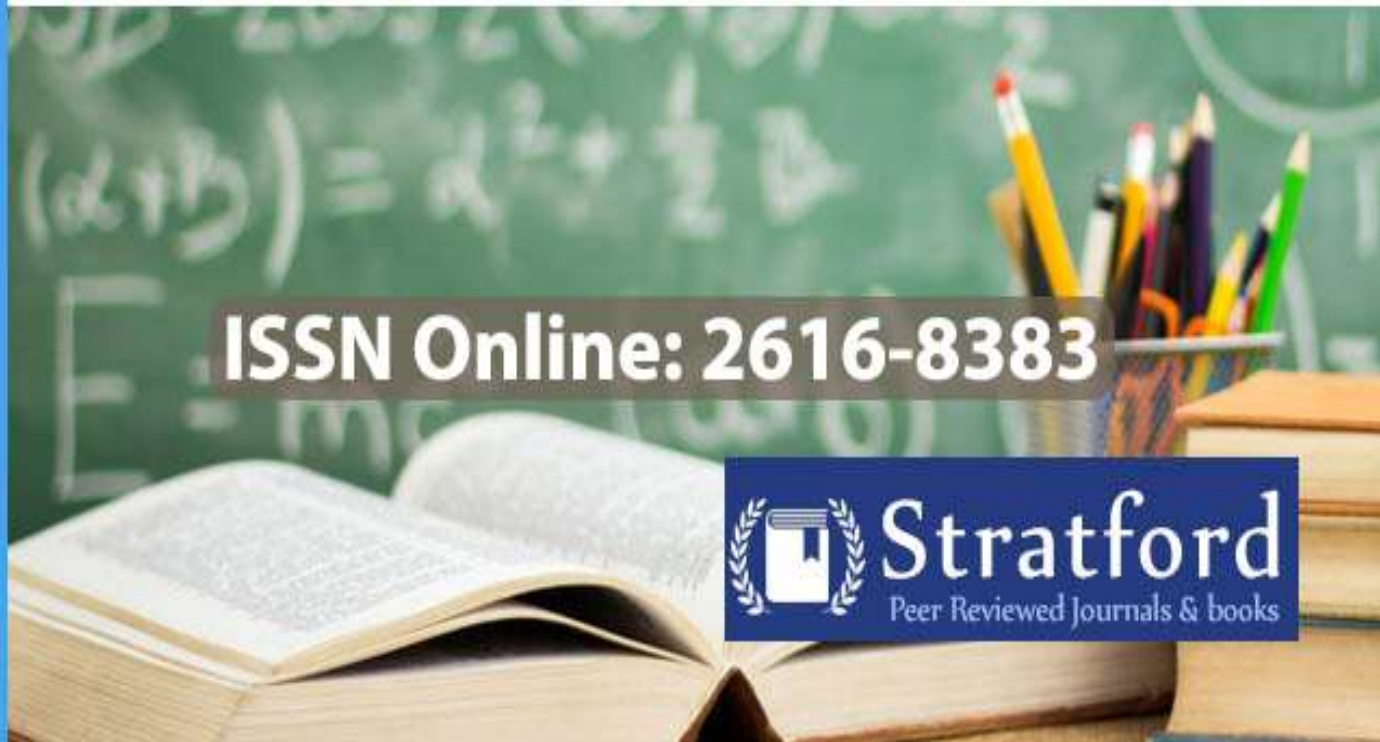


Journal of Education



Managing Education in Kenya amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic (A Theoretical Perspective)

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ISSN: 2616-8383

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How to cite this article: Wangare, B., J. (2020). Managing Education in Kenya amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic (A Theoretical Perspective). *Journal of Education*, 3(6), 76-89.

Abstract

The education sector in Kenya is among the greatest casualties of the COVID 19 pandemic. The educational complexities presented by prolonged closure of learning institutions have had varied impact on educational stakeholders. For majority of the population, 2020 is a lost academic year. Divergent views on managing education amidst the crisis have been proposed and different measures taken. The ministry of education has also been subjected to pressure and litigations to fully open up learning institutions in spite of rising cases of infections in learning institutions. The pressure has exacerbated with the increasing involvement of school-going children in disruptive behavior. As the ministry juggles the critical issues relating to children's right to life, best interest, and their right to education, the need for stakeholder management has conspicuously stood out. It is at such a critical time, when the ministry is receiving a lot of limelight that the minister in-charge must call upon his leadership skills to keep the sector afloat. This article offers insights drawn from select educational leadership theories that could provide guidance to educational managers and other education actors.

