

School Leaders' Roles in Addressing Differential Impacts of the Pandemic

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In this paper, the authors share research findings from a recent study of educators' and leaders' responses to the pandemic. The research team (all part of a research-practice partnership) designed the study to investigate the impacts of the pandemic on educator stress, job satisfaction, and adaptation and with a focus on differential impacts of the pandemic on people of color and those living in poverty. For this reason, the team relied upon social ecological frameworks that draw attention to the relationships between individual, school, and community features and outcomes.

Since the study was designed by an interdisciplinary research team including those specializing in social welfare, policy and leadership, and culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, the team also relied upon brain science, trauma, and secondary traumatic stress literature for conceptual framing.

The study used mixed-methods—gathering data through educator surveys and interviews with school principals. The researchers then used a curated list of related research abstracts, podcasts, and their own study findings to engage in conversations with school leaders in planning for leading their schools through the 2021-22 school year.

The discussions with school leaders were guided by the question: How do school leaders create (or recreate) and sustain a humanizing and inclusive school environment as we emerge from the pandemic? Each of the discussions included information about what school leaders need to look and listen for with regard to differential impacts of the pandemic on staff,

students, and families and provided opportunities for leaders to share ideas around how they would support staff as well as children and families through the pandemic and its aftermath. The lead author will share research study findings as well as discussion prompts and leaders' reflections.

Description of the Study and Related Literature

New York state was one of the first states in the union to experience massive COVID-19 outbreaks. As the severity of the situation became clear, on March 16th, 2020, New York's Governor ordered that all K-12 schools shift to fully remote instruction in two days. A subsequent announcement required remote instruction for the remainder of the 2019-20 academic year. These events were followed in the 2020-21 school year with ongoing school openings and closings with guidance from state government officials, but with local boards, district and school leaders needing to make immediate decisions not always popular with the public. These events required shifting from fully remote instruction, fully in person instruction, and combinations of each as communities across the state experienced COVID-19 outbreaks to different degrees.

Throughout this time, educational researchers prioritized investigating the effects of the pandemic on students, their safety, and their learning needs associated with remote or hybrid learning. This was in good measure, as early indications of the impacts of the pandemic on children were concerning, particularly for those facing other adversities such as poverty (Phelps & Sperry, 2020). While some studies investigated the effects of the pandemic on educators (e.g. Anderson et al., 2020), few studies focused on relationships between school leaders and

educators in light of the significant changes in educators' roles, responsibilities, and relationships with colleagues, students, and families.

An interdisciplinary body of research suggested that it was timely and important to learn more about educators' occupational stress during the pandemic-related transitions and leaders' responses to these concerns. Occupational stress may take two forms: (1) It can be hazardous (distress) and (2) Beneficial (eustress). Framed by occupational stress theory and research, a new kind of workforce stress is important, and it is of special interest in this research. Educators' secondary traumatic stress (STS) is a special priority (Lawson et al. 2019). STS arises from interactions with traumatized students, parents, and other school personnel and, like COVID-19, it can be contagious.

All forms of stress impact educators' job satisfaction. Job satisfaction, particularly under conditions of rapid, dramatic change, influences performance, retention, and turnover. In all such cases, contexts matter—school, district, and community. Questions are implicated from these rapidly changing contexts and stressors. How have educators coped with these adaptations in their roles and performances? What effects have they had on the workforce and how have these impacts differed in different communities? How do impacts on students and frontline educators impact school leaders and vice-versa? What can we learn about contextual influences—commonalties, similarities, and differences?

Social Ecological Frameworks

Social ecological frameworks recommend attention to relations among individual characteristics, group characteristics, salient features of schools-as-organizations, host community setting features, and overall performance (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). Workforce

quality, stability, and performances are a special priority—sometimes operationalized as “organizational social capital” (Holme & Rangel 2012). All in all, strong organizational capital, fueled by a stable, competent, and healthy workforces, improves organizational learning and performance. In contrast, school systems with high workforce turnover, comparatively lower professional and organizational commitments, and diminished levels of interpersonal trust fueled by strong social networks consistently perform below standards. Unsurprisingly, the latter schools experience comparatively higher levels of turnover, some of it predictable because of contextual poverty, social exclusion, and social isolation.

Methods

This mixed method study sought to illuminate occupational stress, job satisfaction, and performance adaptation disparities of leaders and educators working in districts and schools serving different subpopulations of students (i.e., ethnically, linguistically, and socioeconomically) and in different types of communities (i.e., urban, suburban, rural) across New York State. We also sought to examine disparities among educators of different genders and those educators working in different content area classrooms and with students requiring specialized instruction such as students with disabilities and English Language Learners.

The research team was guided by the following research questions: 1. To what extent and how do school leaders and teachers experience stress in response to covid-19 disruptions? 1a. How do school characteristics (i.e., level of urbanicity, level of economic disadvantage, level of ethnic and linguistic diversity), district and school leaders’ practices, and district and school resources and workforce characteristics relate to these experiences? 2. To what extent and how do school leaders and teachers indicate a change in job satisfaction in response to covid-19

disruptions? 2a. How do school characteristics (i.e., level of urbanicity, level of economic disadvantage, level of ethnic and linguistic diversity), district and school leaders' practices, and district and school resources and workforce characteristics relate to these experiences? 3. To what extent and how do school leaders and teachers indicate changes in their work or personal life in response to covid-19 disruptions? 3a. How do school characteristics (i.e., level of urbanicity, level of economic disadvantage, level of ethnic and linguistic diversity), district and school leaders' practices, and district and school resources and workforce characteristics relate to these changes?

