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Safe school reopening under COVID-19 restrictions – Measures implemented in San Andrea Independent School in Malta

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ABSTRACT

Social distancing mandated by COVID-19 so as to slow viral spread has resulted in school closures. It is now the end of summer 2020 and schools are starting. Reopening schools could be safe if accompanied by precautionary measures. This paper describes the events leading up to school closures in Malta with reference to San Andrea Independent School, and the measures and contingency plans created by the school during Malta’s soft lockdown and summer holidays for safe school reopening. As cases rise in the global second wave, all should be done to ensure that clusters and hotspots of COVID-19 are avoided or minimised in schools – whilst children may not generally be severely affected, they may be in contact with vulnerable members of society on whom COVID-19 inflicts significant morbidity and mortality.

1. Introduction

In the absence of an effective vaccine, COVID-19 remains pandemic. Public health measures including social distancing (and these included school closures), have prevented millions of infections and deaths [1,2]. The rationale behind school closures is a precautionary principle in that many previous epidemics (e.g. influenza) were transmitted also or mostly by children [3]. However, school closures have negatively impacted working parents, with attendant economic consequences [4].

There are equally pressing concerns regarding the impact on children’s mental and physical health if children fail to return to school, [5] and these include increased risks of childhood obesity [6], and the exacerbation of wealth inequality and childhood poverty [7].

Thus far it has been estimated that children are circa half as susceptible to COVID-19 infection as adults and are less severely affected, with milder symptoms [8]. For these reasons, it has been suggested that reopening schools could be safe if accompanied by precautionary measures [9].

Schools in Malta are of three types: free state schools, Church schools and independent (fee paying schools). All schools have to adapt to reopening after the summer holidays despite the possibilities of outbreaks that may lead to quarantining of classes or even entire schools [10,11].

This paper describes the events leading up to school closure with reference to San Andrea Independent School in Malta, and the measures and contingency plans created during Malta’s soft lockdown and summer holidays to attempt to ensure safe school reopening.

2. Before schools closed

When the first case of COVID-19 was documented in Malta, all students who had been on vacation for the Carnival holidays/mid-term were asked to self-quarantine for 14 days upon arrival. Hand sanitizers were set up around the school and students were encouraged to bring their own. Signs were placed around the school to remind both students and adults to wash or sanitize their hands, with diagrams on how to do this effectively. Teachers and the school nurse took time to show younger children how they should wash their hands thoroughly whilst being reminded regularly to do so. Step by step instructions on how children and staff should wash their hands were placed above each sink in the bathrooms. Disposable paper towels only were made available in the bathrooms.

3. School closure

3.1. Software

Schools in Malta were closed on 13th March 2020. However, prior to school closures, the school had already started preparations to set up online learning with a Virtual Learning Environments Tech Team providing support and coordinating and drafting contingency plans due to the very fast transition to online learning. Earlier in February, Microsoft Accounts were rolled out for every student in Senior School (ages 11 to 15) and for every member of staff working in Early (2 to 8 years), Middle (8 to 10 years) and Senior School. This allowed Senior School to immediately operate on Microsoft TEAMS. Students were asked to follow a timetable with some lessons live and others recorded. Teachers were available on TEAMS to answer any queries and to give feedback where needed.

Class Dojo was chosen for Early and Middle School since the interface of this particular software environment suits the needs and likes of a younger generation. The first weeks were used to familiarise teachers
and families with the software. A Microsoft-based account was given to every student from pre-nursery to Grade 7 and this gave families access to Microsoft Outlook, Microsoft TEAMS and a wide range of other free Microsoft Services (including the free Online version of Microsoft Office). Teachers started to go live and timetables were issued.

### 3.2. Extra support

The transition brought many challenges. Some children struggled both academically and emotionally. Counsellors were available to support families. Support sessions were timetabled for students who were struggling in any area of the curriculum. Children who needed constant support were followed by Learning Support Educators (LSE) who worked not only with their own students but also with others who needed support. Parents of children who struggled were called regularly to monitor progress and find solutions.

