

The Roles and Challenges of Educational Leaders for Sustainable Education Goals and Agenda during Movement Control Order (MCO)

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ABSTRACT

In the education sector, the sudden outbreak of Covid-19 placed immense pressure on school leaders, who were tasked with ensuring that the goals and agenda of education were maintained. Various issues and challenges have arisen in carrying out this responsibility and one of the challenges was the stumbling block posed by the Movement Control Order (MCO) due to Covid-19. This study focused on the roles of educational leaders in implementing change, as outlined by Fullan (1998) and Hall and Hord (2014), in response to the need for adaptation to the new norms during and after the MCO. Based on the literature, the roles of the educational leaders can be categorized into six (6) categories – to solve complex environmental problems, to practice effective communication, to be flexible, to apply the appropriate technology, to combine old and new concepts, and to be a facilitator of change. This study examined the roles of educational leaders and its relationship with the Covid-19 MCO issues and challenges faced by those leaders in Malaysia and the actions taken. Based on the results, several post-MCO recommendations or actions were proposed.

Keywords: Educational leaders, Covid-19, Movement Control Order (MCO), complex environment, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The world was profoundly impacted by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought significant disruptions to people's daily lives. Starting with hygienic imposition, physical distancing to the Movement Control Order (MCO) which were enforced by most countries in the world including Malaysia. The Malaysian Government had enforced MCO starting from 18 March to 31 March 2020 for MCO Phase 1, MCO Phase 2 starting from 1 to 14 April 2020, extended to MCO Phase 3 starting from 15 to 28 April and then MCO Phase 4 starting from 29 April until May 12 May 2020 (Othman et al., 2022). During that period, it was not certain when the MCO would end, in fact the next phase of the MCO may occur if people did not support and did not comply with the government's recommendations. Cooperation from all parties was very important to support the government's efforts to curb the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic during the MCO period.

During the implementation of MCO Phase 1 in 2020, only 22 service sectors were allowed to operate and reduced to 10 during MCO Phase 2. This closure covered educational services where all education-related institutions have to operate via online mode to ensure that the goals and agenda of education could be sustained. In 2020, educational institutions were starting to implement online learning and training, management and administration were also mostly done from home, modification of learning modules according to the suitability of delivery changes and many more. In other words, educational leaders faced new norms and they had to deal with the changes that were taking place in ensuring that educational goals and agendas could be sustained during the MCO period.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Goals and agenda of education in Malaysia

The National Education Philosophy (*Falsafah Pendidikan Kebangsaan* or FPK) is the bedrock in setting the goals and agenda of education in Malaysia. The Ministry of Education Malaysia (MoE) has set the vision and missions of Malaysian education in line with the FPK and education policy. The education system in Malaysia from preschool to post-secondary education has similar goals, namely; (a) to produce a loyal and united Malaysian nation, (b) to produce faithful, virtuous, knowledgeable, skilled and prosperous people, (c) to provide human resources for the needs of national development, and (d) to provide educational opportunities to all citizens (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017). Based on various layers and functions of MoE, teachers were responsible for achieving the vision and missions set by the MoE. The Malaysian Education Development Plan (PPPM) 2013-2025 has identified 11 shifts that need to be implemented to produce the desired changes toward achieving educational goals. Each shift should impact at least one of the five outcomes of the system, namely access, quality, equity, unity, and efficiency. Quality is a major focus across all shifts because quality is an important dimension that needs immediate attention.

Crisis is risk

The Covid-19 pandemic crisis was a risk that leaders need to face. Bob Boyd, president and CEO of Agility Recovery, which provides consulting services and recovery solutions for businesses affected by the crisis, stated "not having a strategy for how you are going to communicate during a disaster event is a fundamental weakness" (Maurer, 2014). Accordingly, during the Covid-19 MCO period, risk management was one of the key elements that need to be emphasized for any affected organization. Ideally, every leader in an organization needs to know and adopt risk management strategies in order to identify, assess, and mitigate potential threats – ensuring informed decision-making, organizational resilience, and long-term sustainability. In facing a crisis, leaders ought to coordinate with people within the organization to set the direction and control risks. Leaders need to have the ability in analyzing risks focusing on upward assessment – the probability of an event occurring, and the effect or impact of an event or occurrence on the organization. In general, risk management is to:

- a. identify key threats and vulnerabilities to the organization
- b. analyze which functions of the organization are critical in terms of operations
- c. identify the resources needed to protect critical organizational functions
- d. establish a crisis management team and appoint specific individuals in the team to be responsible for the communication aspects of the organization

Figure 1 shows the key actions that can be implemented in risk management. When faced with a risk, a leader can identify appropriate actions to either accept, avoid, transfer or reduce the risk. Leaders' actions in managing risk require leaders to make changes in management and leadership.

