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ARTICLE

Crisis as opportunity: experiences of Norwegian school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Norwegian schools received a few days' notice in March 2020 before closing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The complexity of school life was suddenly compounded by a serious and unstable situation. Amid this was the implementation of the updated Norwegian national curriculum. This research explored how schools coped with this complexity through the gathering of school leaders' perspectives. The views of school leaders were collected first through an anonymous survey. Following an initial analysis of the survey results, focus groups were conducted with school leaders. The data reveal diverse experiences. Whilst challenges were acknowledged, leaders reported strengthened staff collaboration, more insight into teaching and learning activities and a greater sense of community. As the crisis eased, some respondents reflected that teachers' will to collaborate lessened, others reported that their schools continued to be enriched by the experience of the pandemic. Several leaders were keen to build on the positives, viewing the crisis as an opportunity to redesign and develop learning and leading. This research suggests that through an exploration of the experiences of school leaders during the pandemic, it is possible to understand the kinds of co-creative practices needed to continually build schools as learning communities in 'ordinary' times.

Keywords: school leadership, learning communities, school development, COVID-19, mixed methods

Introduction

School closures across the world due to the COVID-19 pandemic have led to researchers seeking to understand the impacts on students, teachers, leaders and schools as organisations. The OECD estimated in June 2020 that more than 1.7 billion children had been affected by disruptions to their schooling, and although at the time of writing, almost all countries have reopened their schools to at least some degree, there are still more than 30 million learners impacted by school closures (UNESCO, 2021). Remote learning, therefore, continues to be part of the educational experience of many, and uncertainty over the control of COVID-19 means that school closures are likely to linger. Whilst the adverse effects of disruptions to children's learning are far-reaching, affecting achievement (Eyles, Gibbons and Montebruno, 2020) and mental health (Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2021), there appears to be a consensus that the pandemic has provided an opportunity to rethink schools (Jopling and Harness, 2021, p.2). Schleicher (2021a) is unequivocal in his assertion that "the COVID-19 pandemic shows us we cannot take the future of education for granted", that we in the education sector need to ask whether an entirely different approach is needed.

Norwegian schools received a few days notice in March 2020 before closing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. School leaders in Norway, as elsewhere, were presented with a challenging and unstable situation. Amid this was the implementation of the updated Norwegian national curriculum. The aim of this research was to explore how schools coped with this complexity through the gathering of school leaders' insights. We wanted to learn about how they had experienced the pandemic, intending to expand knowledge on school leadership. The research questions were therefore:

- How did school leaders experience leading schools during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How do the experiences of school leaders during COVID-19 contribute to knowledge for the further development of schools?

In contrast to research that highlights the significant and potentially long-lasting negative impacts of COVID-19 on schools (e.g. Kaffenberger, 2021; Buonsenso et al., 2021; Burgess and Sievertsen, 2020; Wyse et al., 2020), the research presented in this article suggests there is also much to be gained. The experiences of the school leaders in Norway involved in this research, whilst undoubtedly similar to the demanding and chaotic circumstances described by colleagues elsewhere (Harris and Jones, 2020), indicated that the crisis has also potentially enabled leaders to build on existing practices and develop new ones. Responding to Schleicher's (2021a) call to plan for the unexpected, understanding how school leaders responded to the crisis can be an important part of enabling schools to be more adaptive and innovative.

Research on Leading Schools During the Pandemic

Research conducted during COVID-19 suggests key challenges associated with leading schools. Acting without the safety of pre-existing guidance (Huber and Helm, 2020; Harris and Jones, 2020; Varela and Fedynich, 2020) and within shifting regulatory frameworks, school leaders became essential front-line workers (Stone-Johnson and Weiner, 2020), suddenly expected to be a source of support for all members of school communities (Bubb and Jones, 2020). School leaders needed to deal with

teachers' uncertainty in the transfer to digital learning as well as families feeling overwhelmed as they struggled to support children's learning (Richmond et al., 2020). Meeting academic demands was crucial as learning was required to continue (Marshall, Roache and Moody-Marshall, 2020), but school leaders also had to ensure that the needs of vulnerable students were being met (Grooms and Childs, 2021) and be part of working out how to protect all members of their school communities (Kaffenberger, 2021). School leaders' work became characterised by the increasing need for fast responses to multiple challenges (Fotheringham et al., 2021), resulting in pressure, stress and sleepless nights (Harris and Jones, 2020). Managing the flow of information into and within schools took more of school leaders' time. Federici and Vika (2020) in their research on Norwegian schools during the pandemic report a significant increase in contact between the local authorities and school leaders, and Grooms and Childs (2021) describe school leaders in the United States navigating and interpreting varying responses from authorities.

