Striving for equity in pandemic times: The administrator’s role in the shift to online education in K-12 and higher education spaces

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Chapter 11

Striving for Equity in Pandemic Times: The Administrator’s Role in the Shift to Online Education in K–12 and Higher Education Spaces

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the reality of educational administrators in U.S.-based institutions of education. Looking closely at 17 educational administrators from both K-12 systems and institutions of higher education, the authors come to a more comprehensive understanding of crisis leadership and its impact on equitable educational practices – both for students as well as for the administrators themselves. This chapter is based on a larger project the authors undertook to explore through narratives and photography the experiences of administrators during the global COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2020. This chapter illustrates the ways that communication, support, and equitable solutions for the learning community are and are not well articulated by leaders. The authors close out this chapter with recommendations for educational leaders during times of crisis as well as for potential follow-up research.

INTRODUCTION

From January 10-12, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) published a comprehensive package of guidance documents for countries, covering topics related to the management of an outbreak of the novel coronavirus, including prevention and control, lab testing, national capacities review tool, risk


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communication and community engagement, disease commodity packages, travel advice, clinical management, and surveillance case definitions (World Health Organization, 2020b). At the same time, on January 11, 2020, the Chinese media reported the first death from the novel coronavirus (World Health Organization, 2020b). Then, on January 30, 2020, the Director-General of WHO “declared the novel coronavirus outbreak a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC), WHO’s highest level of alarm” (World Health Organization, 2020b). On February 11, 2020, in order to avoid inaccuracy or stigma to a certain geographic area, animal, or group of people, WHO announced that the disease caused by the novel coronavirus would be named COVID-19 (World Health Organization, 2020b).

BACKGROUND

In the very near past, the World Health Organization (WHO) (2020a) reported in mid-March, approximately 125,260 cases and 4,613 deaths worldwide from COVID-19. These numbers continue to exponentially grow, resulting in the U.S. having the most confirmed number of cases worldwide. This crisis impacts everyone across the globe. Previously, we never considered a pandemic affecting our every facet of life. Our social, health, economic, and political spheres are forever changed. In education, changes were made swiftly, if not overnight. At the same time, educators found themselves drowning in the imperative need to move into the digital environment and provide an array of support to our students, families, and communities.

As Hong Kong returned to remote learning (Chor, 2020), the Los Angeles Unified School District, the second largest U.S. school district, and so many other U.S. K-12 school districts reported they will start the school year online (Hubler & Goldstein, 2020). Simultaneously, major international universities transitioned to mostly online learning, as well. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. government continues an aggressive campaign to force educators and students back into the classroom. It is clear that the politicization of the COVID crisis prioritizes the economy and partisan re-elections as more important than the health and safety of this country’s students and educators.

After these announcements, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) released new resources and schools to support opening schools for in-person instruction. These resources and tools supported how to open schools safely by “promoting behaviors that prevent spread, altering how a school and school day is structured, and outlining how to keep the school environment healthy through cleaning, proper ventilation, and other practices” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020a). In addition, the CDC (2020b) followed up with indicators for dynamic school decision making.

The CDC suggested decision-makers use at least one of the core measures of community burden in addition to the self-assessed measure of school implementation of key mitigation strategies. The recommended measures of community burden are the number of new cases per 100,000 persons within the last 14 days and/or the percentage of COVID-19 tests that are positive during the last 14 days (CDC, 2020b). These measures were coupled with the school’s ability to implement to the largest extent possible and adhere to the following key mitigation strategies: (1) consistent and correct use of masks; (2) social distancing to the extent possible; (3) hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette; (4) cleaning and disinfection; and (5) contact tracing in collaboration with local health department (CDC, 2020b). These indicators and measures were introduced to reduce the risk of introduction and mitigate the spread of COVID-19 within schools and in the larger community.
However, given these CDC resources, indicators, and measures, evidence from across the country conclusively indicates the COVID pandemic impacts low-income students disproportionately (Johns Hopkins Medicine, 2020) coupled by the mounting evidence that the growth of online education is hurting our less proficient students (Dynarski, 2019). With this reality, our schools are tasked with expanding student services for remote learning, student engagement in the virtual world, nutrition assistance programs, telehealth provisions, rethinking existing educational services, and expanding student access to high-speed internet and electronic devices in order that all students can effectively participate in remote learning and improve educational and life outcomes for all students.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

The objective of our chapter is to identify the role and support of educational administrators, in both K-12 and higher education spaces, during the shift to online education amidst the global pandemic. This chapter is one part of a larger study that focuses on the diverse experiences of educational leaders across the United States. We explore the literature on leadership in crisis (Bishop et al., 2015; Trust & Whalen, 2020; Pepper et al., 2010) and the rethinking of administrative decision-making (Christensen & Alexander, 2020; Johnson, 2001; Low, 2008) as it intersects with multiple lenses for equity and learning with technology (Lowell & Morris Jr., 2019; Qadar, 2020) to frame this chapter.