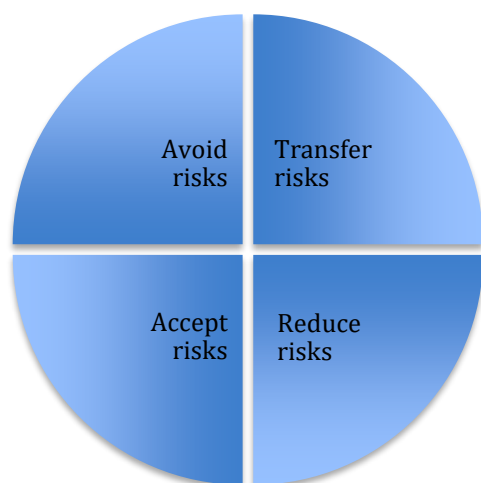


Figure 1: Actions in risk management

The roles and challenges of educational leaders in the face of change

The world is increasingly challenging and complex. Any changes must be treated with agility. This means that in every role, education leader needs to change according to current needs and requisites. Old mindset needs to be reassessed and removed, if necessary. According to Peter Drucker (2017),

“The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence. It is to act with yesterday’s logic.”

In addition, Fullan (1998) asserts that the role of educational leaders in making changes can be generated and sustained in the following five (5) actions: (a) solve complex environmental problems, (b) practice effective communication, (c) have flexibility, (d) apply the relevant technology, and (e) combine old and new concepts. The sixth action was based on a recommendation from Hall and Hord (2014) who explained that in implementing a change, educational leaders need to be facilitators of change. Further analysis of the roles of educational leaders based on the actions suggested by Fullan (1998) and Hall and Hord (2014) are as follows:

Complex environmental problems

Today’s volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous (VUCA) world requires leaders to be constantly prepared and be sensitive to change and dynamic in management and leadership. When something unexpected happens, leaders need to be efficient in adapting to sudden changes, improving decision making, being creative, making decisions through collaboration and trustworthiness (Drucker, 2017). Leaders also need to prepare themselves in all aspects in order to adapt to any situation in an ever-changing world. The important thing to emphasize is the efficient and timely execution of tasks. Moreover, leaders no longer rely on one option alone in making decision.

Traditional leadership is no longer suitable nowadays especially during the Covid-19 crisis. Essentially, effective leadership is influenced by the three components – leader, followers and context (Yukl, 2013). The components of leadership and followers are influenced by work relationships that are complex especially when unpredictable events occur in the organizations. The VUCA world demands wisdom and a new approach to leadership (Rodriguez & Rodriguez, 2015). Hence, in addressing the world of VUCA, new challenges for leaders need to be flexible and diverse. Hence, the demand for educational leaders to master various skills (multi-skill) and possess spiritual characteristics. Although the meaning of spiritual has a broad meaning, according to Roothaan (2007), spiritual emphasizes the aspects of openness of behaviors, intention and high awareness. In addition, the work culture in the institution has also changed during the MCO period, where working from home has become the new norm. This situation demands the efficiency of performing tasks remotely, the availability of appropriate facilities and equipment, time management, and the integrity of each

individual. Therefore, in this MCO situation, the spiritual maturity of the leaders is crucial in order for the leaders to portray the true characteristics of a charismatic leader through resilience and drastic action.

Situations can often be characterized by varying degrees of simplicity or complexity. The interaction between these two conditions inevitably influences management practices. Hence, leaders must learn to balance and adapt simple environmental factors to meet the demands of complex management systems. Furthermore, simplicity can create a new platform for an organization to move forward. Simplicity also opens up space for the expression of ideas in a dominant system (Westley, 2011). The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the need for educational leaders and their teams to adopt simplicity and moderation in communication, decision-making, and planning during times of crisis. Such simplicity fosters creativity and innovation, which can significantly enhance organizational success. Therefore, creative and innovative leaders are needed to handle the current situation in order to provide viable solutions for this new phenomenon.