Whilst there is little disagreement in the literature about the extent and complexity of the burdens placed on school leaders during the pandemic, there are also suggestions of what leaders might have gained. Kidson et al. (2020, p.18) praised leaders' quick thinking to "mobilise resources and partnerships immediately to create new realities of schooling". Netolicky (2020) described heightened feelings of supportiveness among teaching professionals, and a sense of being 'all in this together' (ibid.). In a study of English teachers, Kim and Asbury (2020) found that although teachers initially experienced high levels of stress, they found a way forward due to positive relationships. This is supported by a survey of more than 8000 teaching professionals in England which found that 63% of staff reported feeling 'like part of one team' (Bring, Ozolins and Jenavs, 2020). In Norway, Gilje et al. (2020) found that leaders described the strengthening of professional learning communities as teachers sought inspiration and support from each other. The changed cultures within schools seemed to provide opportunities for new practices of leading. Darling-Hammond and Hyler (2020) reported how leaders created more time for 'teaming and collaboration' and Netolicky (2020) described school leaders as becoming more adept and able to evolve. Harris and Jones (2020) agree, arguing that the crisis has brought about leaders who are more connected, collaborative, creative and responsive. Therefore, whilst research conducted thus far on the COVID-19 pandemic acknowledges the difficulties faced by school leaders, there are indications that leaders were able to build on heightened feelings of community among teachers. This has potentially exciting implications for future practice. This research, through exploring the experiences of school leaders in a time of crisis, invites a consideration of what kinds of leading practices might enhance learning communities in ordinary times.

Understanding Leading in Complexity and Crisis

An organisational crisis can be defined as unsolicited complexity urging swift action (Pearson and Clair, 1998; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). Complexity is essential to understanding crisis, as it represents the encounter and acceptance/acknowledging of not-knowing (Weick, 1988; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). Crisis requires acting in uncertainty, without the aid of manuals or any guaranty of workability, only with the certainty that whichever action is taken it cannot later be erased or reversed (Klein, Biesenthal and Dehlin, 2015). In crisis, sense must be found where there is none, as Weick (1988,

p.305) explains in his seminal work on organisational crisis: "To sort out a crisis as it unfolds often requires action which simultaneously generates the raw material that is used for sensemaking and affects the unfolding crisis itself".

For school leaders and teachers alike, crises demand action without the luxury of time to contemplate or plan in the long term. Peirce's (1901) term 'abduction' promotes the idea that discontinuity and urgency is the basis for all meaning-making, regardless of crises. School leaders' ability to improvise is therefore key. Defined as demonstrating the capacity to respond in real time to challenges in order to develop a deliberate new design (Cunha and Clegg, 2019), improvisation is an advanced skill. The 'life and death importance' of the pandemic (Enserink and Kupferschmidt, 2021) and its unexpected advent created an undeniably demanding situation. For leaders there is uncertainty on two levels, both regarding the complexity of the circumstances, and the extra dimension of handling uncertainty on behalf of others (Shenhav and Weitz, 2000). But just how unusual is this for school leaders? Certainty is indeed a rare commodity in the world of leading. Filled with surprises, dilemmas and conflicts, complexity is ever-present in schools. Day (2014, p.638) describes an array of demands, expectations, requirements and adversities that test school leaders' adaptivity, flexibility, intellectual and emotional energy on an everyday basis. In a review of problems faced by school leaders during the past fifteen years, Tintoré et al. (2020, p.27) conclude that challenges for school leaders have been "increasing in number, complexity and wickedness". Crisis, therefore, rather than calling for exceptionality, can act as a magnifying glass upon what is always already occurring (Heidegger, 1962): a steady flow of more or less complex events. As much as discontinuity is a hallmark of crisis, unpredictability is woven into everyday leading and organising, as ad hoc, adaptive arrangements (Gronn, 2009) co-existing with an array of required responsibilities.