### 3.3. Further training

After 4 months adapting to a new system of teaching and learning, webinars were organised for additional training in the virtual learning environment. Table 1 shows the sessions given, with emphasis on the flipped learning approach which shifts the classroom from passive to active learning, focusing on higher order thinking skills so as to further engage students in learning. Students are given opportunities to take greater responsibility for their own learning and class time focuses more on exploration, meaning and application of knowledge with teachers providing learning opportunities, and feedback [12].

### 4. Reopening preparations

#### 4.1. E-learning

For parents who remained concerned at sending their children to school, the option of E-learning with live streaming of lessons was made available so that the timetable could still be followed in real time with students physically present at the school. Students would hear the lesson and the whiteboard contents would be projected on their computer screens at home. Homework would be uploaded and corrected. Teachers from Nursery till Grade 4 will be using Class Dojo and older classes, TEAMS. Students could return to the school at any time. The E-learning facility would also be useful for students who need to be quarantined during the course of the scholastic year.

Students in Grades 8, 9 and 10 in Senior School were asked to buy a touchscreen tablet with a detachable keyboard, a digital pen and a digitizer, to enable them to do their schoolwork on it, follow online sessions, and hand in homework, regardless of whether the students were physically at school or following from home. Students in Grade 11 and 12 were given the option of bringing their own devices from home.

Teachers scanned their booklets and were asked to create handouts and worksheets as editable PDFs. These booklets and worksheets would be available on the students’ tablets, as soft copies, removing the need for purchasing them as hard copies. This has the added benefits of a reduced weight of the school bags, and a reduced amount of printed material, which is part of the school’s conscious effort to be more environmentally friendly. The school is currently also looking into the purchasing the licences of digital books, so as to have school books available online.

Understanding that the tablets were an added expense during these difficult times, the school reached an agreement with the local Bank of Valletta, through which the tablets could be paid in monthly instalments. In order to facilitate matters, parents would deal directly with the school, and have no commitment with the Bank.

Investment was also made in teachers’ resources. Teachers were provided with new laptops, which were compatible with the new interactive whiteboards that were installed during the closure of the school. They were also given headsets to enable them to communicate with their students following online, and graphical tablets were bought, to ease the marking of homework.

#### 4.2. Physical presence and E-learning

The classes across the school have enough physical space to accommodate all the children at a 1.5 metre distance. The floor is clearly marked to ensure that all desks remain at this distance. There will also be Perspex separating one student from the other.

Should the schools close once again, lessons will be delivered online. Teachers will have the option of either delivering live lessons, or using the flipped classroom approach wherein the recorded lesson or explanation will be sent as homework and teachers will be available online for the students, during lesson time to help them with their work.

#### 4.3. Safety

The objectives of the school now include additional enhanced safety precautions to minimise the risk of COVID-19 spread. Public Health Advice will be rigorously adhered to and adapted for the school and its opening with other schools in September 2020. This includes maintaining a social distance of 1.5 m between all persons in the school. A log will be kept every day and at all times of which children and staff are in class. A log will be kept of the contacts of each and every child/staff member for contact tracing purposes.

#### 4.4. School entry

Exclusions to attending school: symptoms of COVID 19, or thermal screening >37.2 °C at school entrance or in quarantine, self-isolation, or have knowingly been in contact with a COVID-19 positive person, within the last 14 days. If anyone in the household goes abroad to a country listed by public health as red zoned, students need to remain at home for 15 days after the person returns from their trip. When students visit a red zoned country they need to quarantine for 15 days.

The procedure for entry into school will include temperature measurement prior to entry into school transport. Temperature >37.2 °C and children who look visibly unwell will not be allowed on school transport. Parents who do the school run should check their children’s temperature before leaving home.