Effective Communication

According to Amir Aris and Ahmad Rozelan Yunus (2016), effective communication has four characteristics – understanding, enjoyment, maintaining the trust of the target audience and the presence of follow-up action. Communication is the foundation that drives and coordinates the activities and functions that exist in an organization. With the existence of communication channels in the organization, each individual or group can not only interact, understand and exchange information with each other, but also can create continuous cooperation among staff. In this regard, the efficiency of an organization is closely related to the extent to which communication channels can be provided and implemented.

The Covid-19 situation demands that leaders to communicate information effectively in ensuring that tasks can be executed well and smoothly. This includes instructions or reminders so that the members of the organization are updated with the latest information as well as to assist the compliance with laws and instructions that are being enforced. In addition, leaders need to build confidence and strength among the citizens of the organization they lead through various modes of communication. In this case, knowledge and skills used in digital applications are very important for the delivery and reception of information.

There is no doubt that there are obstacles that result in the communication process not being able to be carried out as usual. With the occurrence of MCO in the Covid-19 pandemic, the usual face-to-faces communication among the leaders and the people of their organization has changed to online communication and increased dramatically. The Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) and the industries comprising the telecommunications, broadcasting, postal and courier sectors as well as digital signature certification authorities are committed to ensuring the continuity of its operations in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic (Bernama, 19 March 2020). MCMC also explained the importance of ensuring that Malaysians continue to have access to a wide range of communication services throughout the MCO period. Telecommunication operators need to plan business continuity plans to ensure that networks, online applications and customer service operate as normal.

At the same time new skills are also demanded for the online communication to be fully mastered and accepted in a new culture leading to the need toward digitization of society. In this context, individuals must continuously develop their communication competence by acquiring the necessary skills, attitudes, and traits to overcome potential barriers, thereby ensuring that effective communication can be maintained under any circumstances (Kapur, 2018).

Indirectly, the pandemic crisis of Covid-19 and MCO has led to enhanced competencies of ICT among teachers especially in the usage of the online teaching and learning platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom and Skype. Hence, it is important for the organizations to plan in order to ensure the availability of the required infrastructure in line with the increasing use of the latest communication. In general, educational leaders should be aware of the need for staff in their organization to master effective communication techniques (Helmi Akhtar & Ilhamie Abdul Ghani Azmi, 2017). Ineffective communication can result in confusion and misinterpretation of information within an organization, negatively impacting its management. Thus, leaders should develop strong communication skills to

deliver clear messages and avoid misunderstandings, particularly in online settings where their image and credibility are at stake. This is to ensure that leaders can earn respect when communicating online.

Flexibility

The MCO demands both moderation and flexibility in leadership actions. For educational leaders, flexibility ensures that their roles remain relevant to current needs and challenges. It reflects the capacity to adapt and respond promptly to shifting conditions and expectations during difficult times (Doyle, 2020). The ability of leaders and organizational members to adjust their approaches and move beyond traditional job boundaries in response to stakeholder priorities and situational challenges reflects effective and adaptive leadership. The flexibility of performing tasks using digital applications is a current trend. According to the Global Digital Report (2019), Malaysia ranks fifth highest in the world and the top spot in Southeast Asia in mobile social media penetration. The report also stated that internet penetration in Malaysia is now at 80 percent with users spending an average of eight hours and five minutes a day online.

The leadership approach in the digital age poses a challenge to leaders, for which it requires flexibility between the leader and the followers. A hierarchical and structured, formal, instruction-based and traditional leadership approach needs to be adapted and requires transformation when faced with Covid-19 pandemic. Since the current generation is the leading group in the digital world, then the existing leaders need to have a leadership approach appropriate to the hyper-connected society through the digital world. According to Heimans and Timms (2019), the new power in the hyper-connected era is the widespread access to digital networks anywhere and anytime – individuals are more likely to work in less formal settings and most organizations would engage in virtual communication. This in turn encourages the involvement of every member in the organization to communicate actively in the virtual world regarding their work matters regardless of place and time. It helps to enhance the potential of the individual, while promoting a more open work culture. This borderless relationship, allowing employees to connect with the management of an organization directly through digital applications, necessitates a change in leadership approach. The main challenge for educational leaders is to practice management and leadership flexibly but still adhere to rules – such as to be ethical and to have integrity toward achieving educational goals.