Distributed leadership, described by Harris and Jones (2010) as the infrastructure that holds the community together, has been suggested elsewhere in the literature as a way for schools to thrive in complexity. Emphasising decentralisation and networking at the expense of formal roles and positions (Harris, 2013), distributed leadership may allow for flexible responses. As the landscape in which schools operate was unexpectedly displaced during the pandemic, Harris and Jones (2021) conclude that for overworked leaders, distributed leadership is a necessity to survive. Ironically, though illuminating the collective aspect of leadership, the concept of distribution lacks direction as to how to go about leadership: what does it mean to distribute leadership in a context of crisis, where hierarchical coordination and central decision-making are in high demand? Whilst distributed leadership might imply organisational elasticity, the centre of power is arguably reinforced, as the leader remains the distributor of power (Lumby, 2013). In organisational crises, it is paradoxical that central command, prioritisation and coordination are desired alongside flexibility, sensitivity and intelligence (Loosemore, 1998). In uncertain times, when crisis combines with the ever-present pressures related to efficiency, effectiveness and the 'terrors of performativity' (Ball, 2003, p.215), it is perhaps unsurprising that the search continues for a 'Holy Grail' of leadership (Pye, 2005, p.31). We seek reassurance and clarity, and thus the identification of a single leadership style is tempting. Rather than one form of leadership, distributed or indeed any other style, however, the ongoing complexities of school life as well as the

challenges of the pandemic seem to point towards a multiplicity of dynamic responses by school leaders.

Context of the research

Norway provided an interesting context for this research. Unlike many other countries, Norway was arguably very well prepared for the shift to digital learning with at least 93% of pupils already attending 'digitalised schools' (European Commission, 2019) compared with the European average of 35%. Great emphasis is placed on digital competency in the Norwegian national curriculum (Søby, 2018). At the outbreak of the pandemic, the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (Udir) promptly published a range of resources, and schools were allowed free access to digital teaching and learning tools. Teachers from all over Norway flocked to a Facebook group (50,000 in the first week of the pandemic) to exchange ideas on organising home-school.

The framing of the response to the pandemic as a national dugnad by the Norwegian Prime Minister, Erna Solberg in March 2020 is important in describing the context of this research. Whilst direct translation of the term dugnad is not possible, Simon and Mobekk (2019, p.815) define it as "a cultural practice that creates an environment that nurtures prosocial and cooperative activities", thus, the use of the word in connection with the pandemic directly appealed to Norwegian values and norms of community. Arguing that the use of the word dugnad united and co-ordinated Norwegian people in a collective effort, Nilsen and Skarpenes (2020) suggest that it was responsible for the successful handling of the COVID-19 crisis. Whilst this might be going too far, the Norwegian emphasis on community spirit is important to bear in mind when interpreting school leaders' experiences of the pandemic.

Methods

Our involvement in the National Programme for School Leaders in Norway at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology inspired this research as well as providing a network of school leaders from which to invite participants. Past and current students on the programme are leaders in different types of schools all over central and northern Norway and we wanted to explore how they had responded to and experienced school closures in March-April 2020.

Survey

First, we collected their views through an anonymous online survey designed on Nettskjema, which is Norway's most secure online survey tool. Being online and easily accessed, via a link that was distributed via email and on social media in June 2020, the survey facilitated the gathering of a wide range of experiences during continuing social restrictions. Using research on home-schooling during COVID-19 recently conducted with school leaders in one Norwegian municipality (Bubb and Jones, 2020) as a starting point, the survey was designed to be straightforward to complete, thus hopefully encouraging more completed responses from busy school leaders. The first two questions asked school leaders about their use of time, inviting them to select the activities they spent most time on before and during the pandemic. The remaining questions were open, inviting respondents to describe their experiences of collaboration inside and outside the organisation and how they felt their role as leader

and expectations of them as leaders had been influenced by the pandemic. In addition, we collected information about the type and size of school they worked in. We received 63 responses to the survey and an overview of the survey responses can be seen in Table 1. A copy of the survey questions is available from the authors upon request.

