Quality Education News

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Dear Supporter of Quality Education

During pandemics should there be marks and grades?

How do we assess children when there are no face-to-face classes? The coronavirus has forever changed the way that we understand education. Our schooling system has changed more in the last few months than in the last few decades.

Suddenly schools have had to look at how to teach in a lockdown situation. According to scientists, it's naïve to think that there won't be pandemics in the future. Should lockdowns happen again, how are teachers able to assess the children's achievements? Should we be giving marks and grade symbols?

Joe Feldman, a former North American school principal and district administrator, maintains that during the 2020 coronavirus, children should not be given grades (Feldman 2020: 43-46). Although he describes the situation in his own country, the parallels in South Africa are obvious.

Firstly, the virus has negatively impacted on children's academic performance. When people have too much stress, performance levels drop. There can be few South African families where there haven't been increases – albeit they small – in stress levels. For fortunate families, parents can work from home and regular salaries or business incomes are received. Compare that with those millions who have recently lost their jobs and their incomes. Such situations can cause stress levels to soar in such homes.

Lockdowns have distinct downsides for children. Being home-bound for weeks on end with no contact with friends and school mates, is stressful. So often, the school is an emotional relief and support for children who come from dysfunctional families. During lockdown that safety valve has been taken away from them.

The pandemic has added more stressors to students' lives. Is it fair to make academic assessments when the children are in a unique type of stress? That stress might have made it impossible for them to achieve their full potential.

Feldman's second reason for doing away with assessment marks and grades applies also to South Africa. The level of scholastic achievement of a child often reflects its' racial, economic and resource background. Think of the typical Grade 12 results expected of a student at a rural school in Limpopo as against that of a Johannesburg northern suburb one. The Johannesburg student will likely have better human and physical resources to help get good exam results as against their Limpopo counterpart.

With the coronavirus closing of schools, the quality of education offered which already exists between the two above-mentioned students, will be further widened. The urban well-resourced school will be better able to switch from the face-to-face to the virtual online classroom. Poorly resourced schools are less likely to make a successful transition to the new teaching methodology.

The third rationale that Feldman puts forward is that most teachers have not been adequately prepared to provide high-quality instruction remotely. Even in those schools that have all the necessary technology resources, much in-house training is still needed. Poor schools often face a treble – whammy. They don't have the computer resources; the families of their students lack them too and thirdly, there has been little or no computer teaching training of staff.

So, how does one assess the children? Feldman recommends that assessment marks should be awarded only up until the day that a school was closed because of the lockdown. Marks awarded after that date might not be able to take accurate cognizance of factors that have made it impossible for children to give of their best.

Obviously, children deserve to know how well they are performing with the work submitted during the lockdown. Make remarks to give an overall assessment rather than give raw marks or grade symbols. Make allowances for children who fall short of expectations. If necessary, use a word such as 'Incomplete'. That word suggests that when the child returns to school, the child will be helped and able to catch up once sitting again in the classroom.

The coronavirus has caused tough times for millions of children. Let's not add to the trauma by using a rigid way of assessment. After all, they're likely to be trying to do their best in these pandemic times.

Sincerely

Richard Hayward

Reference

Feldman, J 2020. Should we give grades? *Educational Leadership*, April (Special issue): pages 42-46.

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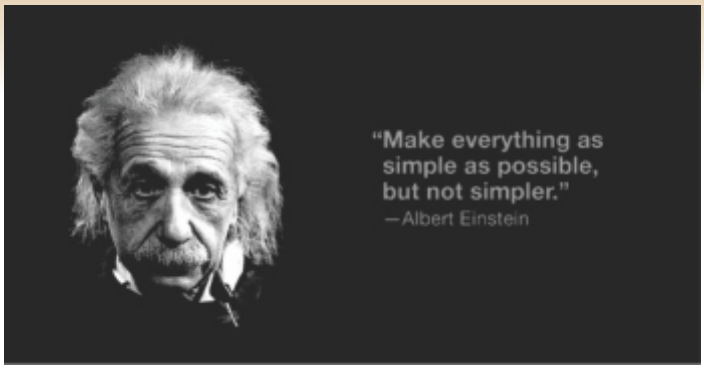
The KISS principle



In the business world there's a management mantra called the KISS principle. It means 'Keep it simple, Sam.' In times of frustration, it might also be referred to as, 'Keep it simple, stupid.' The short sentence is a reminder that in times of chaos and turmoil, the best way forward is to focus on a few core factors. Refuse to allow yourself to be side-tracked into dealing with a huge pile of problems.

When Covid-19 arrived in South Africa, there were times when society was overwhelmed. The five lockdown levels were full of regulations about what could and couldn't be done. Business, industry, police and political leaders were forever at odds as to the best ways to deal with the crisis.