Keywords: *Pandemic, education, stakeholder management, leadership theory.*

1.1 Introduction

The education sector in Kenya is arguably one of the greatest casualties of the COVID 19 pandemic. To curb the spread of the virus, the government closed all learning institutions for over five months until October 2020 when it embarked on a phased re-opening of learning, mainly for the examination classes. For the majority of learners however, 2020 is practically a lost academic year. In attempt to ensure continuity of teaching and learning during the period of closure, the Ministry of Education (MoE) and other education actors instituted a range of measures including transmitting educational content through the radio and TV, and availing e-learning platforms for all learners at basic levels of education. These initiatives have however come under sharp scrutiny from the general public with focus being directed at their potential to aggravate already existing disparities in the provision of education; particularly in low income communities. Questions on

inclusivity, access, equity, quality and sustainability, for instance, dominate conversations on distance learning as an alternative medium of providing education.

The educational complexities presented by the prolonged closure have had varied impact on educational stakeholders including learners, parents, teachers unions, private educational providers, donors, MoE and the general public. Each of these groups is concerned about the best way to manage teaching and learning without jeopardizing the health and safety of learners, other education actors and the community at large. Over time, divergent views have been proposed and different measures taken. Some have opted for home schooling, others for remote learning while others have totally shelved learning. The ministry has also been subjected to pressure and litigations to fully open up learning institutions (World Health Organization {WHO} 2020; Okubasu, 2020; Teachers Arena, 2020; KTN News, 2020).

As the ministry ponders on how to manage the critical issues relating to children's right to life and their right to education, the need for stakeholder management has conspicuously stood out. Education impacts practically every aspect of the economy and the society at large. The minister must therefore call upon his leadership skills particularly at such a time when the ministry is receiving a lot of limelight. He can draw useful insight from a range of leadership theories, a few of which are highlighted below.

2.1 Leadership Theory and Stakeholder Management

2.1.1 Situational Leadership Theory

Like all other contingent theories of leadership, Hersey and Blanchard's situational theory is of the view that the best leadership style is dependent on the situation. It proposes that successful leadership is both task and people oriented. This is a useful insight for the Minister particularly as he enforces measures to contain the pandemic and at the same time sustain teaching and learning. Being a public good and a social service, education is of interest to many. The ministry thus needs to be cautious not to strain its relationship with stakeholders in order not to stir apathy among the public. Education stakeholders comprise direct consumers of the service, financiers, private education providers, prospective employers, and the ministry's own workforce to implement decisions made. Without stakeholders' goodwill, decisions may not only receive little buy-in but also risk being sabotaged.

The situational theory of leadership proposes that instead of using one style, a leader needs to change his leadership style based on the maturity of the people and the details of work. This proposition provides a good fit for the education sector given the heterogeneity of the stakeholders. The theory identifies four styles of leadership: telling, selling, participating and delegating. It also identifies four levels of maturity: M1, M2, M3, M4. The choice of leadership style is dependent on the maturity level of followers.

Maturity level 1 and 2: People at level 1 are presented as lacking knowledge, skills, confidence and motivation. They have to be pushed to work. The recommended leadership skill is 'telling'. A majority of learners, particularly in basic institutions of learning are at this level. Without constant direction and supervision, work will be neglected. The ministry has made commendable effort to ensure that learners have access to information and are properly instructed on what to do. Since

learners are presently at home, the ministry needs the support of the parents not only to ‘tell’ on behalf the ministry but also to enforce compliance. Parents are expected to not only provide their children with access to radio and TV educational programmes, but also to ensure that these programmes are attended. Parents no doubt need to be actively involved and furnished with clear, accurate and up-to-date information.

Parents have for instance been asked to constantly monitor the whereabouts of their children and to be keen about the content children access online in order to protect them from emerging incidences of cyber bullying and other criminal activities perpetrated through the social media (Muraya, 2020; Nyongesa, 2020). Ministry officials and teachers have also taken an active role in advocating behavior change by suggesting (‘selling’) useful tips to slightly mature students including some in secondary schools, regarding how they can keep themselves productively engaged.