The research team launched the study in March 2021 with an invitation distributed by a statewide school leader association to its membership, with supplementary recruitment through regional school leader organizations. Principals who agreed to have their schools participate were sent a link to a Qualtrics survey for instructional and support staff that included both likert-scaled and open-ended questions probing into their experiences of stress, job satisfaction, and adaptations due to the pandemic (see Bothma & Roodt 2013). This was followed by semi-structured interviews with principals in schools selected by taking into account the degree of stress, job satisfaction, and adaptation identified in the school-wide surveys. A total of 904 educators from 38 schools varying in geographic region, urbanicity, and other demographic characteristics responded to our survey. The overall educator response rate from participating schools was 33.1%. The survey collection was conducted between March and June of the 2020-21 school year.

The survey responses indicated that school 6 was a positive outlier (i.e. relatively low job dissatisfaction and low levels of stress) whereas educators from school 1 indicated higher

levels of job dissatisfaction and have experienced relatively higher levels of stress (see Figures 1 and 2). Both of these schools are elementary schools and so provide an opportunity for comparison. School 6 falls into the average range for economic disadvantage in our sample and is located in a suburban community whereas school 1 falls into the higher range for economic disadvantage in our sample and is located in a rural community. See table 1 for focal school characteristics.

Table 1: Focal school characteristics

	School 6	School 1
Grade Levels	K-4	PK-5
Enrollment	350 ¹	450
Economic Disadvantage Category	Middle Range	Higher Range
Urbanicity Category	Suburban	Rural
Response Rate (n)	49% (17)	64% (51)
Job Dissatisfaction Index in 2020	1.783 (std 0.818)	1.853 (std 0.665)
Job Dissatisfaction Index in 2021	1.850 (std 0.944)	3.484 (std 1.388)
Amount Change 2020-2021	0.067	1.631

Findings

¹ Enrollment numbers are rounded and economic disadvantage categories are provided in ranges to protect anonymity per Institutional Review Board-approved consent agreements

Our open-ended survey question asked: “Please provide any comments you would like to about stress, your job satisfaction, or your perceptions of the effects of the pandemic on your life and work as an educator.” Seven educators from school 6 responded to this question. One respondent expressed an appreciation for leaders’ support and communications (e.g. “I feel fortunate that my building level supervisor and district level supervisors have been supportive and willing to listen to the concerns of their staff and make adjustments as appropriate.”). Others reported that they recognize the need to ensure all students have technologies available to them going forward and that relationships are prioritized (e.g. “If we can learn from this pandemic, we should learn that reaching kids matters..... no matter what the reach is, virtual, small classrooms, giving them wi-fi.... we need to Reach... Kids need relationships with teachers and we need relationships with students in order to be effective!”). In this school, a number of teachers spoke to the stress and “exhaustion” of pandemic-induced changes and with teachers of very young children (Kindergarten) and a specialist teacher (music) expressing experiencing great challenges in adapting their instruction to meet their students’ needs. A balance of positive and negative perspectives and experiences were evident in their responses.

In school 1, 26 responses were collected revealing some similar patterns with regard to the challenges of social distancing while teaching young children (e.g. “It has been very difficult to work closely with small children. While they are eating they remove their mask, have difficulty putting it back on, and often forget.”). However, the responses from school 1 respondents were dominated by more negative perspectives related to leaders’ and community members’ support of them and the risks to their physical safety, job security, and overall well-

being due to the pandemic. For instance, one teacher described the toll remote learning has taken on her mental and physical health, “it's been exhausting and unhealthy most days mentally and physically.” Another, expressed a common refrain— a feeling of being unsupported and not listened to by administrators and undervalued by community members (“Teachers need help... we are suffering silently everyday! admin says the right things... your mental health is important ... but their actions DO NOT speak to them”).

A notable contrast in these two settings was with regard to how the community, district and school leaders relate to each other with School 1 staff expressing being insufficiently supported by both community and leaders, whereby in School 6, while stress was evident, a general sense of community and leader support was evident.

Conclusions

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, trends in educators' attitudes about their jobs (e.g., intent to leave) were similar with only a non-statistically significant trend with regard to dissatisfaction increasing with the percentage of economically disadvantaged students. In contrast, after a year of COVID-19 related disruptions, educators in schools serving higher poverty populations have the highest levels of dissatisfaction and workplace stress. One clear conclusion from the analysis of this sample's survey responses is that COVID-19 has exacerbated some of the challenges facing leaders and educators serving more economically disadvantaged students and that community context and community-school relations appear to have impacted educator levels of stress, job satisfaction, and adaptations in different ways.

These are important disparities that leaders need to understand and take into account as they navigate the future. These findings also speak to the important buffering role of school

leaders (Durand et al., 2017) as well as the qualities of their communications with staff and community in navigating the pandemic disruptions and setting their sights on positive innovations and relations to come. This research holds implications for supporting leaders in navigating challenges as they proceed in leading their schools post-pandemic and offers one strategy in the form of interdisciplinary research-practice partnership engagement with school leaders in how to “emerge stronger”.

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