This chapter is based on our larger study that began as a phenomenological project framed by standard interviews, but transitions into a Photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997) study where participants were asked after the first interview to share images that typify their experiences as educational administrators during this crisis. In the K-12 space, we spotlight the work of district and school leaders who supported their students, with daily nutrition, electronic devices, and high-speed internet, and faculty, with transparent communication and support, to teach in the online environment. Similarly, in the higher education space, we highlight the work of administrators who supported their students during the abrupt shift to online learning, particularly in the area of student affairs. Most importantly, this chapter offers recommendations to enhance the administrative response to the evolving pandemic and future possibilities for equitable education.

CRISIS LEADERSHIP AND ADMINISTRATIVE DECISION-MAKING

Crisis Leadership

The COVID-19 crisis spun educational institutions into a tailspin. In the United States, at its peak, the K-12 school closures affected at least 55.1 million students in 124,000 U.S. public and private schools (Education Week, 2020). Currently, colleges and universities remain impaired by the pandemic. Large, flagship universities, such as the University of Michigan continue to shutter their doors as a stay-at-home order (with exceptions) is issued by its county due to 61 percent of the COVID-19 cases in that county are from its students (IHE Staff, 2020). Schools, colleges, and universities cannot prevent a crisis from occurring and leaders rarely have power to control the event.

Leaders typically are underprepared for crisis. In fact, they didn’t know what they didn’t know, or might be unwilling or unable to use resources (Christensen & Alexander, 2020; Low, 2008). In times of
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crisis, leaders are under tremendous stress. In fact, their stress is twofold, there is the fear of being viewed as inadequate and feeling personally responsible for the incident and the response (Low, 2008). However, educational leaders “have great power to control the outcome the event has on students. This is the moment of choice. When we do not know what we do not know, we can inadvertently choose unwisely” (Low, 2008, p. 102). Although many schools, colleges, and universities were thrust into emergency teaching and operations, Christensen and Alexander (2020) stress the importance of building the necessary skills to provide a quality education in emergency situations whether it be face-to-face, hybrid, or all online.

Since crisis leadership is more complicated in schools, colleges, and universities due to school governance and other bureaucratic challenges, educational institutions are often slow to react or change in times of crisis (Pepper et al., 2010). In fact, in a study by Trust and Whalen (2020), they found that, prior to January 2020, more than half of their participants had never tried remote teaching, online teaching, or blended teaching. Overall, participants expressed feeling overwhelmed and underprepared to teach remotely and the fluctuating situations created more challenges for their pedagogy, such as students’ access to Wi-Fi, personal needs, and nonexistent or shifting educational or governmental directives. Consequently, school leaders must develop and demonstrate effective leadership skills during times of crisis so that followers feel empowered rather than discouraged (Bishop et al., 2015). Despite this importance, rarely is crisis leadership included as part of the standard curriculum of educational leadership programs. At best, this topic is covered in a class as a module.

As a result, many educators were not efficiently trained to make the shift to ERT (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; Trust & Whalen, 2020). According to Hodges et al. (2020), the emergency movement to online learning and operations might “seal the perception of online learning as a weak option, when in truth nobody making the transition to online teaching under these circumstances will truly be designing to take full advantage of the affordances and possibilities of the online format”. Similarly, Trust and Whalen (2020), reported “significant variation in educators’ readiness to use technology to support learners at a distance...while most educators seemed to be learning online and remote teaching strategies and tools while teaching online or remotely (aka “building the plane while flying it”)” (p. 193) As such, according to the literature (Pepper et al., 2010; Reich et al., 2020; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020), educational leaders can take several actions to respond to crisis.

Some of the identified actions that leaders can take to effectively respond during crisis, including recognizing immediate priorities, concentrate time and efforts on priorities, remaining somewhat disconnected to make rational decisions, and communicating frequently (Pepper et al., 2010; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020). First, by recognizing immediate priorities, the leader is shuffling an unprecedented number of tasks, but identifies and acts on the most pressing for the benefit of their immediate school community. In fact, it is necessary for school leaders to make “ethical decisions that truly reflect the needs of students and not their own adult self-interest. This is not always easy. It requires a great deal of self-reflection, open-mindedness, and an understanding that making ethically sound decisions profoundly influences others’ lives” (Stefkovich & Begley, 2007, p. 215). All the while, the leader in crisis must maintain a balance to continue to make rational decisions. These actions are connected by efficient and consistent communication.