Maturity Level 3: Those at this level are portrayed as more knowledgeable and skillful. Though they may be motivated to work, they lack confidence to perform tasks. It is noteworthy that in spite of the ministry launching a virtual learning platform, the greater fraction of ministry officials, teachers, and parents lack familiarity and confidence in their use. This is indicative of the need for in-service training for educational personnel in order to create a responsive and resilient workforce. The ministry has in addition issued crisis management guidelines aimed at assisting institutional managers prepare for full reopening of face to face teaching and learning (MoE, 2020). Clearly, the goodwill of stakeholders is critical in both sustaining learning during the prolonged closure and after reopening.

Maturity level 4: This group is highly skilled, autonomous, confident and highly committed. Education experts and expertise from other fields, financiers and partners all fall into this group. This group of stakeholders and in particular those in the health sector, are instrumental in providing professional advice.

2.1.2 Path-Goal Theory

Under this theory, Robert House posits that the main job of the leader is to guide the followers to and through the right path to achieve set goals. Effective leaders, according to the theory, clarify the path to the goal and make the journey easier by reducing and eliminating obstacles. Just like the situational theory, four leadership styles are identified to suit the tasks and people involved: directive, supportive, participative and achievement oriented. While the tenets of the leadership styles proposed here compare quite well to Hersey and Blanchard’s situational theory, the participative leader behavior advanced by path-goal provides instrumental guidance to managing educational stakeholders. This involves consultations with stakeholders particularly those with the right expertise and when their input is essential. In my view, this is critical particularly with the reality that the position of Minister of Education in Kenya has not exclusively been held by educationists.

2.1.3 Power and Influence Theory

All styles of leaderships according to Bosman (n.d) rely on the use of power to influence others and get things done. Power is often defined as the ability of one person to influence another to do something that they would not ordinarily do. Influence on the other hand refers to the effect a person's actions have on the attitudes, values, beliefs, or actions of others. Power, as conceptualized by French and Raven, derives from office held (positional power) and from unique qualities of a leader. While positions confer legitimate, coercive and reward power on office bearers, personal attributes bestow expert and referent power. Expert and referent powers have however been acclaimed as the most instrumental in influencing behaviour. Expert Power is borne of leader's special knowledge or skills regarding the task at hand. Referent power, on the other hand, is based on the emotional impact a leader has on people. A leader with strong referent and expert power is able to inspire stakeholders to do more than they would ordinarily do in spite of obstacles.

Leaders draw from various sources of power to influence others to pursue laid down objectives. It is to be expected for instance that in enforcing its mandate, the ministry may resort to legitimate power. The minister needs however, to exploit other sources of powers to gain support of the stakeholders, not only in implementing programmes aimed at sustaining teaching and learning, but also to address emerging issues currently affecting education. The prolonged closure has been associated with a surge in cases of violence against students, drugs and substance abuse, harmful cultural practices including FGM, forced early marriages, increasing involvement of students in sex orgies, filming of pornographic content, deviance and membership to criminal gangs (Nyongesa, 2020 & Standard team, 2020).

The success of any attempt to influence stakeholders is a matter of degree. According to Bosman (n.d), there are three distinct outcomes that may result from the use of power: compliance, resistance, and commitment. For instance, the initiative by MoE to kick-start a community based learning programme for the more than 10 million learners that have no access to online learning programmes was hampered by contentions among stakeholders about the practicability of the programmes (Owiti, 2020). Teachers argued that they had not been involved in the planning of the programme in spite of being the main custodians of the children during the planned programmes. Parents also voiced their reservations about releasing their children for the intended programmes. Clearly, an issue of stakeholder management had been overlooked. Even if the ministry had resorted to use its legitimate power to coerce teachers to implement the programme, the programme was bound to fail without the support the parents.

2.2 Education Leadership Theory to Impact Youth Behaviour

Leadership has widely been defined as the art of influencing others to willingly work towards set goals. Influence, according to Klann (2003), lies in the ability to persuade, convince, motivate, inspire and judiciously use power to prompt others to do what they would not ordinarily do. The power of influence according to Klann (2003) sets apart effective leaders from ineffective ones, regardless of style adopted. No doubt, a variety of factors determine the choice of leadership style. It is the voluntary response however, that is at the heart of effective leadership. Considering the role of leadership in stimulating desired response, educational stakeholders have a critical

obligation of engaging a variety of leadership skills within their means to not only direct the youth to pursue desirable engagements, but also to steer them away from destructive behavior.