Flexibility in dealing with the changes especially during the MCO period gives guided autonomy to leaders to implement various actions. Leaders and the members have the freedom to plan the implementation of tasks but still abide by the rules. Freedom and flexibility lead to the generation of new ideas as well as the spark of innovation. Possibly, some tasks also reduce bureaucracy. The social interaction of society is now also undergoing a phase of transformation from human-to-human-based interaction, to digital-axis-machine-based interaction. Information is received and disseminated easily. Various forms of discussion and debate can be seen in social media nowadays. Social involvement in virtual groups such WhatsApp and Telegram, whether among family members, sharing hobbies, departments and many more makes human beings closer to each other in cyberspace, despite being thousands of miles away physically.

Digital transformation

The flexibility of demanding organizations has also changed in line with the development of digital technology. The new technology has forced organizational to change in terms of work processes, workflows and responsibilities. In other words, the digital transformation has influenced changes in the work environment, and led to new paradigms in education. Digital transformation demands that the world of education constantly renew technological skills from time to time in line with the Industrial Revolution 4.0 (IR4). A new paradigm for 21st century educational leaders is to implement technology-supported learning skills to prepare teachers and students for a globalized environment that requires critical thinking, willingness to seek, access and analyze information and make informed decisions. In brief, the competence of all parties in the application of digital technology must be emphasized.

During Covid-19 pandemic, the continuous professionalism development (CPD) of teachers was implemented by using digital technology. The implementation of the MCO which requires all schools to be closed has prompted the school leaders and teachers to restructure the teaching and learning process by using digital technology or to form the conventional teaching and learning session by using home-based teaching and learning session. Hence, the digitization of society is getting

paramount. Indirectly, the aspects of creative and innovative thinking were embedded in the online lessons to deal with crisis situation and to provide solutions to the new norms.

The virtual solution implemented in most countries in an effort to address the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic and to change the focus of learning from traditional learning methods that are face-to-face in the classroom to online education. This solution has brought online education to be a new norm in the world of education. Malaysia was no exception but to adopt the new norm due to the MCO. However, most teachers were not fully trained to conduct online teaching and learning. The Ministry has taken bold steps to train the teachers by introducing online classroom management system such as Google classroom and others.

MCO has had an impact on the culture of human life and also on the world of education. Online education is not only encouraged among pupils and students in institutes of higher learning, but also to civil servants who have to work from home during the MCO period. Civil servants were also required to use Public Sector E-Learning (EPSA) for their CPDs. Changes in management and administration aspects have increased the use of various digital applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Skype, Google Meet, and others. Organizational management not only able to survive and continue to operate with the assistance of these digital applications, but also saving money and time. Geographical factors constraints can be overcome while working from home. However, leaders and employees must have high integrity, creativity, spiritual maturity and resilience while performing tasks without face-to-face control. Support from telecommunication companies supporting online educational activities by giving away free data per day to their customers was also very helpful.

The MoE also provides several learning portals such as Webinar and Eduweb TV for teachers, and Online Quizziz for year one to year six students. Teach for Malaysia has collaborated with the YTL Foundation to build online learning content to ensure that all students in Malaysia can continue to learn from home during the school closure period due to the Covid-19 pandemic through the FrogPlay Mobile application. In addition, the National Library also provides an eLib eBook Portal to encourage free online book lending. Institutions of Higher Learning are also not left behind in implementing online education. Universiti Malaya, Universiti Teknologi Mara, Universiti Teknologi Petronas, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris and other universities have conducted online lectures. Online learning is viable option if the students are all over Malaysia or the students from foreign countries.

In general, online teaching and learning can be carried out better throughout MCO if all parties whether MoE, school leaders, teachers and students can build and utilize existing learning applications. Parental support and monitoring during MCO is essential to support children's learning. This interdependence requires each party to play their role to ensure that the children who are the human capital of the future are protected.

Combining the Old and New Concepts

The Covid-19 pandemic that hit the country has caused 'confusion' in most aspects of life including those in managing educational institutions where there was a clash between previous and the present roles. Educational leaders were struggled to adapt to the new norm of working from home because it disrupted the traditional structure of school management. They were used to face-to-face supervision, direct communication, and physical presence to monitor teaching and learning. The sudden shift to online platforms required new digital skills, remote leadership strategies, and frequent online staff meetings to coordinate teachers and maintain school operations. A number of principals faced challenges in ensuring teachers' accountability, students' engagement, and equitable access to technology. The lack of prior training, poor internet connectivity, and emotional stress further complicated their ability to lead effectively in this unfamiliar environment.