Table 1: Overview of survey responses

School Type	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Total
Primary	21	33.9%
Lower Secondary	8	12.9%
Combined Primary and Lower Secondary	18	29%
Upper Secondary	15	24.2%

First, a simple frequency analysis of the results to the questions about use of time, and content analysis of the qualitative responses was conducted. Then we carried out focus groups with school leaders in November 2020.

Focus groups

The pandemic was continuing to impact school life in Norway, and we were interested in exploring changes that followed the reopening of schools. We wanted to create the opportunity to expand on our initial findings by inviting reflections from school leaders, thus enriching and expanding the data. The participants were invited from among students in the National Programme for School Leaders. 36 participants responded positively, and five focus groups were subsequently established, with participants randomly assigned to each group. The focus groups were conducted and recorded digitally, due to restrictions related to COVID-19, and in accordance with the requirements of the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. To maintain the anonymity of the survey, it was not possible to know whether the focus group participants had also answered the survey. We did not view this as a barrier to participants' reflections on the survey data, however, and we used survey data as an initial impetus for discussion in the focus groups. Considering ethics, we decided not to be part of the focus group discussions because the participants were our students. We gave participants access to a graph (figure 1) showing the results of the responses to the first two questions in the survey 'What did you use most time on before and during COVID-19?' and invited them to discuss their own experiences in light of the results. The intention was to stimulate unstructured discussion, unhindered by our presence, allowing participants to explore experiences as they chose, whilst also enriching the survey findings. Thus, this mixed methods research can be described as sequential explanatory (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p.178).

Mixed methods

The mixed methods approach used in this research enables a richer and more complex data set, allowing a greater exploration of the complexities of leading schools during the pandemic. The survey enabled the collection of a wide range of views, potentially facilitating a greater number of school leaders to directly relay their opinions than would otherwise be possible. Anonymity allowed leaders to be open about their experiences without fear of recognition. The focus group discussions created opportunities for dialogue between respondents, allowing for the more spontaneous exploration of themes. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) argue that whilst qualitative and quantitative researchers continue to debate the advantages of their own paradigm and highlight the disadvantages of the other, mixed methods recognises the importance of both, suggesting that it draws from the strengths and minimises the weaknesses of each (ibid.). Their argument is centred around improving the quality of research produced; that through collaboration and communication across the paradigms researchers are better equipped to produce knowledge. According to Carroll and Rothe (2010), the combination of perspectives enables the understanding of both complexity and context. Mixed methods, write Hibberts and Johnson (2012, p.137) allow for increased validity, because they offer opportunities to draw from a wider range of data in order to produce meta-inferences. Utilising content analysis allowed for the making of inferences following the initial reduction and organisation of the data using coding (Krippendorff, 2018). During analysis we moved reflexively back and forth between the survey comments, the transcripts of the focus groups and the context of the research to identify findings and respond to the research questions (White and Marsh, 2006). Although the survey results were initially analysed prior to the focus groups, they were revisited and compared with the discussions in the focus groups, enabling a greater appreciation of the complexity of the phenomena and new findings.

Findings

The findings from the survey and the focus groups are combined under descriptive headings, selected according to the questions in the survey and identified as part of the content analysis process. Data from the survey and the focus groups are combined in the presentation of the findings.

School leaders' use of time

The data collected about school leaders' use of time before and during the pandemic provided insights into their priorities, demands on them and taken as a whole, their everyday working lives. Respondents in the survey were asked to select the three things they used most time on before and during the pandemic, the results are summarised in Figure 1. What was perhaps most striking was the frequency that 'operational tasks' was selected, surpassing almost all other options. There appeared to be little change from before the pandemic, clearly respondents felt that they used considerable time on operational tasks. 'Following up employees' also appeared to dominate respondents' use of time, increasing further during the pandemic. One leader in the focus group said, "It's the following up of teachers which takes the most time", another reflected, "I had to increasingly use more time on caring for the teachers". It is worth noting that 'operational tasks' and 'following up employees' were selected more frequently than 'developing the school' and 'student matters', especially as the Norwegian national curriculum is clear about the importance of school leaders in development work and furthermore, a

continued focus on the needs of students (Udir, 2018). These results seem to suggest that school leaders were using disproportionate time on operational tasks and following up employees, potentially to the detriment of their responsibilities (according to the national curriculum) to ensure learning and development.