In education too there was much conflict about how to manage the crisis. Stress levels soared. Teachers, senior management teams, school district offices, teacher unions and politicians were contradicting each other for days and weeks on end.

Yet there were also those schools scattered across the country that didn't go into a flat spin. In fact, they did sound planning to keep disruption at schools to a minimum. How did they go about it? They used the KISS principle.

Justin Reich is an associate professor at MIT in the USA. He directs the Institute's Teaching Systems Laboratory. In an article in *Educational Leadership* (2020:2-5), he describes how an education department managed the pandemic using KISS. Schools were requested to deal with the challenges of distant or remote learning by focussing on only three core aspects:

1 Care for students
2 Create opportunities for enrichment and projects
3 Set realistic expectations

Being guided by those factors helped speed up the decision-making process of management at their schools. It also helped to ensure minimal disruption to learning and teaching.

There's the familiar saying that former students often forget what you taught them but they never forget how you cared for them – or didn't. During lockdown there would have been children who felt isolated from all their usual social contacts. Then, of course, there would have been the boredom of being made to stay at home for weeks on end.

At a time such as lockdown, there's a crucial need for teachers to let children know that they've not been forgotten. Try to make the daily contact and ask the care questions (examples: 'How are you today?' or 'What can I do to make the learning better and easier for you?' Use email, the mobile, telephone, google classroom, Zoom and whatever else to keep in touch with them.

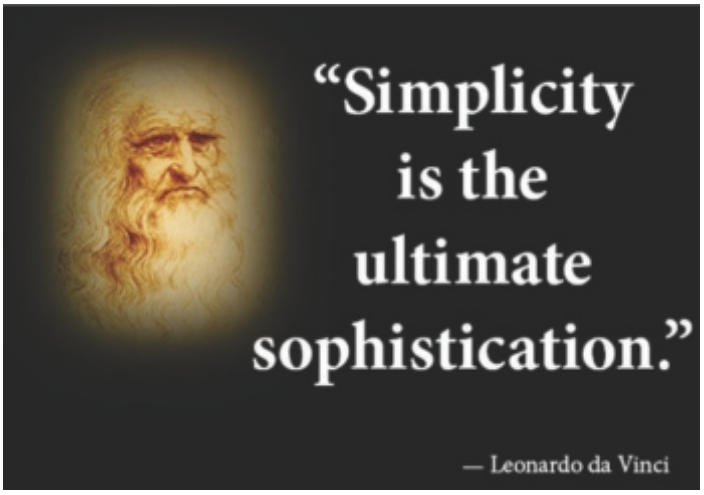
Create opportunities for children to do enrichment activities and projects. However, set realistic expectations. Resources available in the homes of the children can differ widely. There'll be those homes with internet connectivity and online teaching resources readily available. Compare that to those homes with little or no such resources. There's a need to be sensitive to such realities.

If possible, design tasks in ways that parents might like to be of assistance. Guidelines can be given as to how they can join in and contribute to their children's learning. Yet also be aware that there'll be those caregivers and parents who are unable or unwilling to be of help. No child should be made to feel inadequate because there's no help available at home.

Teachers and school administrators have had to adapt rapidly to the coronavirus-enforced new ways of teaching. Their stress levels have soared. Hopefully, by the time of writing this newsletter, some of those stress levels will have gone down. Yet new challenges undoubtedly await. Huge and radical changes might need being done within tight time deadlines. Don't despair. Cosy up to the KISS principle!

Reference

Reich, J 2020. Keep it simple, schools. *Educational Leadership*. April (Special issue): pages 2-5.



How do we reduce their anxiety, fear and panic?

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times ..." Those are the opening words of Charles Dickens', *A Tale of Two Cities*. More than 160 years after Dickens wrote the book, the words could describe today's world. On one hand our planet has never been so advanced. Yet our 21st century has been the most traumatic in the history of mankind. There's carnage, disaster, social upheaval (think, for example, of the Black Lives Matter protests) and war across the globe. How do we reduce today's children's from understandable anxiety, fear and panic?

Jessica Minahan (2020: 24-25), a behaviour analyst, suggests these ways to help a child in such times:

- ***Validate feelings.*** Don't downplay the child's anxiety, fear and panic. Let the child know that it's normal to feel that way when there's so much upheaval and turmoil. Be empathic to the emotional distress.

- ***Stay calm.*** Don't add to the stress by the way in which you respond to the child. Keep the cadence, intonation and volume of your voice at a level that's calming and reassuring.

- ***Be truthful.*** Don't avoid telling the truth. Give the basic facts but also includes positive realities. For example, it's important for children to know that it's highly unlikely for them to get sick from the virus.

