# EXPLORING SCHOOL LEADERS´ LESSONS LEARNED DURING THE PANDEMIC: REFLECTIONS IN RETROSPECT

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## Abstract

In post-pandemic times, it is of interest to reflect in retrospect upon lessons learned in regard to leading, teaching, and learning with digital technologies during the pandemic. The aim of this paper is to explore and analyse school leaders' experiences of learning regarding the use of digital technologies during the pandemic. Using written learning reflections, school leaders reflected on lessons learned during the pandemic as the result of the rapid change to digital technologies for teaching and learning. School leaders saw possibilities in efficient digital meetings, adaptions in teaching and learning for students, as well as increased flexibility in digital leadership. The school leaders also reported new ways to reach students and parents, as well as collaboration. Although the pandemic, for many school leaders, resulted in a rapid shift in the use of digital technologies, school leaders saw benefits in this shift in the form of increased conditions for advancing professional digital competence. How school leaders will continue to retain and support these new lessons learned in their everyday work will be important in supporting of the use and advancement of digital technologies to support students' learning.

## Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were forced to rapidly shift to online learning when many schools were closed. Following the pandemic the circumstances, sometime being described as disruptive for schools and educational systems, the role of the school leader became important. For many school leaders, returning to post-pandemic times demanded balancing a new context. This is within the context of what must be sustained and adapted in the old normal, new normal, and the next normal in the educational system. School leaders will have a key role in this process (Netolicky, 2019; Netolicky, 2020). Further, the process also emphasizes the inequities between schools, as well as in families and among (Netolicky, 2020).

In the post-pandemic state at present, the use of digital technologies has become widespread in schools. Here, the challenge will be not to just continue as before but to reflect upon experiences and identify changed directions (Hargreaves, 2020).

Zhao (2020) argues that seeing COVID-19 as a short-term crisis may exclude possibilities for lessons learned. This might involve missing possibilities in teaching and learning and changes which may be missed to change schools and education systems (Zhao, 2020). Identifying and using these new lessons learned as opportunities for school leaders in order to lead more effectively is important (Harris, 2020). This also includes the move from traditional school leadership to digital school leadership, involving, for example, digital meetings (Harris, 2020). Along the same line of thought, The World Bank (WB) also sees new possibilities in regard to digital technologies and teaching and learning, in which educational change which may be advanced and even hastened (WB, 2021).

Projects to strengthen digitalisation in Swedish schools and students and teachers' digital skills have been implemented in the Swedish context for many years (Jedeskog, 2007; Tallvid, 2015). However, though these investments have had impact, teaching and learning continues to be unclear despite investments and increased access (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2016; 2022). Leading for digitalisation is complex (Håkansson Lindqvist & Pettersson, 2019). Furthermore, the use of digital technologies does not automatically lead to increased use or improved outcomes for learners (European Commission, 2019). While digital technologies have entered Swedish schools (European Commission, 2018), the intentions of policy for teaching and learning with digital technologies and digital competence are not clear in practice (Olofsson, et al., 2020).

The Swedish National Agency for Education (SNAE) highlighted the necessity for professional development in the area of digitalisation for schools (SNAE, 2016). Several national efforts have been introduced in professional digital competence for school leaders. One of these efforts is a module on leading for digitalisation, which the SNAE implemented *Leading Digitalisation* (SNAE, 2018a). Another effort in meeting the new demands in digitalisation for school leaders has been to add digitalisation in the Swedish national principal training program (SNAE, 2018b). School leaders must be able to identify needs in their organization the pedagogical, administrative, and technical perspectives. A recent report by the SNAE (2022) showed that work remained to achieve the digitalisation strategy's aims. The most important results were that access continued to be good, although teachers lacked access to digital tools for supporting students with special needs (SNAE, 2022). There needed to be improved conditions for students to develop digital skills in searching for information and critical thinking. The overview reported that the effects of COVID-19 pushed the pace of digitalisation in schools (SNAE, 2022). However, which of these effects, or lessons learned, will remain is uncertain.