3.1 Crisis Leadership

The COVID 19 pandemic has presented educational leaders with an educational crisis of unparalleled magnitude in recent history. The crisis stems not just from the threat of contracting the virus but also from the consequences of the containment measures imposed by the government. The ripple effects have left a trail of disaster in the sector. Prolonged closure of learning institutions has not only posed a threat to continuity of education but also the wellbeing of the learners.

The World Health Organization, WHO (2020) has warned that extension of school closures has grave impact on the learners. This includes poor nutrition, stress, and increased exposure to violence and exploitation, childhood pregnancies, and overall challenges in mental development of children due to reduced interaction. This threat is reported to be even higher among the already marginalized and vulnerable children. WHO further argues that extended school closures in sub-Saharan Africa could result in lifetime earning losses of US\$ 4500 per child. Quite clearly, educational leaders are at crossroads as they juggle between safeguarding the health and safety of the learners with securing their future. Effective leadership calls for a clear understanding of the crisis situation, the risks posed by the crisis, and a thorough consideration of the consequences of any action aimed at averting the crisis.

Considered separately, the increasing youth involvement in destructive activities during the extended schools closure period presents a looming crisis in the education sector. An awareness of the factors underlying deviance is vital in offering effective leadership during crises. An unfamiliar and distressful situation, like the one presented by the COVID 19 pandemic, is bound to throw the youth into a wide range of emotions including fear, anger, anxiety, resignation, sorrow, disgust and despair. Klann (2003) observes that a crisis can exert a high impact on needs, emotions and behavior among those affected. The impact is bound to elicit different reactions among people. High stress situations can move otherwise rational people away from sense and reason. These emotions can trigger violent and illogical behavior; exacerbate previously dysfunctional behavior or impair functionality. Effective crisis leadership is pegged on the ability to respond to human needs, emotions and behavior caused by the crisis. Klann (2003) identifies three components of effective crisis leadership: Communication, clarity of vision and values. These are vital before during and after the crisis.

Communication

A well-defined communication strategy is essential before, during and after a crisis situation. Crises are typically characterized by uncertainty due to absence of information regarding the occurrence. The less the information, the greater the impact and the greater the impact, the greater the need for those impacted to understand what happened, why it happened and how it will impact their future. The greatest challenge to educational leaders lies in ensuring that the right information gets to the stakeholders. Though the constitution of Kenya guarantees every citizen a right of access to information concerning them, documented evidence reveals that a sizeable proportion of the population is deprived of access to information (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics {KNBS},

2017). Disparities in access also persist by area of residence with the level of deprivation 3 times higher in the rural areas compared to those living in urban areas.

An even greater danger lies in the misinformation and fake news widely shared through the social media regarding COVID 19 (UN News, 2020; Obi-Ani, Anikwenze; Chukwudi, 2020; Hartley & Khuong Vu, 2020). The Director for Policies and Strategies regarding Communication and Information at UNESCO is quoted by UN news (2020) to have observed that there is barely an area left untouched by disinformation in relation to the COVID-19. He is reported to have observed that: “When disinformation is repeated and amplified, including by influential people, the grave danger is that information which is based on truth, ends up having only marginal impact.” The ministry of education is evidently confronted with a dire need to institute mechanisms to ensure that learners, their parents and guardians are able to access correct information with ease. As primary stakeholders, parents must also ensure that they get information from reliable sources.

Clarity of Vision

Leaders can leverage a credible vision and value system and use both as a rallying point and as a way of providing stability to individuals faced by the crisis. In the case of Kenya, and in order to give learners something to look forward to, significant benefits would be realized through rationalization of the academic calendar, which has for a long time been shrouded in uncertainty. This is instrumental in improving declining morale. As mentioned earlier, prolonged closure of educational institutions puts the learners at risk of losing academic focus and ultimately regressing on their previous learning. Parents need also to prioritize acceptable value systems particular now that the students are at home, and are constantly confronted with many distractions from academic engagements (Standard team, 2020)

Value

A sincere interest and genuine concern for others is important in meeting the emotional needs of people experiencing crisis. Among the educational concerns that have repeatedly been voiced by learners and their parents relates to the fate of summative national examinations. Another concern relates to the possibility of students having to repeat classes following the interruption to the academic year. It should be understood that these concerns are a reflection of the deep emotional turmoil that the crisis has occasioned on learners. Even as the ministry embarks on a crash academic programme in attempt to recover lost time, it mustn't lose sight of the need to safeguard the quality of learning.