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Table 1

| Training for educators | How to create and record a lesson for a flipped learning approach |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
|                        | How to use various digital applications                        |
|                        | How to present the lesson as a flipped classroom               |
|                        | Dealing with misconceptions of Blended Learning                |
| Lesson plan phase 1 & 2|explicit instruction and modelling                              |
| Lesson plan phase 3 & 4|skills application and feedback                                 |
| How to use TEAMS | Q & A session – Feedback from the educators                      |
|discussion of the way forward within the three proposed scenarios |
| Mindfulness – responding to and dealing with the anxieties of our students due to COVID-19 |
| Training | Training on MY SCHOOL – the new online system                    |
| Training | Training on how to protect themselves and observe hygiene protocols during the upcoming scholastic year |
| Nurses & SMT | training on how to wear and remove protective gear |
| Vertical Meetings | between grades to analyse and plan for continuity within the grades/departments |
| Training for parents and students | Training on Teams and One Note for Senior School |
| Training on Teams and Class Dojo for Early and Middle School |
| Training on how to use the Tablets in Senior School |
| Webinars discussing the struggles and anxieties caused due to COVID-19 | Preparing for the upcoming scholastic year |
Students and staff members on antipyretics should not come to school under any circumstances unless medications are not for fever. Staff members have been given a kit which includes a visor, a reusable mask, hand sanitizer and antibacterial wipes.

Everyone entering the school must wear their own protective mask or visor and will have temperature checked. If temperature >37.2°C or they look unwell, they will be referred to the nurse and will be kept in isolation until they are picked up. Children must be picked up within an hour. Staff at the door screening students upon entry will have a list of individuals who need to present a COVID free certificate upon their arrival.

Parents are asked not to crowd the public areas adjacent to the school. Students should enter school immediately upon arrival, have their temperature checked, use hand sanitiser and proceed to their class and designated desk.

Perspex barriers will be placed around desks of teachers and administration staff. Plastic curtains will be placed in all classrooms from grade 1 classrooms, creating a protective barrier between the students in their bubble and the subject teachers who will come in to deliver a lesson, creating a safe passage way.

4.5. Family measures

Before leaving home, families need to ensure that all materials brought to school have been wiped down and sanitised and brought to school in a single bag. Students should only bring material which is strictly needed for the day. Neither parents nor third parties will be allowed into school. Parents must ensure that children have a clean mask and container to put the mask in whilst in class as well as sanitizer, and tissues. Cloth masks need to be washed every day. Children should have their own hand sanitiser. Parents should remind children to wash hands frequently at school, to avoid sharing anything with friends, to cough and sneeze into a tissue or elbow and to avoid touching face, eyes, mouth and nose.

On return from school, they should remove uniforms (which need to be washed daily along with cloth masks) and bathe or shower. In order to facilitate this, students have been given permission to use their P.E. kit rather than their formal uniform, which makes it easier to clean. All materials returned home should be wiped down including school bag, shoes, books, and anything taken to school.

4.6. Social distancing

Social distancing will be followed by floor markings. Two metre distancing markers will be placed on the floor to remind students about social distancing. One-way traffic systems will be enabled through the use of the main staircase and the fire escape. Signs placed strategically along the walls will remind the students.

4.7. Masks

Both staff and students are expected to wear a face mask upon entry to school and on transport. Masks are to be worn at all times in corridors and common areas. Students in Early and Middle School may remove their masks in class. Students in Senior School are required to wear a mask at all times in the presence of all others.

4.8. Clinics

Three separate clinics will be set in Early/Middle and Senior School respectively. Entry requires a mask.

First clinic – for minor injuries not related to COVID-19.
Second clinic – for those children who show symptoms of COVID-19.
Third clinic – isolation room for the children with COVID-19 symptoms. These children will remain here until they are picked up by their parents.

Facilities will be stocked for the use of the Nurse or any member of staff in the case of a possible COVID-19 case. These include gloves, masks, visors, aprons and disposable gowns. Nurses have been trained in the use of single use protective clothing.

Children taking medication will not go to the clinic for administration – the school nurse will go around instead. All staff have been trained on how to deal with health and hygiene protocols and how to safeguard themselves and the students under their care.

4.9. Hygiene and ventilation

Door handles, stair rails, tabletops, desks, keyboards, and other surfaces will be cleaned regularly and frequently during the day. All cleaning tasks will be carried out with mask and single use gloves. The school will be cleaned twice per day with additional deep cleaning at the end of each week.