Discussion sessions and meetings for management and administrative purposes were also conducted online. Hence, educational leaders need to combine old or existing concepts with new, more relevant concepts to ensure that they can function effectively even during pandemic. Education leaders must be creative in managing the changes needed throughout the implementation of the MCO. Creative leaders are not tied to routines in the workplace that result in a loss of creativity and innovation (Naseri, 2019). These suggestions stated by Naseri (2019) as a guide for educational leaders to create creative management:

- make teachers as source of ideas
- accept failure from a given idea
- allow teachers more independence in performing tasks
- make teachers as a resource to gain competitive advantage
- adopt work culture of trust and integrity

Educational leaders should navigate the complexities of managing teachers from three distinct generations – X, Y (Millennials), and Z – each with unique values, communication styles, and technological fluency. Generation X teachers often value independence, stability, and practical experience; Generation Y tends to prioritize collaboration, innovation, and work-life balance; while Generation Z educators bring digital fluency, adaptability, and a desire for purpose-driven work. These generational differences became even more pronounced during the pandemic outbreak, when most teaching and learning were conducted online. Leaders had to bridge gaps in digital literacy, teaching styles, and attitudes toward technology to ensure continuity and quality of education. When managed effectively, these differences can create a dynamic and complementary workforce. Thus, educational leaders must foster mutual respect, open communication, and shared goals so that teachers from all generations can work together as one cohesive team – combining the wisdom and experience of older generations with the creativity and digital expertise of younger ones – to enhance teaching quality, student engagement, and institutional resilience in a rapidly changing educational landscape.

According to Davis (2019), educational leaders need to be open in listening to the views and suggestions voiced by their teachers. An open attitude will also assist in creating effective management as suggested by Naseri (2019). In this regard, good communication is essential in management especially in dealing with crisis. Hence, educational leaders should constantly acquire knowledge to improve their self-competence to meet these needs.

Gelbart and Komninos (2012) acknowledged that workplace management is facing new challenges. The large difference gap with traditional leader patterns and methods has also made such approaches less effective. At the same time, when there is a crisis that requires leaders to make decisions and act drastically and creatively, it has widened the gap of clash between the new generation and the old generation. Hence, the main challenge to the leader is to ensure that every work instruction, idea, and action is truly able to meet the demands of the job. Leaders also need to efficiently adapt methods and improve their role in decision making while planning and executing daily tasks as well as overcoming obstacles that may arise.

Changes that happen quickly, suddenly and unexpectedly also require leaders to have high self-efficacy to cope with those changes. Self-efficacy is associated with the belief that a person has the ability in a particular field, and is considered one of the main factors to achieve an objective (Cavazotte, Moreno, & Bernardo, 2013). Individuals with high self-efficacy will also be more committed in coping with change (Ng, Ang, & Chan, 2008; Herold, Fedor & Caldwell, 2007). Therefore, education leaders should act towards increasing self-efficacy in order to address change as needed during and after the implementation of the MCO.

The educational leaders who can adapt in combining old and new concepts while transforming change throughout the MCO are those who have resilience and flexibility. Hence, transformational leadership style is the most suitable leadership style to be practiced in managing change when there is a clash between old and new. According to Mansaray (2019), a transformational leader is able to address various challenges and reduce resistance to change by nurturing and being an inspiration as well as being able to strengthen the team he/she leads. However, creating an efficient and effective teamwork in mobilizing efforts and energy to address the current challenges of MCO is not an easy task. Thus, leaders have no choice but to change. Willingness to change and networking and intertwining are strengths in managing change (Al-Alawi et al. 2019; Penton & Petterson, 2019). In managing change while dealing with a crisis, leaders need to generate clear strategies and be able to execute them accurately with stable emotions.

Facilitator of change

The complex demands experienced during the MCO period compel educational leaders to exercise sound judgment, making decisions grounded in thorough analysis and supported by credible data and information. According to Hall and Hord (2014), there are three (3) main roles of leaders as facilitators

of change; (a) caring for others, (b) emphasizing organizational efficiency, and (c) implementing change strategies.

Effective leaders demonstrate care by understanding and responding to the emotions, attitudes, and concerns of their people, while directly participating in and overseeing organizational change. Next, leaders need to emphasize organizational efficiency by facilitating the work of the organization through sharing of responsibilities and authority, rather than doing it all on their own. While implementing change strategies, leaders need to maintain balance between long-term goals with daily or routine activity planning and short-term goals. These goals will ultimately be able to influence the organizational climate which encompasses the practices of the organization's citizens, implementation strategies and also has an impact on organizational outcomes.

