

Chapter 12

Reimagining the Role of School Management Teams in Curriculum Delivery in the COVID–19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explored the role of SMT in curriculum delivery in the midst of the pandemic, the impact of the pandemic on curriculum delivery, and support systems most useful during the coronavirus outbreak. The objectives were examined under the lens of the transformational leadership theory. The study was positioned in the interpretivist paradigm and informed by an exploratory case study design. Fifteen SMT members from six schools were conveniently sampled and interviewed to understand their experiences, perceptions, and expectations of curriculum delivery during the pandemic. The findings largely showed good practices in curriculum management during the pandemic, knowledge of curriculum delivery roles, and expanded support structures. On the other hand, challenges, such as increased absenteeism and weak student accountability resulting from recurring community transmissions, were noted. This chapter, therefore, calls for enhancing the role of SMTs in schools to make them better prepared for and responsive to interconnected global challenges such as this pandemic.

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INTRODUCTION

To reimagine is to have an ideological perception beyond an existing situation. It denotes a utopian system or society where everything works perfectly. But, with the advent of the Covid-19 Pandemic, most countries around the world are facing the twin pressures of contending with an already challenged education system in addition to the new challenges brought about as a result of the Pandemic (Cascella, Rajnik, Cuomo, Dulebohn & Napoli, 2020). Before the Pandemic, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP, 2020) had concluded that most students, especially in developing countries, were either taught too little or learned too little. Sections of the Millennium Development Goal 4's target of free compulsory universal basic education for all children of school-going age also seemed elusive.

Currently, education systems around the world are experiencing simultaneous shocks with wide-ranging implications. By 24 April 2020, schools in over 180 countries worldwide announced closures (Kaffenberger, 2020). This was estimated to have affected over 85 percent of the world's student population representing 1.5 billion school-going children (Mundy & Hares, 2020). While most students from affluent backgrounds continued learning from the comfort of their homes through alternative means, their counterparts in disadvantaged rural communities were shut out of the classrooms as well as from teaching and learning. According to Reimers, Schleicher, and Ansah (2020), the direct result of the lockdown on education has been a halt to learning, a disproportionate increase in the achievement gap, and a fall in the attachment to schooling (Diaz, Caminero, Lioret, Gonzalez & Castillo, 2020). Moreover, the time out of school has, in the interim, led to considerable losses, which will be difficult to bridge.

In South Africa, the national infrastructure grant was slashed by over R2 billion for all three basic components of the national education system (Mthethwa, 2020). These are the General Education and Training (GET), the Further Education and Training (FET), and the Higher Education and Training (HET) (Gustafsson & Deliwe, 2020). This was done to divert funds to support Covid-19 relief. The cut in funding has resulted in about 2,000 school infrastructure projects earmarked for the 2020/2021 academic year being put on hold (Mthethwa, 2020). Further, the implementation of hard lockdowns meant that most public schools' conventional teaching and learning functions and their associated social programs were discontinued (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2020). School feeding programs that mainly served quintile 1, 2 and 3 schools were suspended. In-person learning was put on hold resulting in most children being completely isolated from their educators and peers (Pilane, 2020). The alternative, which is a safe physical space for the continuity of teaching and learning from home, could also not be guaranteed for most children in public schools.

Although governments around the world are providing coping mechanisms through policies and various social programs to minimize the deleterious effect of the Pandemic, SMTs serve as the first responders to the immediate needs of students at the school level. This means that every available resource would have to be expended to bridge the ever-widening achievement gap. Effective leadership by SMTs can be a challenge if not managed properly. Some of these include inspiring staff, building teams, and managing resources effectively and practically. Contextually, the traditional role of the SMT will need to be either fine-tuned or ultimately adjusted to accommodate new ways of curriculum management with a focus on 'what works in place of a normative understanding of curriculum management. This Pandemic has also altered policy making and response to Policy across education systems.

In this chapter, we explore the role of SMTs and the key concepts underlining the challenges they face. We further discuss the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on curriculum delivery and the support structures (people, resources, policies, and procedures) most helpful to SMTs during and after the Pandemic.

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