Students will be taught regular and effective hand washing techniques. There will be hand washing routines and times set for all students throughout the day. Students will be reminded to wash hands after using bathroom, before and after meals, before and after playtime, after sneezing or coughing. Students will have to use hand sanitiser when they enter and exit the classroom. Students are to bring their own personal sanitising gel to make the process of sanitising hands during the day more efficient. There is a strict no-hugging, no handshake, no touching policy.

Windows will be kept open to maintain adequate ventilation and air renewal. Air conditioning and heating will be kept to a minimum. Filters will be regularly sanitised.

Soft furnishings, soft toys and those items which cannot be easily cleaned and disinfected are banned from classrooms. Tables in Early School have been changed in order to enable social distancing within the class.

Bathrooms will have their capacity clearly marked on the entrances. Areas where social distancing cannot be maintained, such as sinks will have Perspex dividers erected. Each class will be allocated a bathroom to use. Teachers will also have specific bathrooms that they can use.

4.10. Children in quarantine

Any child who in mandatory quarantine will only be allowed back to school when advised by public health authorities.

4.11. Procedures for sick children

The teacher/LSE should immediately inform either the nurse or the school management team (SMT) if the nurse cannot be reached. This should be done by phone. The teacher/LSE will explain to the nurse what the symptoms are.

Under no circumstances should the student be sent to the clinic unattended.

In obvious non-COVID cases, the nurse will attend to the child in class or wherever the child is at that moment to avoid queues at the clinic.

In potential COVID-19 cases the nurse/SMT will wear personal protective equipment before going for the student in their classroom. The child will be taken to an isolation room to await pickup within 1 h. The student will not be allowed to enter the school without a negative COVID result. Siblings will not return to school without public health affirmation.

4.12. Well being

Counselling services are available for all students. The purpose is to enhance the development of the student, encourage personal growth, empower them towards positive change and see to their well-being. This service may be individual, group or even class based. Counselling can
also be provided indirectly by working with and supporting the parents/guardians. Counselling is provided for a crisis or through a referral. The service is in high demand and the student may be put on a waiting list, or referred to the Personal, Social And Career Development (PSCD) teacher. During the COVID era, phone calls, TEAMS, Skype, Zoom and WhatsApp were the main means used for communication and continued to function throughout the summer holidays. From September 2020, the service will continue online or face-to-face.

Lessons have been planned to support students by teaching them accurate information about COVID-19. Students will also be taught strategies to deal with anxiety and teachers have been trained in mindfulness to teach students techniques to deal with fears and anxiety.

Support groups are also being organised for parents and children who will be staying home due to their vulnerability. Support groups will also be organised for the parents of children with specific needs.

4.13. Meeting staff

Meetings with members of staff will only be held by appointment online via agreed channels only.

4.14. Online lesson rules

Students must be on time for the session/lesson in a quiet place without any distractions and where the student can listen and participate. Students must avoid staying on beds or on the floor. Using a desk is ideal. Books and work need to be prepared before the session. Appropriate clothing needs to be worn - underwean, bare chested, bathing costumes, attire deemed inappropriate will lead to exclusion. The microphone will be muted, and switched on only when instructed. Permission to talk needs to be sought. Water is allowed, food is not. Students are to avoid fidgeting with toys or gadgets or browsing on the internet/chatting (with third parties).

5. Reopening practicalities

5.1. Assemblies and mass activities

There will be no physical assemblies held in the playground due to social distancing issues. The Assistant Heads will conduct general assemblies via TEAMS on Mondays (in Maltese) and on Fridays (in English). Grade 2 and Grade 3 students will follow assembly from their respective classrooms. All mass activities, such as Sports Days, concerts, outings, etc. will be held according to guidelines issued by the Health authorities at that particular time. The library will be closed, there will be no book borrowing, and the physical library will be used as a classroom. However, library sessions will still take place the same way as the other subjects (see below). The use of the Libby App is being encouraged, amongst others, in order to always have reading material at hand. Libby is a free app that allows users to borrow ebooks and digital audiobooks from public libraries.

5.2. Alternate day start

Classes will be split into two groups and attend on alternate days for the first few days so that each group (group A and group B) will have time to acclimatise. Siblings will attend on the same days.