The main challenge of leaders as facilitators of change is to clearly understand their roles and responsibilities. The use of different approaches by leaders is essential to influence the citizens of the organization while performing tasks. In this case, in addition to interacting about task or work-related matters, leaders as change facilitators also need to engage in informal conversations and relaxed discussions with members of the organization. For an effective organization, the practice of sharing a vision clearly and firmly with the organization members is made as a bond and moral commitment between the leaders and the members. Therefore, the extent to which leaders are able to involve organizational members in change initiatives will determine the level of success of those initiatives. Clear procedures as well as established systems and resources can help the organization members to carry out their duties efficiently.

The implementation of MCO has also changed the teaching and learning landscape. Therefore, the main challenge in this Covid-19 pandemic situation is how education leaders are able to act to motivate, facilitate and guide the citizens of their organization to continue to perform the task of educating their students online. Drastic action needs to be considered so that the motivation of educators is always at the same level or higher than conventional methods. In this regard, the Malaysian Education Quality Standard which contains four dimensions, namely the direction of leadership, organizational management, management of educational programs and student development needs to be adapted according to current needs and future planning.

The main impact when an educational leader plays the role as a facilitator of change can be seen from the aspect of the quality and standard of work of the people of his organization. If scrutinized and refined, all the standards put forward either locally or abroad have many similarities. Differences exist only in terms of the terminology used, but many similarities exist in terms of content and the tasks that educational leaders need to perform. These standards are also the same as the Malaysian School Principals' Competency Standard (SKKSM) (IAB, 2006).

The next impact can be seen from the aspect of the formation of teamwork culture among the members of the organization. This positive culture will create fun working environment, togetherness in taking responsibility and in turn create a sense of belonging to the organization. The conventional approach to professional development, which is to follow formal training (courses, workshops and face-to-face training) is no longer popular today. On the other hand, the development of professionalism through experience gained while performing tasks (experiential learning) is more effective. In this case, the leader as a facilitator of change has a great influence on the continuous professional improvement of the organization members. These include personal qualities, theoretical knowledge, strategic management practices, skills and techniques of dealing with change. The personal qualities meant are such as communication, leadership, innovation, interest and confidence. Meanwhile, strategic management practices involve problem identification, strategic planning, implementation and strategic evaluation. Thus, between leaders and teachers, what is the new form of strategic planning that can increase the motivation, concern and responsibility of teachers to realize the mission and vision of MOE.

In the nutshell, the actions recommended by Fullan (1998) and Hall and Hord (2014) can be used as a guide by leaders in overcoming the various challenges of managing change that occurred during the MCO period. However, preparation for leaders to face the institutional challenges during or after the MCO must also be emphasized to ensure that the main goal of MCO which is to break the chain of transmission of the Covid-19 epidemic is achieved and concurrently the goals and agenda of education can be sustained.

IMPLICATIONS TO STAKEHOLDERS

Failure to address change may have implications for the different parties that either involved directly or indirectly. The implications of this failure can be seen from the point of view of management and leadership of the MoE as well as the stakeholders. New issues in the increasingly complex field of education require an understanding and re-evaluation of leadership and management concepts by the leaders. In fact, education leaders need to face and address educational issues more flexibly especially when faced with new global crises. Failure to do so will hinder key educational goals, particularly the ability of school leaders to prioritize instructional leadership amid competing responsibilities (Hallinger, 2018; Harris et.al, 2017, Tucker & Tschannen-Moran, 2002). Therefore, if the process of adaptation to the new environment fails, the missions of the MoE will also be affected.

The use of digital learning in MoE's via the Digital Educational Learning Initiatives Malaysia (DELIMa) has shown significant increment since the implementation of MCO. Online learning or home schooling during the MCO period which is the latest trend requires education leaders to look at the psychological aspects of students, teachers and parents. The development of students in terms of collaborative and social skills may be disrupted and individualistic or selfish attitudes may be embedded in the psyche of students. In fact, they will face new living norms such as social distance, hygiene practices, and other personal safety measures after MCO in the future. Therefore, precise planning and clear SOPs need to be formulated and implemented.

In addition, the issue of data security uploaded to the virtual world needs to be researched and focused on. For example, there have been incidents of data breaches that have posed a risk to users. The existence of fake information (fake news), exploitation and online fraud can also lead to harm and errors in giving and conveying information. Therefore, knowledge of what information that can be uploaded and things that need to be controlled should be available to every netizen. Education leaders and all parties involved should take vigilant action and ensure that the sources of information received or transmitted are accurate and authentic. In addition, leaders need to be creative in dealing with this such as establishing online controls so that members of the organization are aware, that they are being monitored and not doing things that could tarnish the image of the organization and disrupt work productivity.