Klann (2003) offers a number of leadership behavior that educational leaders could adopt in their effort to assist the youth get through the challenges posed by the pandemic. They include maintaining and displaying optimism throughout the period of the crisis; maintaining emotional maturity; answering emotional charged questions and comments with calm and quiet; soliciting input from others; keeping people informed; upholding the dignity of those affected by the crisis even when enforcing corrective discipline; and being clear on set expectations.

3.2 Ethical and Moral Leadership (EML)

Ethics can generally be defined as a code of principles that guide behavior. Ethical leadership thus aims at encouraging people to do the right things and discouraging them from doing the wrong

things (Mihelic, Lipcnik, & Tekavcic, 2010). Ethical and moral leadership (ELM) is guided by a strong ethical and moral compass. It encompasses leading by example. According to Burnham (n.d), ELM draws its importance from the disproportionate influence leaders have on followers and the view that education is primarily a moral process and should therefore be led by those who are ethically literate.

Literature provides common tenets of ethical leadership including : respect for value systems pertaining to justice and what is right, taking steps to actively identify moral and ethical issues, enforcing ethical and moral standards, honesty, transparency, willingness to put the interest of others before self and assuming personal responsibilities for decisions made. To be an ethical and moral leader, one must demonstrate ethics and morality in his or her personal life or personal statement. The level of a person's moral development according to "*ETHICAL AND MORAL LEADERSHIP*" (2020) may fall into three categories:

Pre-conventional:

A person at this level seeks to follow laid down rules and regulations to avoid punishments. The behavior of such a person is largely driven by self-interest. The interest of an ethical leader here would be to bring to the awareness of the follower, in this case the youth, that what they do now (current interests and engagements) has a bearing on their future. Learners need to be made aware that their current engagements may not only impair their future prospects but also endanger their life. They should be encouraged to pursue those activities that nurture, pave way for, mold and facilitate future career path and interest.

Conventional:

Persons at this level aspire to live up to the expectations, obligations and norms of the groups they are affiliated to. This stems from a desire to conform. The youth at this level is confronted with a lot of peer pressure. Following the surge in youth involvement in deviance and harmful behavior, there has been a nationwide campaign for parents and persons with moral authority over the youth and learners to pay attention to the friends and associations that the youth keeps in order to stem out negative peer influence. Parents as moral leaders can also play an instrumental role in helping the youth choose friends and associations that nurture their vision and career prospects.

Post- Convention:

This is the highest level of moral development. Persons at this level do not necessary adhere to what others perceive to be right or wrong. Rather, they display a strong internalized sense of right and wrong. Such people tend to put the interests of others or the greater good above their own interest. Parents will particularly find such youths useful in mentoring others.

Extant literature however warns that these three levels of moral development are not mutually exclusive. Instead, a person might predominantly be at one level while still showing signs of being at the other two levels. Among these levels of development, the conventional is said to be the most prevalent, and that this is typically the case in different spheres of life and for different roles that people take.

In embracing EML, Burnham (n.d) recommends that leaders model and exemplify their own expectations. Accordingly, they should engage in those actions that demonstrate high ethical standards. They need to set themselves as role model for ethical behavior. The defining characteristic of leadership is that it is the exemplification of what a particular society values most. One of the justifications for having leaders according to Burnham (n.d) is that they help others see how they should be. Consequently, every leader's actions should be seen to be ethically based, value driven and morally consistent. This is an important challenge for educational leadership today particularly in our society where a sizeable proportion of adults, and people occupying positions of authority often demonstrate little regard for social values and norms. Most recently the MoE had its own cabinet secretary, the highest ranking official and ministerial figurehead, stripped off HR functions in a move by the Public Service Commission to protect public servants from undignified and unwarranted attacks by the cabinet secretary (Asamba, 2020).

Ethical and moral leaders, be they educationists, parents, siblings, local government authorities and the general public must also demonstrate courage to speak up and challenge unethical behavior without being held back by the risk of losing popularity. Caution need to be taken to ensure that corrective discipline does not jeopardize the dignity of offenders. Parents and educational leaders need to temper corrective actions meted on the youth with love to avoid fall-outs, instilling fear or killing initiative. At a time when parents are increasingly being urged to step up their engagement with their children, ethical and moral leadership could prove very productive in molding the behavior of the youth and getting them off destructive practices. This is particularly so because a parent is the first symbol of moral authority that a child encounters and continues to interact with on a daily basis.