The aim of this paper is to explore and analyse school leaders' reflections regarding lessons learned during the pandemic in retrospect. The research question was: *What*

*lessons learned do school leaders identify in post-pandemic leading, teaching, and learning?* Following this short introduction, background, method and finding will be presented. Thereafter, a discussion, practical implications, limitations and future research will be provided.

## Background

Leithwood and Riehl (2005) describe successful school leadership as including four different functions: *setting the direction, developing the organisation, developing people,* and *developing teaching and learning.* These four functions involve how goals are formed and how the goals themselves are implemented in practice. The formulation and implementation and study of how the goals are implemented can be a driver of educational change and development (Fullan, 2015; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). In regard to school development through the use of digital technologies to support teaching and learning, Williams (2008) emphasizes the role of school leader during a time of rapid growth of digital technologies. The school leader is also of importance for supporting students' learning (Dexter, 2008). Further, the school leader is of importance for implementing digitalisation in schools as organisations (Pettersson, 2018).

Chua Reyes (2015) describes how school leaders navigated ICT educational reform. Here, school leaders described shifting identities, emerging roles, and ambivalent capacities when leading for technologies. These school leaders indicated that a change in leadership was needed, moving from a single leader role to leading teams of teachers (Chua Reyes, 2015). For teachers, this new role involves own learning, as well as supporting students' knowledge and skills for future schooling and work within a society where digitalisation is key and where school leader support is necessary. Starkey et al. (2017) reported that an education leader or system aiming to minimise the digital divide is a complex problem. How school leaders choose to support teachers in this work may also differ. Tolwinska (2021) reported two examples of school leaders' teacher-supportive behaviours. One group of school leaders focused on infrastructure and ensuring teachers had easy access to modern equipment. The other group of school leaders promoted a sharing culture that facilitated the development of professional digital competence.

Brockmeier et al. (2005) describe a threshold regarding professional digital competence that school leaders must cross before feeling prepared for leading for digitalisation. In early research, Flanagan and Jacobsen (2003) report many school leaders are hesitant regarding leading technology implementation due to the lack experience and formal training. They state that if school leaders are expected to lead their organisations toward using digital technologies, school leaders need professional digital competence. Schiller (2003) also discusses this line of thought regarding the need for professional digital competence. Anderson and Dexter

(2005) report that school leaders need adequate technology skills for their leadership roles. Schiller (2003) reports wide variations in what school leaders understand as technology competences and skills in practice, and therefore, the need for professional digital competence for school leaders. Acton (2021) shows that school leaders feel they have received very little professional development on how to be a leader of change and that research on professional digital competence for school leaders in practice has been limited.

## Method

This paper focuses on school leaders' reflections on lessons learned during the pandemic in retrospect. The data were gathered from learning reflections (N = 22) written by school leaders. With inspiration from Moon's (2006) notion of learning journals, the school leaders were asked to reflect and identify lessons learned during the pandemic through learning journals. The learning reflections were written in the spring of 2024 by school leaders who were in middle of the Swedish National School Leader Programme, which is a three-year programme. The school leaders represented all levels of school, from preschool to upper secondary school. The majority of the school leaders were women. Further, the school leaders were new in their positions as school leaders. The school leaders had time to reflect on this question for a brief period during a lesson regarding digital technologies for leading, teaching, and learning. The learning reflections were short texts that were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This involved reading and re-reading the school leader texts with a reflective approach and then allowing their themes to emerge in reflection. The 22 school leaders' reflections are identified in the Results section as "School Leader" (SL1 to SL 22; translations into English by the author).

## Results

In this section the, the results are presented. In the analysis, three themes emerged: *Efficient meetings, Accessibility for meeting students and parents,* and *Professional digital competence.*

### Efficient Meetings

One of the most important lessons learned after the pandemic for the school leaders in terms of digitalization was digital meetings as efficient meetings. Many of the school leaders' reflections referred to the opportunity to hold digital meetings. These meetings were seen to be efficient meetings, which saved time and were seen to be structured meetings: "Digital meetings were very time-saving" (SL4). A similar line of thought was expressed as structuring or streamlining: "How digital

tools can help streamline things that previously took time and resources, such as digital meetings instead of physical ones" (SL2). Other school leaders reflected upon "More effective meetings" (SL18) as well the shift to more digital meetings: "How much more we could work digitally than we did then. More efficient time, for example, meetings etc." (SL19). Another school leader expressed: "Effective with team meeting, easier to check short things" (SL12). In the same line of thought one school leader noted increased efficiency: "Online meetings - teleworking. Efficient conversation paths. A lot of systematization" (SL14). One school leader reflected digital meetings being efficient as well as providing: "a rapid change to what digital [technologies] can contribute" (SL17).