There was agreement in the data that meetings, despite being more frequent, were more effective, primarily due to being digital. "Much time has been saved", with "less opportunity for small talk", "shorter agendas" and "improved attendance" were some of the comments received in the survey. For more remote schools, digital meetings had freed up time usually spent on driving, and several school leaders wished to continue with this practice after the pandemic.

Despite spending less time on meetings, there was a clear sense in the focus groups that school leaders had been busier during the pandemic, partly due to infection control routines. There were, however, some important alternative perspectives. One leader commented,

> "During COVID-19, I felt that more things happened by themselves, that I used less time making sure that small things were in place."

Another leader said,

> "I'm surprised by the results, I think that the leaders haven't understood how they have divided their time. At our school, even though we didn't set aside specific time for development, it happened anyway. We got better at differentiating, better at using digital tools."

This insight suggests that the categorisation of leaders' time is artificial. Seemingly, school development does not only happen in the time labelled as such, and the pandemic appeared to highlight that.
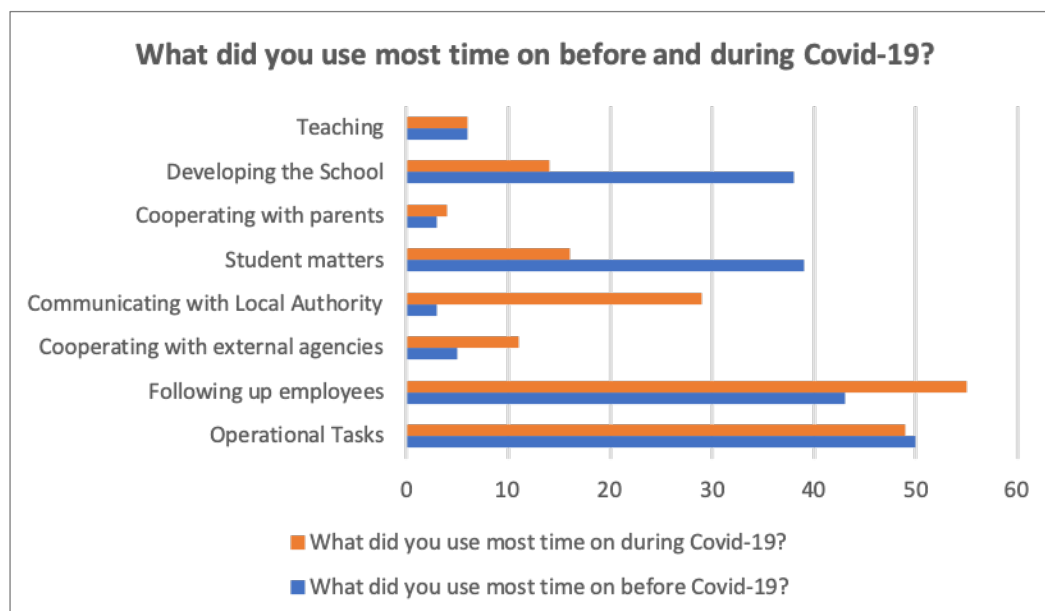

Figure 1: What did you use most time on before and during the COVID-19 crisis?

Working together at school

In the survey, we asked school leaders to comment about their work with other leaders and teachers during the pandemic. Many respondents chose to do so, with overwhelmingly positive descriptions of cooperation. Some described closer cooperation with their leadership teams, for example, "we talked about how we worked, and the challenges we had". Others described how digital tools had allowed for more collaboration in meetings, enabling, for example, "continued discussions about things which came up", as well as "more opportunities for cooperation using chat in Teams".