Burham (n.d) suggests a number of strategies that are useful in enhancing a leader's ability to respond to complex situations in an ethically consistent manner: coaching (to be provided by a more experienced person or leader); Networking for advice, reassurance, problem analysis and clarification; reflection-in-action (here the youth's conceptual map or vision is used to analyze actual action so that both map and practice are interrogated and revised so as to inform future action); engagement with the meta-narratives including religious ideals, doctrines and books. The purpose here is to deepen awareness and understanding, and to stimulate reflection.

3.3 Innovation Leadership

Innovation leadership has invariably been defined as the art of blending different leadership styles to spur innovation among employees. For the purpose of this discussion innovation refers to the ability to inspire productive action in oneself and others in the midst of uncertainty, ambiguity, and risk (Cone, 2019). The choice of this definition is based on its appreciation of the interplay between innovation and uncertainty. Cone (2019) identifies key competencies of influential innovation leadership. These competencies can provide useful guidance to parents and educational leaders in harnessing youth behavior during a period of great uncertainty.

'Being 'Innovation Leadership

Innovation leaders pay great attention to their 'person' as leaders. They are aware that their disposition and the image they project as leaders have forceful psychological impact on their

employees. Innovation leaders are thus keen and intentional about the type of energy they exude in a given situation and how this energy impacts the people and processes around them.

‘Doing’ Innovation Leadership

Influential innovation leaders lead by example. They navigate themselves and others through ambiguity. By so doing, they encourage others to find comfort in the midst of uncertainty. They actively seek information and use this information to plan. They prioritize learning and their first inclination in a new situation is to learn as fast as possible. In the words of Cones (2019), influential innovation leaders ask a lot of questions even when they think they know the answer. They ask many questions especially provocative ones and especially to people whose experiences and perspectives differ from theirs. They begin everything with curiosity. In addition, they continually check and question their plan to find out if it is still relevant to changing circumstances. They appreciate that availability of accurate information reduces uncertainty, minimizes risks and avoids wastage of time and resources.

Parents and educational leaders might find these ideas useful in helping the youth navigate through the COVID 19 pandemic. Everyone needs to start seeing the constraints presented by the pandemic as learning opportunities.

‘Fueling’ Innovation

Innovation leadership thrives in the ability to create, cultivate and sustain environments where everyone contributes to the collaborative process of innovation. This is achievable when leaders work towards instilling a sense of psychological safety in followers. When people feel psychologically safe, they trust that they can take risks and make mistakes without fear of punishment. Innovation leaders are not only accommodative but also promote thought diversity. They view divergence of thoughts and disputations not as sources of conflict, but as alternative ways of handling a situation. They ponder over how such views can complement each other or be blended to arrive at the best solution.

To accommodate thought diversity, innovation leaders have to reign in their ego, and to encourage others to do so, in order to boost humility and reduce defensiveness and the tendency to take things personally. Cone (2019) cautions leaders against applying judgment to new ideas. Judgment, it is argued, is often informed by past experiences and not necessarily on the worth of the new idea. Creative ideas can be a poor fit to existing paradigms or templates precisely because they are creative.

In spite of the negative reports concerning youth behavior, it should not be lost to educational leaders and parents that the country has also witnessed impressive innovation by the youth during the COVID 19 pandemic. A case in point is the presidential award winning 9 year old boy who invented a hands-free hand washing machine to curb the spread of the corona virus. This underscores the inherent innovative potential of children and the youth, with proper guidance. The role of innovation leadership is thus critical during the COVID19 pandemic, not just for addressing emerging issues among the youth but also in rebuilding a more responsive and resilient education system.

4.1 Conclusion

Crises present the greatest test to those entrusted with leadership. Often, leader ability is weighted against the emotions those in authority evoke in people, and how well they are perceived to have steered an organization during periods of uncertainty. It is also during crises that many great expectations are placed upon those in authority to make tenable decisions in spite of limited information extreme uncertainty. Leaders will find the time tested wisdom of leadership theories a stable anchorage and strategic resource to draw.

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