The possibility to hold digital meetings from home was also seen a new, efficient way to work. For example, one school leader noted how digital meetings offer flexibility and at the same time availability: "Being able to work from home with administrative/digital meetings. I commute to work and I work from home one day/week. [I am] available online" (SL8).

Digital meetings were seen to be time-efficient and sustainable as they often involved less travel and less travel in time. The alternative of digital meetings was seen to be sustainable over distance and time: "More digital meetings instead of physical ones. Good because of the distances, but we have discovered that it is good to meet physically at regular intervals anyway" (SL3). "More meetings are possible when you can offer digital meetings" (SL7) was one reflection by a school leader. Digital meetings, according to the school leaders, work in many cases: "More efficient meetings as time in the car is reduced by being able to meet digitally Digital meetings work in many contexts" (SL21). Despite structured meetings and time-efficiency, the school leaders expressed the need for physical meetings as well. One school leader reflected on the need for both digital and physical meetings: "The most important [thing] learned after the pandemic is that it is possible to streamline meetings by conducting them digitally (avoiding travel, small talk, etc.). However, it is easy to miss social elements in the meeting as you cannot always read the participants" (SL9). Two of the school leaders reflected on the need for physical meetings as well as digital meetings: "Digital meetings save time between many meetings. However, they never replace the physical interaction" (SL13) as well as aspects lost in digital meetings: "Digital meetings save time. However, it has consequences because contact IRL disappears" (SL22).

In summary, one school leader also expressed digital meetings as providing another dimension to work at school.

> I started working as a principal in the middle of the pandemic so I may not have the picture before the pandemic completely. What I can see is that the meeting structure has become more efficient as several meetings have remained in digital form. Which means both time savings and fewer trips.

You can be close to the school in another dimension. This is positive as I have many miles between my preschools. (S1)

## Meeting Parents and Students

The school leaders also reflected upon lessons learned within meeting students and parents. Digital meetings offered opportunities to meet parents independent of time and space. Flexibility and availability were expressed: "After the pandemic we have become much more flexible. Meetings are more ad hoc with specific issues. Family participation has been easier to meet with development talks when it can also be done digitally" (SL15).

School leaders mean that digital teaching meant that it was easier to reach students with problematic absenteeism. One school leader expressed that it was easier [for teachers] to adapt and be more flexible in teaching and schoolwork assignments: "[I] Discovered benefits of this. Not only bad, development of own learning materials and digital homework through, for example, film and recorded material can be created when there is no disturbing noise from outside" (SL3). For students, this could lead to development in teaching: "We are more flexible today, lessons can take place in classrooms and via teams simultaneously or as decentralized training" (SL3). However, this school leader also noted caution in online teaching: "Distance learning is difficult, students lose focus and often become unmotivated. Semi-distance or decentralized training is better" (SL3). This could also include supporting students' learning at home: "That it is easy to have meetings digitally. Homeschooling for students easier" (SL11).

One school leader discussed the link between teachers' work with digital teaching and reaching students with problematic absenteeism, focusing on the benefits:

That the teachers who were previously against digitization were "forced" into a way of working that they then saw several benefits in. That we have several students who are truant at a high [level] or skip school a lot. But they managed school better when they had to work more digitally (SL5).

## Professional Digital Competence

Several of the school leaders reflected upon important lessons learned in regard to professional digital competence. One school leader expressed the resources provided to go digital with teachers: "The municipality has invested in both materials and training. This has allowed everyone to get started in a good way. Due to the pandemic and the need for digital meetings, everyone was challenged to try working digitally to varying degrees" (SL7). Another school leader saw lessons learned for organizational development through collaboration.

