

How can schools support student learning in times of crisis? A typology of emergency strategies

Conference abstract

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Abstract

Crises, such as wars, epidemics, wildfires, earthquakes and hurricanes, can disrupt education in major ways. When such crises occur, schools need to take immediate action to prevent or mitigate any negative effects on student learning. With developments such as climate change and heightening geopolitical tension across the world increasing the frequency of crises globally (see e.g., Acevedo & Novta, 2017; Haileamlak, 2022; Senthilingam, 2017), it is crucial that schools become crisis-ready. Crisis-readiness lies partly in the ability of schools to deliver “emergency education” promptly and effectively. Emergency education, defined as “education in situations where children lack access to their national education systems, due to man-made crises or natural disasters” (Sinclair, 2001, p.4), constitutes an emergency solution aimed at enabling teaching and learning to continue during a disruptive event. For it, however, to function as an effective solution, it needs to be informed not only by an understanding of the educational challenges created by the disruptive event, but also by an awareness of the types of strategies which could be employed to address these challenges. To support the delivery of emergency education, the present study focused on this latter dimension, that pertaining to possible courses of action during a crisis. Specifically, it sought to explore the kinds of resources that schools may mobilise and the types of measures that they can put in place to support their students when emergencies arise.

The crisis that provided the setting for this study was the recent Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic led to school closures across the world, disrupting the learning of 1.5 billion students in 188 countries and economies (OECD, 2022). Due to its global character, it represented an ideal crisis context for this study, as it allowed a wide range of different strategies to be captured and analysed.

This investigation drew upon a series of 90-minute, in-depth interviews with 13 teachers. The interviews formed the second phase of a mixed-methods study, with the first phase involving a questionnaire completed by 404 teachers from around the world. The interview participants were chosen from the pool of questionnaire respondents. They were purposefully selected to represent a heterogeneous group to allow a range of perspectives and experiences to be captured. Specifically, the interviewees were employed in different education sectors (early years, primary, secondary), worked in different types of school (state-funded and private), were based in different countries, taught different subjects, and held different roles within their school. Their teaching experience ranged from six to 35 years.

The interviews were transcribed and the transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) using MAXQDA (VERBI Software, 2021). The analysis consisted of two stages. The first stage was descriptive in nature and focused on identifying the different micro-level strategies used by schools. The second stage, on the other hand, was interpretive and aimed to make sense of the identified micro-level strategies. This latter analysis stage was predominantly data-driven and led to the identification of a number of overarching mechanisms, or macro-level strategies, employed by schools to address the pandemic challenges.

Overall, the emergency strategies developed by schools seemed to be multifaceted. Specifically, they:

- (a) targeted different areas (*safety, learning, and wellbeing*), exposing the multiplicity of challenges confronted by schools during a crisis and highlighting teachers' commitment to supporting their students in a holistic manner;
- (b) served different functions (*defence and recovery*); and
- (c) employed different problem-solving approaches (*suspension of existing structures; exploitation of existing structures; and development of new structures*).

Arguably, these strategies can provide a useful starting point for any teachers required to deliver emergency education in the future. In addition, they can offer valuable insights into schools' crisis-readiness. As such, they may prove very informative for both educational policy and practice.

This paper will present the micro- and macro-level emergency strategies identified through the study. It will also share some useful observations about schools' preparedness to cope with the challenges of a possible future disruptive event.

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For further details on this research, please refer to the corresponding journal article:

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