MoE conducts various courses to provide teachers with the skills to use digital learning platforms as well as build teaching materials. This positive development can also be seen when many teachers are able to provide their own digital learning materials for students to use and share with other teacher peers. This can be seen through the existence of certain groups, specifically to assist colleagues by expert teachers such as CikgooTube, Telegram group, Google Classroom Malaysia and Facebook Library and Media Teachers. However, there is no doubt that there are still a handful of teachers who need guidance from fellow skilled teachers. Unlike students because ICT and internet equipment is not something new, in fact they are already exposed to a variety of more interactive online applications. Therefore, the skills and competencies of teachers to produce interesting learning materials using online learning platforms will influence the level of acceptance of the current generation of students. In this case, the MoE needs to take into account the willingness of all parties in adapting the latest teaching and learning approaches.

Internal and external stakeholders

MoE stakeholders can be categorized into two (2) namely; (a) students and teachers as internal stakeholders, and (b) parents, the community and the private sector as external stakeholders. The dropout factor is a factor of great concern to the MoE, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some students do not have the opportunity to follow the online learning process due to the constraints of internet access and technological devices, differences in the socio-economic level of the family and geographical factors cause them to lag behind in their learning. As a first step, the MoE has postponed several public examinations that will enable teaching and learning to be completed face to face after the MCO period and before the students face the examination. However, the MoE needs to plan and implement various measures to reduce student dropouts.

In addition, the increasingly challenging role of educators also resulted in the MoE with the cooperation of various parties in ensuring that educators whether serving or still in training are equipped

with the knowledge and skills to face the risks and challenges of the new world. In line with this issue, there is a need to review the curriculum, training modules, new trainee recruitment criteria and coordinate the latest infrastructure requirements to support teaching and learning approaches in line with current developments. Undoubtedly, the teachers have shown high commitment as recommended by the MoE by offering learning sessions through various online platforms such as Google Classroom, Zoom, Skype, Quizzes, YouTube and others. Yet to what extent is meaningful learning, differentiated learning and developmental learning feasible?

The role of parents becomes even greater when student learning, which usually takes place in school, takes place at home during MCO. Parents need to provide digital devices and allocate time to support online learning needs. In addition, they may also need to subject-related knowledge and skills in using appropriate technology applications. In this regard, the offering of any online learning session should take into account the diversity of economic and educational backgrounds of the students' families. Support and cooperation from the private sector also played an important role in dealing with the Covid-19 crisis situation. In this regard, the internet network and facilities should be provided by MoE for the public schools. For example, in collaboration with Google, the use of Google Classroom has increased dramatically. Telecommunication company was also appointed to provide free data and free e-book access by e-Lib to the students.

Post movement control order

During the pandemic, educational leaders need to face the new normative culture by implementing changes such as physical distancing and hygiene practices throughout the school – in classrooms, laboratories, toilets, offices, training centers, and out-door activities. After the movement control order (MCO) was released, the schools were closed. Hence, change management skills of the educational leaders were also critical during post movement control order (MCO). However, leadership styles such as situational leadership, instructional, distributive, and authentic are difficult to be adapted as a result of leadership characteristics have changed from face-to-face leadership to online leadership or virtual communication. Thus, in the post MCO, educational leaders need to be retrained.

In addition, the strategic planning of the organization must also take into account the aspect of digital technologies in dealing with unexpected situations such as the Covid-19 pandemic that forced the entire organization to operate from home. The level of readiness needs to go beyond the limits of existing leadership thinking. Tasks execution also requires drastic changes beyond the expectations of ordinary thinking when faced with new situations. Action and implementation of tasks in the field of education requires a blended method between common practice with approaches related to the integration of digital technologies.

FUTURE PREPARATION RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the review of literature regarding the roles and challenges of educational leaders for sustainable education goals and agenda during and post Movement Control Order (MCO), several suggestions in preparation for education leaders to meet the needs of the future so that we can weather the possible risks of such a crisis, are listed as follows:

1. Cultivate Digital Leadership and Vision

Develop a clear digital transformation vision and roadmap for the institution. Establish a Digital Leadership Committee to coordinate online learning, cybersecurity, data privacy, and innovation policies that ensure resilience during disruptions.