The pandemic has created opportunities for me as a principal and my staff regarding digitization in the context of organizational development. We have developed digital forums and meetings that enable collaboration groups between preschools. The staff have also become accustomed to holding various meetings digitally. In X municipality, we now have a training course for all staff in municipal preschools. The leader gives the training via digital links. The training of the staff as expected to go well and much is due to the staff already having developed knowledge of participating in various digital forums. (SL6)

One lesson learned was also professional competence development in digitalisation for teachers. One school leader expressed that lack of professional digital competence became visible for teachers and students. This is important, according to one school leader who was interested in the continued work in school with Artificial Intelligence (AI): "The biggest lesson is that you can use IT for many adaptations. Teaching, access to data. Many had to quickly learn IT as a tool. AI is a feature that is coming by leaps and bounds. How do we relate to it [AI]?" (SL20). At the same time an important lesson learned was that gaps in professional digital competence for teachers and digital competence for students were made visible: "Many teachers and students have digital literacy gaps. This was discovered when we were forced into a digital environment"(SL2) .

In summary, the school leaders reflected upon many lessons learned in regard mainly to the opportunities provided after the pandemic as school leaders in terms of digitalization. A final reflection in summary by one school leaders expressed lessons learned:

How quickly we could adapt to distance / remote teaching. How we got students with problems attendance in a different way in teaching. How we use digital platforms today naturally in our teaching, how we can streamline and conduct digital meetings. Meetings with colleagues, guardians, etc. (SL16).

## Discussion

The aim of this paper is to explore and analyse school leaders' reflections regarding lessons learned during the pandemic in retrospect. The research question was: *What lessons learned do school leaders identify in post-pandemic leading, teaching and learning?*

For the school leaders in this study, an important lesson learned was found in the use of digital meetings. These meetings were seen as a possibility to structure and support work, but also time-efficient. The possibility to hold meetings from home

or from the car appears to provide opportunities to arrange meetings in a more flexible manner that included accessibility and availability Here, school leaders' reflections on lessons learned appear to be linked to employing change by taking on this form of meetings and supporting the use of digital meetings in their organisations through ideas of acting as change agents (Acton, 2021) and to navigate change (Chua Reyes, 2015).

In regard to meeting students and parents, the school leaders reflected upon lessons learned in regard to accessibility for both those groups. For students, the use of digital technologies should support student learning. As the school leaders in this study reflect upon meeting students with special needs or problematic school absenteeism, this will be important work to continue, in order to reach all students. The same came be said to be true in regard to the lessons learned regarding reaching and meeting parents in a more flexible manner. In this sense, both of these lessons learned in the school leaders' reflections can be said to be important for supporting and advancing teaching and learning with digital technologies as an important part of fulling the intentions in policy in leading for digitalisation (SNAE, 2016; 2022). In teaching students, schools must achieve the intentions of the steering documents in terms of democracy, equity, the compensatory mission, and creating beneficial conditions for students as citizens of society (EC, 2019; OECD, 2022; UNESCO, 2017).

Perhaps the most interesting finding in this study is the school leaders' lessons learned in regard to how quickly the adaption online learning was carried out. As noted by the school leaders in this study, this shift appears to rapidly have advanced the use digital technologies, for example, for the use of digital meetings. However, according to the school leaders this also meant the need for digital competence became visible. Here, continued professional development will most likely be needed to support school leaders' work with their own professional digital competence, as well as the need to support teachers' and students' work. This will be important for school organizers. It is most likely that professional digital competence for school leaders will be necessary to take advantage of these lessons learned as new possibilities for student learning and educational change (Harris, 2020; WB, 2021; Zhao, 2021).

## Practical Implications, Limitations and Future Research

The practical implications of this study focus on how school leaders advance the implementations of their lessons learned. For example, continued work with digital tools to support collegial meetings as well as meeting with students and parents should be supported by school organizers. Moreover, how school leaders together can share lessons learning with other school leaders will be of importance.

As this study is a small study, the findings could be explored further in larger studies. Future research could involve a larger study from the school leader perspective regarding lessons learned during the pandemic. Here, a survey could be administered for a larger number of school leaders, in order to attain a wider sample and deeper insights. Another interesting perspective would be to study parents' views on accessibility and availability to schools through the use of digital meetings.

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