5.3. Drop off

Students will exit school transport/cars wearing masks (students aged 3+) and walk straight to their respective main entrance. Nursery children are to be dropped off at the nursery gate. Nursery children, teachers and LSEs are to enter the school premises from the Nursery gate.

Students from Grade 2 to Grade 12 will be dropped off in the car park where there will be supervisors to take care of them and take them in. Grade 1, Grade 2 and Grade 3 students, teachers and LSEs are to enter the school premises from the main door of Early School.

Grade 4 and 5 students, teachers and LSEs are to enter the school through the gate in the Grade 5 playground. Grade 6 and 7 students, teachers and LSEs are to enter the school through the playground gate next to the offices.

5.4. Leaving school

Middle school students going home with school vans will wait outside school under the school’s canopy.

For children picked up by parents, nursery children will be picked up from the same place they were dropped off. Grades 1–3 parents will be asked to collect their children from their respective classes. Four parents at a time will be given access to enter the school premises. Students in grade 4 to grade 7 will remain in their respective classrooms and the exit procedure will be coordinated by the supervisors. For Senior School, students will remain in the class of their last lesson. For those taking school transport, van numbers will be called out on the school PA system. A member of staff will be in each corridor to ensure that students leave the classroom in an orderly manner, keeping appropriate social distancing. Students returning home with parents will exit at staggered classroom intervals once school transport has left. Parents are required to be punctual and not to linger on school premises once they have picked up their children.

5.5. Extra-curricular activities

No extra-curricular activities will be offered except for religious catechism lessons which will take place online.

5.6. Flexible Learning Programmes

Flexible Learning Programmes (FLO) will take place within the same bubble and in the same class. Nursery teachers will conduct these sessions for their respective classes.

5.7. Evacuation procedures

The evacuation procedures are unchanged but students will be staggered once they reach the assembly points.

5.8. Use of bathrooms

Students’ access to bathrooms will require to be carefully managed in order to maintain social distancing within the bathroom areas. Bathrooms will have their capacity clearly marked on their entrance. Class teachers are to keep record (taking the exact time, example, John Smith: 09:00–09:05) of all the students sent to the bathroom during the day.

5.9. Corridor traffic

Corridor traffic will be kept to a minimum, in order to ensure that all students will remain within their bubble. Masks are to be worn in the corridors. No physical contact is allowed. Social distancing will be followed by floor markings. Distancing markers will be placed on the floor to remind students about social distancing.

5.10. Breaks

Breaks will be staggered to avoid classes meeting in the playgrounds and in the corridors and there will be a two minute interval between the exit/entrance of one class and the next. In case of bad weather, breaks will take place indoors in class’s respective common areas or in the class,
as specifically timetabled.

5.11. Staff room and canteen

These can be used whilst respecting social distancing. The staffroom will have its capacity clearly marked at the entrance. Educators may purchase online from the canteen and this will be delivered.

6. Delivery of the curriculum

Internet (Wi-Fi) will be provided by the school. All students are to remain in their respective class throughout the day. The number of children per class will depend on the measures issued by the health authorities which may change from time to time. Social distancing must be respected at all times. All students will have a designated chair where to sit and they cannot change their places. In all classes, a plastic curtain and Perspex dividers will be installed to help with social distancing. There will be no extra furniture in class apart from the teachers’ cupboards.

6.1. Tablets and devices

Students need to bring their pencil case, some writing paper and their tablets (Grades 8 to 10) or devices (Grade 11 & 12). Tablets (grade 8 to 10) and devices (11–12) are needed so as to be able to use the respective apps in class and to follow certain lessons online.

6.2. ‘Full class’ scenario

In the event of a full class scenario, all students are required to come to school. The class teacher is responsible to help students respect social distancing at all times. The class teacher will live stream or record the lessons. Free tech auditing will be given to all teachers. A graphical tablet and a stylus pen will be given to all teachers and LSEs. Attendance team will be included in every class on TEAMS.

6.3. ‘Digital learning’ scenario

In the event of digital learning, teachers are to conduct live sessions on TEAMS/Class Dojo. There will be small group online sessions and whole class online sessions during each and every week depending on the age of the students. As for the younger grades, groups will be split up in smaller numbers. A structured time-table will be issued to all students to follow in case of digital learning or flipped classroom approach.