Some leaders wrote in the survey about how the crisis had created the necessity for better cooperation. One said, "increased pressure to deliver led to much more focus on planning, teaching and assessing together, rather than talking about other things", another leader commented that "teachers have been forced to cooperate better, something that I think is good for the students". A number of respondents noticed the positive impact of the feeling of being in a crisis, encapsulated by one comment: "shared fate, shared comfort". One leader described how "a common enemy had brought everyone together. We shared experiences and make use of each other's knowledge". Another agreed that the crisis had led to "strengthened cooperation and more involvement". A school leader in a focus group reflected, "we had completely different forms of cooperation than we had before. We were together, we had a shared goal". Less dissent among the adults was mentioned by several leaders in the focus groups. One said, "there were fewer questions, we were in agreement much quicker than previously", and another leader went even further, saying, "overnight, all resistance disappeared and it felt like we were learning as an organisation".

Other respondents to the survey explained that there had been few, if any changes during the pandemic, for example "no changes worth mentioning" and "we've always worked well together, before, during and after Covid". One respondent suggested cooperation had become worse, saying "we have much more work, we are exhausted, all of us", and another had noticed how digital meetings "made it easier for people to not follow what was happening" and that social contact was reduced. Furthermore, not all teachers were equally convinced of closer working relationships with leaders, one leader described in the survey how "some teachers tried to prevent me from getting an insight into their digital teaching, arguing that it was controlling" and another described difficulty maintaining contact with teachers as they were "disappearing into their own caves".

Summarising the diverse experiences of working together in schools during the pandemic is challenging. This is an important finding in itself, enabling a recognition of the complexity of school life. Whilst improvements were clear for many respondents, there were also other, less positive experiences. For some schools, the shared experience of crisis acted as an impetus to bring the adults closer together, both for emotional support and to develop teaching. In other schools, the crisis impacted collaborative working practices less, or negatively.

Leading Schools

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the data about leading schools during the pandemic revealed a multiplicity of experiences. Some leaders in the focus groups talked about how they felt more secure and had

experienced learning. One explained, "Now that we have experienced this, I'm much less frightened about difficult situations". A leader enthused, "I've seen my employees blossom and really show what they can do. I've also tried out new systems" and another said, "I've been able to demonstrate that I'm a good leader, I've led meetings with lots of important people in the local area". Clear and calm were two words that were repeated by leaders as necessary attributes throughout the data, both in the survey and the focus groups. Other leaders negatively described the pressures to be, or appear to be, in control. Comments in the survey included, "We had to be available to make decisions until late in the evening", "Even greater expectations that we have all the answers" and "Even more responsibility on us than usual". Whilst the crisis brought a heightening of demands on leaders, the suggestion from these comments is that leaders being omniscient was also a pre-existing expectation.

Reflections on leading teachers were especially insightful. One leader in a focus group clearly welcomed the opportunity for different ways of leading, having less focus on responding to the needs of teachers:

> "My experience of leadership is usually that I run around fixing things for teachers, but that disappeared for me. I had an open-door policy before, which meant that I was interrupted all the time and never had time to concentrate on anything. But since everything became digital, contact with teachers was initiated by me, rather than the other way around."

The relationships between leaders and teachers were also discussed in one of the focus groups where leaders discussed their experiences of vulnerable teachers, saying "They needed to be reassured, to be told that they were doing their jobs properly, that they weren't doing the wrong thing", another leader explained that "Some teachers were very uncertain about letting the children see them at home, especially if parents were also around". This might be solely due to concerns brought on by the pandemic, however, there may also be pre-existing insecurities and patterns of behaviour. The need for leaders to serve teachers prior to the crisis, and comfort them during the pandemic invites consideration of how teachers view themselves and their roles.

Descriptions of teachers as daring to be creative elsewhere in the data suggest that some teachers were more able than others to rise to the challenges of teaching during the pandemic. One leader explained in a focus group how their teachers had grown along the way:

> "After a while, they [the teachers] found out that it wasn't the digital tools that were the problem, it was their teaching. That the teaching they had done for the past fifteen years actually wasn't good enough – not in the classroom, and not digitally. Teachers had to stop and think, what have we been doing? Which I thought was really good."

Another leader in the same focus group agreed that the crisis had created impetus for change, exclaiming, "We all got a kick in the behind!". Elsewhere, however, change was less welcomed, "It's been challenging to lead teachers who react negatively to change." As in 'normal' times, teachers demonstrated diverse attitudes to change, perhaps suggesting that the original sense of urgency during school closures lessened as the pandemic continued.