2. Reframe Institutional Mindset for Agility

Promote a growth and adaptive mindset among staff and students. Encourage openness to change, creative problem-solving, and readiness for blended learning environments where technology and flexibility are key.

3. Strengthen Digital Competencies

Provide continuous professional development in digital literacy, online assessment tools, and the use of AI-based teaching aids. Encourage all educators to meet or exceed digital competency benchmarks based on UNESCO ICT-CFT or local frameworks.

4. Innovate Online and Hybrid Pedagogies

Enhance instructional design through interactive, student-centered approaches — flipped classrooms, microlearning, gamified lessons, AR/VR-based simulations, and competency-based digital assessment tools.

5. Promote Flexibility and Inclusivity

Design flexible learning systems that cater to diverse learners. Offer asynchronous access, downloadable materials, and mobile-friendly platforms for students with limited connectivity. Implement compassionate policies for attendance and submission deadlines.

6. Upgrade Facilities and Infrastructure

Invest in digital infrastructure (high-speed internet, LMS, device support schemes) and safe physical spaces for limited on-campus learning. Post-MCO, transform traditional classrooms into smart hybrid learning hubs.

7. Build a Sustainable Digital Ecosystem

Form strategic collaborations with industry, ed-tech partners, and government agencies to co-develop digital content, internships, and innovation hubs. Encourage open-source learning resources and shared platforms across institutions.

8. Strengthen Health, Hygiene, and Safety Culture

Establish strict health protocols during and after MCO. Personal hygiene — regular handwashing and use of sanitizers. Masks — mandatory in crowded or enclosed areas. Distancing — maintain safe physical distance in classrooms, labs, and offices. Ventilation — ensure adequate air circulation. Mental health — provide counselling, stress management sessions, and encourage balanced screen time. Leaders should ensure these measures become part of the institutional health culture beyond the pandemic period.

9. Enhance Communication and Collaboration

Maintain clear, empathetic, and transparent communication through digital platforms. Use collaborative tools (eg, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet) for real-time updates and decision-making. Regularly engage all stakeholders through virtual town halls or feedback loops.

10. Reinforce Commitment and Ethical Responsibility

Instil shared accountability for institutional recovery and digital ethics. Recognize exemplary leadership, teaching innovation, and student engagement. Embed principles of digital integrity, inclusivity, and sustainability into policy and curriculum.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to review relevant literature regarding the roles and challenges of educational leaders for sustainable education goals and agenda during Movement Control Order (MCO). In conclusion, the unprecedented shift to remote learning during the pandemic has highlighted the urgent need for leadership that is adaptive, technologically competent, and compassionate. Digital leadership and vision must be the driving force behind institutional transformation during the pandemic. Leaders are expected to inspire innovation, coordinate digital initiatives, and ensure technology is meaningfully linked to pedagogy and student outcomes. Cultivating a growth-oriented mindset among teachers, staff, students, and parents is equally vital to foster adaptability, lifelong learning, and resilience. Building digital competencies ensures that technology integration enhances—not replaces—human interaction and learning quality.

Pedagogical practices should move beyond temporary online measures toward purposeful hybrid and student-centered learning models. Flexibility and inclusivity must be prioritized to accommodate students from diverse socioeconomic and geographic backgrounds. Investments in robust digital infrastructure, accessible learning management systems, and smart campus facilities will further strengthen institutional continuity and preparedness for future disruptions. Health and safety, both physical and psychological, remain central pillars of post-MCO education. Institutions must uphold hygiene standards — mask-wearing, physical distancing, ventilation, and campus sanitation — while also nurturing mental health and digital well-being. Transparent communication, empathy, and ethical responsibility are key leadership traits that ensure trust and cooperation across all educational levels.

Importantly, the role of parents and guardians has become more prominent in the digital learning ecosystem. During online learning, parents must serve as active partners — supervising their children’s engagement, managing screen time, ensuring safe digital behaviors, and providing emotional and motivational supports. Educational leaders should establish mechanisms for parent training, communication, and collaboration to strengthen this home-school partnership. Finally, the post-MCO educational landscape demands a balance between digital competence, human empathy, parental involvement, and ethical responsibility. By implementing these recommendations, educational leaders play a pivotal role as visionaries, enablers, and guardians of transformative learning — ensuring that institutions, educators, and learners collectively thrive in a resilient, innovative, and inclusive digital future.

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