The following procedures apply for the two scenarios mentioned above. All educators and all students are to have their camera on for all the lessons. Free tech auditing will be given to all teachers. A graphical tablet and a stylus pen will be given to all teachers and LSEs. Attendance has to be taken on a daily basis. Members of the school senior leadership team will be included in every class on TEAMS.

6.4. Subject details

Students in Grade 10, 11 and 12 will have core subjects, such as Maths, English, Maltese, Religion and Environmental studies in their home class. There will be some movement during the option subjects, wherein part of the class may leave for a practical subject, whilst another group of students will have their lesson delivered in the home classroom. Some students may simultaneously be listening to their option lesson online. Subject teachers will carry out live sessions from their respective class and the students will follow the lesson from their main classroom.

The exceptions are Art, Home Economics, PE, and Science and possibly Drama. Students will sanitize their hands each time they enter and exit a classroom. Students who do not follow regular lessons of Maltese and follow the Maltese as a Foreign Language programme (MFL), the Italian students who follow the Italian Language and Culture course, and foreign students who have Module Sessions as an alternative learning programme to Maltese will have sessions in a separate classroom. Practical lessons, such as Chemistry, Physics, Biology and Science will be held in the school laboratories. Home Economics, Art, Computing and ICT will be held in their designated classrooms. Students will be required to wear masks during these sessions. PE and games will be held outside, in the pitch and on the track, with appropriate social distancing measures.

Classes for PSCD, Art and Home Economics will be divided into two groups and given sessions simultaneously in two separate rooms. Students will remain in same class bubble but smaller groups. Students taking Art/Design/Graphical need to get all their material as no sharing/borrowing is allowed. PSCD lessons will not be broadcast live but teachers will be available for some individual sessions with the students should the need arise. All work (except for practical subjects) will be handed in to teachers as soft copies via TEAMS or One Note as requested.

Students who do not take Religion as a subject will be asked to remain in their home classroom and to work from there, as there will not be the physical space for them to move elsewhere.

Grade 10 Students who do not take Maltese will be taken out of class during some of these lessons and will have alternative lessons by different teachers. This is a pilot project that is being offered to Grade 10 students only, for the time-being.

6.5. Senior school E-learning specifics

There will be 8 lesson daily with reduced time for each lesson slot. This will give students frequent time off from looking at computer screens. Where possible, lessons will be double lessons thus reducing the number of different subjects tackled each day and reducing amount daily homework. Students will need to log on during the respective lesson to follow from home. They can ask about their difficulties and discuss other issues with their peers and teacher. The lesson time slot is the time when students ask questions to that specific teacher. Students are to wear headphones and to put on their cameras at all times.

7. Additional matters

7.1. Support teachers

Support teachers normally take children out of class in groups or offer support within the class. This year students will be taken out individually and will be required to wear a mask during these sessions.

7.2. Break supervision

All supervisors must ensure that no bubble mixes with any other bubble during break times and they are to respect social distancing at all times during supervision duties. For simultaneous accidental injuries in students from different bubbles, supervisors must ensure that students are not to be sent to the nurse together. In case of head injury, supervisors are asked to call the nurse immediately and not to move the student.

A supervisor will also be appointed to supervise close to the bathrooms to make sure that students (whatever the bubble) are to enter the bathrooms one at a time. No toys including balls may be taken out of the classroom. Children are not allowed to eat and run at the same time. Supervisors must only use mobile phones for emergency purposes.

7.3. Canteen for students

Students wishing to buy food from the canteen are to place an online order for any food that needs to be cooked or prepared at the canteen, for first and second break. The food ordered will be taken up to the students’ class by canteen personnel. There will be no seating at the canteen.
8. Discussion

As cases rise in the global second wave, globally and in Malta [13], all should be done to ensure that COVID-19 is minimised in schools as whilst children may not be severely affected, they may be in contact with vulnerable members of society. This paper may help other schools to create their own protocols and mechanisms for safe reopening.

It is also worth stating that influenza vaccination is recommended beyond the age of 6 months and since COVID-19 will co-circulate with influenza this winter, all (especially children) should be vaccinated [14].

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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