These experiences provide useful insights into leading schools that could be a springboard for change. The diversity of experiences presented in this research illustrates the pre-existing complexities of schools. Although leaders were positive about the ways in which their school communities had coped with the crisis and it seems that the spirit of dugnad did lead to collective efforts in many schools, at least for a while. At the same time, the differences in the experiences of school leaders are notable. For some, the move to digital meetings represented a significant change, for others, the experience of unplanned and potentially radical innovation was profound. The extent to which these experiences were rooted in school life before the pandemic is difficult to generalise about, however, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that for some leaders the crisis was a welcomed opportunity to bring about longed-for transformation. This raises questions about how leaders might develop more in-depth understandings of what is needed for their schools to develop in ordinary times, and how they might harness their skills of leading for routine uncertainty in order to facilitate development.

Discussion

This research initially developed from curiosity about how the school leaders that we work with experienced their roles during the pandemic. Whilst the experiences in themselves are fascinating, providing an insight into school life before and during the COVID-19 crisis, we also intended to contribute to knowledge about leading schools.

The obvious and perhaps most keenly felt experience during the crisis was the heightened sense of community and togetherness. Whilst some school leaders reported that they had pre-existing cultures of working together, many leaders were enthusiastic about the impact of shared adversity. Teachers went the extra mile to help their students and each other, and according to leaders, many became less concerned with complaining or questioning, making organising easier. The greater good appeared to become more important than the needs of the individual. Mutual emotional and professional support for each other, a sharpened focus on taking care of vulnerable members of the community, and can-do attitudes were all positive consequences reported in the data of having a shared enemy. This deserves recognition. It also leads to the question: what is needed under ordinary circumstances to inspire a sense of community in schools and, consequently, what are the roles of leaders?

The research findings indicate that school leaders spent considerable time following up and supporting teachers during the outbreak. This is interesting when framing the school as a learning community, where teacher autonomy and collective development is at the core (Hargreaves et al., 2013), regularly referred to as co-creative learning (Klev and Levin, 2020). This is particularly emphasised through the Norwegian national curriculum's requirements that schools should be professional learning communities, where leaders prioritise developing collaboration and promoting a sharing and learning culture among the teachers (Udir, 2018). During the pandemic, however, leaders appeared to spend more time on supportive activities than on school development and student matters. Arguably, at least for some, ideas of self-efficacy and autonomy were eroded by the crisis, as concerns about doing the right thing took precedence. This might indicate that the crisis acted as a hindrance to schools as

learning communities, as teachers became less able to rely on their own professional judgement and more reliant on leaders for direction and reassurance.

In some schools, however, the crisis necessitated more collaboration and learning, especially related to digital teaching activities. Some school leaders described school development work intensifying during the pandemic, and that development work became more continuous. The data suggest that for some, school development became an ongoing, innovative, collective activity, challenging previous practices of understanding change as an event, rather than as a process (Vennebo and Aas, 2020, p.3). Development seemed to become more integrated into everyday actions, rather than being a defined activity during, for example, staff development meetings. Leaders seemed to support rather than facilitate by way of steering practice. An understanding of the importance of continual development, not only integrated into but inherent in the everyday, can be inspired by experiences during the pandemic. Furthermore, a paradigmatic move from operational tasks as the opposite of development, to operational tasks as development is proposed. This involves shifting from negative improvisation – reacting to uninvited and acute complexity, to positive improvisation – organising and acting to perpetually develop organisational practices (Dehlin, 2008). Organisational change and crisis share important characteristics, ambiguity, confusion, and feelings of disorientation (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010, p.552). Thus, our findings from during the pandemic offer insights into organisational change in the everyday that are relevant post-Covid.

Our results reflect that teachers and leaders succumbed to inaction and denial to a small extent. Risk-taking and improvisation were evident. COVID-19 added a sense of urgency (Kotter, 2012), removing the veil of certainty some may have previously taken for granted or even needed. Teachers and leaders were able to tackle the crisis with pragmatic ambitions and a rare feeling of community. Rather than being formally distributed, in some schools leadership became about joint efforts to deal with difficult things. Our findings indicate that leaders during the pandemic were context-sensitive, risk-involving, reflexive and fundamentally empathetic. These skills are highly likely to have been developed before the pandemic, rather than as a direct response. The crisis enabled leaders to gain new perspectives on the immense resources of their teachers and organisations, as well as about themselves as leaders.