- ***Reframe negative comments.*** Don't encourage doomsday talk. A child might say, "We've been locked in the house forever." Actually, that's not true! The reply could be, "You've been in the house for ten weeks and within weeks lockdown will be over."

- ***Notify a caregiver if a child expresses deep anxiety and fear.*** Don't presume that you alone, no matter how well-intended, can remove the child's concerns. A severely depressed child could do self-harm or resort to aggressive behaviour. Professional help might be needed from a school counsellor or a therapist.

In a recent TV documentary, an interviewer spoke to people who worked in confined spaces for days on end. One was a submariner who stated that he might sometimes stay deep down in the oceans for weeks. "How, "asked the interviewer, "did you stay sane?"

The submariner had two strategies. First was a set routine. From the time that he woke up until he went to sleep on his bunk, he stuck to a daily routine. Do this ... then that ... followed by this. The second strategy was to find a quiet place where he, on his own, could gather his thoughts. On a cramped submarine that was incredibly hard to find but the submariner found one.

The two strategies of the submariner on how to be calm in a potentially stressful environment, could also be of value to a lock-downed child. Get into a routine. By having tasks to do throughout the day, they help take the mind away from being totally preoccupied with one's own thoughts. Yet it's also important to have time for thinking and reflecting. A child can benefit by having quiet time to be mindful. It's a time to be grounded and get a grasp of the situation.

Other strategies that a child could learn to have a sense of control in lockdown situations are (ibid: 28):

- ***Limit exposure to news, including news or discussions about the pandemic on social media.*** Stop spending hours watching TV programmes and talking about the pandemic. Be in the know about what's happening but not obsessively so. Wallowing in tragedy and trauma is mentally unhealthy.

- ***Teach media literacy.*** Not everything stated in the media is true. 'Fake news' is everywhere. During the pandemic, a huge raft of reasons were put forward as to what caused Covid-19. Learn to sift fact from fiction. Teach children to be critical listeners, readers and TV viewers.

- ***Teach 'channel switching'.*** It's a simple technique of learning to use the brain like a remote control. When feeling nervous, try to switch to a new 'channel' or way of thinking – one that has positive thoughts. The channel change should help restore a sense of calm.

- ***Focus on gratitude.*** These have been horrendous and tragic times for millions. In the midst of it all, there's still much for room for gratitude. A sense of gratitude and maybe drawing up a list of five or so reasons to be grateful, can help one to be positive.

Right now these are not the best of times for children. Nor, however, need they be the worst of times. There's so much we can do to help children overcome the worst of their anxiety, fear and panic.

Reference

Minahan, J 2020. Maintaining connections, reducing anxiety while school is closed. *Educational Leadership*, (Special issue), April: pages 22-27.

Upsides during lockdowns

As schools gradually reopened after the lockdown, relief was felt everywhere. Those were difficult times for everyone. Yet there were those days when teachers saw their teaching in a new light. In fact, there were teachers who believed that they even benefitted from the experience.

One teacher remarked that until the lockdown, she had never really bothered to use computer technology in her classes. She admitted belonging to the school of the 'chalk and talk' style of teaching. The lockdown forced her to adapt to a new situation ... and fast! As she ruefully observed, “Covid-19 reminded me that as a teacher I should be a life-long learner. Also, I learnt that learning new technology added zip to my lessons.”

The lockdown made new demands on teachers. At schools where most of the children didn't have computer access, lessons had to be written up and printed. Then the packs had to be distributed. Computer-savvy and well-resourced schools had to prepare online lessons. Those never-before experiences brought teams of teachers together. The teams rapidly adapted to the new realities. Such teamwork in schools helped reduce workload and stress. Yet they also brought staff closer together as they dealt with the pandemic.

A Johannesburg mother of two primary-school-aged girls, confessed to enjoying the lockdown. She remarked, “At school I'm so busy from sunrise to sunset. Also, don't forget the Saturday morning sport events. The lockdown was a chance for more time with my girls and my hubby. He also had to work from home. As a family, we loved being able to have so much more time together.” She further observed that the lockdown helped her realise that her family was the first priority.

An American teacher quoted by Wiggins (2020:40), found the lockdown experience a reminder of the main reason why teachers are in education. Too often schools are obsessed with academic performance. In her own words, “It isn't about the curriculum ... it's about the kids. Seeing the students in real time and listening to their stories, questions and concerns helped remind me of that.”

There's the one-liner about the need that if confronted with difficulties, try and turn all those lemons into lemonade. During the lockdown I hope that you were able to do that too!

Reference

Wiggins, A 2020. A brave new world: a teacher's take on surviving distance learning. *Educational Leadership* (Special issue) April: pages 38-41.

Quality teachers are always learning

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