Improvisation may have been more palpable during the pandemic, but, arguably, school leadership in the future can be modelled according to the same logic: improvisational acts of co-creative learning (Klev and Levin, 2020). Co-creative learning is a process perhaps best understood as a creative, collaborative practice where all participants take (mutual) responsibility for results (Jones and Dehlin, 2021). Not only is it an important characteristic of learning communities, it is also a central concept in the Norwegian national curriculum, that states: "students must participate and assume co-responsibility in the learning community which they create together with the teachers every day" (Udir, 2018). Whilst some leaders explained that traditional arenas for co-creation (i.e. face-to-face meetings) were limited during the crisis, the data suggest that teachers and leaders were regularly participating in co-creative activities. We ask, therefore: how might leaders harness their experiences of co-creative learning from the pandemic to enhance the continued development of schools as learning communities?

Conclusions and Recommendations

Our findings on the experiences of school leaders during COVID-19 are diverse, suggesting contextuality and multiplicity. This may be frustrating for those seeking a clear understanding of what can be taken forward from this crisis. Appreciating the complexity of leading schools and resisting the temptation of quick fixes (such as a particular leadership style) is, however, an important aspect of this research. Rather than the pandemic providing answers, it invites questions, allowing for an enriched debate about the future of schools and the roles of school leaders.

On the one hand, the crisis seems to indicate the continued relevance of the Nordic model, both within Norwegian schools and internationally. Personal differences, insecurities and dogmatisms seemingly became less important when the shared purpose was clearer. The community spirit was heightened due to the crisis with positive, albeit at times short lived, effects. Potentially, when adults in schools work together for the good of their students and for their learning communities at all times, not just during the pandemic, then good things happen. Leaders can be supported to understand the kinds of co-creative practices needed to continually build schools as learning communities, not simply the identification of behaviour exhibited during extraordinary times.

Elsewhere, however, leaders experienced teachers needing more support and reassurance. Fearful of making mistakes, teachers looked to their leaders to guide them safely through the crisis. The pandemic enables questions to be asked about the ways in which leaders and teachers interact. Has an over-emphasis on effectiveness and performativity eroded teachers' sense of professionalism and autonomy (Holloway and Brass, 2018), negatively impacting schools as learning communities? We propose that rather than dwelling on notions of lost learning time, the crisis invites a reframing of teachers as autonomous, highly competent subjects (rather than objects) in their own organisations (Dehlin and Jones, 2021). Leaders might consider how they can work co-creatively with teachers to encourage professional autonomy which can build learning communities.

There are clearly limitations of this research in terms of scope, timing and the uniqueness of the context of Norway. An increased number of respondents may have revealed even greater complexity and it would be interesting to explore school leaders' experiences now that schools have largely returned to normal. It has not, however, been our intention to develop generic success criteria for future crisis leadership which can be universally applied. Collecting the experiences of Norwegian school leaders has provided valuable insights into leading schools before and during the pandemic, raising questions relevant for any education system. As a counter to the deficit discourse on the pandemic, the case of Norway provides a diversity of experiences, many of which were positive. At the time of writing, the pandemic is a reality, even a normality worldwide. We are not ready to simply learn from the past, it is still our present. What is possible, however, is to use the crisis to better understand what went before and what might yet be, as a useful reminder of the complexity of school life and the everyday challenges of leading schools.

COVID-19 is an important opportunity; illuminating what previously existed and allowing central questions about education to be discussed. As Schleicher (2021) states, "ultimately, it makes us think

harder about the future we want for education". Leaders can use the pandemic as an opportunity to explore and develop their pre-existing skills of improvisation, honed through continual everyday handling of complexities. Rather than seeing COVID-19 as an isolated incident that necessitated extraordinary leadership and seeking to identify a recipe for leadership which can be applied in ordinary circumstances, we propose that leaders use the crisis to identify and build on the practices which continually develop learning communities.

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