Reich et al. (2020) recommended to communicate information clearly and with multiple target audiences in mind. By consolidating information into comprehensive documents or webpages and prioritizing accessibility efforts for the key documents, with universal design, recorded phone messages, SMS broadcasts, printed mailings, and translations into multiple languages (Reich et al., 2020). The possible outcomes of a crisis, both positive and negative, are dependent on the actions of the leadership team. In
doing so, educational leaders in crisis must rethink their administrative decision-making by leaning on their stakeholder relationships based in trust and empowerment (Pepper et al., 2010; Sutherland, 2017) to mobilize their human resources to mitigate the crisis.

**Administrative Decision-Making and Building Teams**

Whether formally or informally, the building of teams to be utilized during crisis is crucial (Low, 2008; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020). By building crisis teams, educational leaders are trained in the necessities to respond to crisis. Through this training school leaders also begin to break the cycle of silence and isolation perpetrated by the fear of making a bad situation worse or bringing negative attention to themselves or their school (Johnson, 2001). Furthermore, leaders gain a thorough understanding that the crisis team is intended to support them in their role as the school leader, not take over the school (Johnson, 2001; Low, 2008; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020). Rethinking administrative decision-making lends itself to the discussion over equitable leadership in crisis.

**Equitable Leadership in Crisis**

Equity in education is often mistaken for equality, or sameness for all stakeholders. However, within educational institutions, sameness does not equate to equitable outcomes for all. For example, there are students that have “unequal learning needs (e.g. physical and cognitive disabilities) and unequal backgrounds (socio-economic), which can mean that there are differences in their needs when compared to most students. These differences can mean that for some students additional support is needed” (Lowell & Morris, 2019, p. 80). Therefore, “equity deals with accommodating and meeting the specific needs of specific individuals” (Anderson and Hendricks, 2014, p. 8). Since fair is not always equal, by providing equity for faculty, students, and families, each stakeholder is given the opportunity to have what they need to be successful.

This allocation of support reflects a particular type of caring leadership. According to Louis et al. (2016) caring leaders do not simply invest “in more caring dyadic personal relationships between teachers and students. Rather, it is also associated with a considered effort to distribute the most critical resources that a school has...toward the students who may need it the most” (p. 334). Furthermore, Louis and Murphy’s (2017) findings indicate that schools with a larger proportion of marginalized students remain disadvantaged in two ways: they are less likely to allocate resources to students who need them most and they have fewer teachers who are busy looking for, sharing, and using new information. Lastly, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), while school closures affect all students, students from marginalized communities feel an even greater impact. As such, these data revealed one facet of the digital divide that nearly 20 percent of African American children ages 3-18 and 21 percent of families earning less than $40,000 per year have no access to the internet at home.

**The Digital Divide**

The digital divide refers to the lack of access to information and technologies, such as computers and the internet, and those with an abundance of access. The haves and have nots of these digital tools widens the gap between several factors, including age, gender, and socioeconomic status (Dynarsky, 2018; Livingstone and Helsper, 2007; Lowell & Morris, 2019). Wei et al. (2011) suggests three levels
of digital divide, access, usage capability, and outcome. Access refers to the technology available in homes, schools, and businesses. Usage capability is associated with access as the lack of technologies can result in the underdevelopment of the same skills and outcomes. Outcome refers to the differences in outcomes and productivity due to the lack of access and opportunities to use technology.

Online Penalty

The pandemic has not only revealed but deepened injustices in our society. As Ishimaru (2020) notes “Black, Native, and Latinx communities have been hit disproportionately hard by coronavirus; many working-class immigrants have been forced to remain in frontline labor or have lost their jobs”. As well, as persons without documentation living with limited or lack of access to healthcare and governmental supports. In addition to an upswing in incidents of anti-Asian racism (Ishimaru, 2020). Along the same lines, due to the stark difference between administrators, teachers, and families in lived socioeconomic differences, it is important to relate the experiences that students and families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may deal with (Crowley & Smith, 2015). In some homes, students have parents, family members, or hired tutors supporting them with remote learning. Others will have working parents and family members and lack of resources to hire individual tutors (Louise Kelly, 2020).

With the shift to remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is just cause to be concerned over running the risk of broadening and reinforcing the social divide. Emerging from the digital divide, the social divide results in an online penalty. The online penalty “is more severe for struggling, underprivileged and vulnerable students (e.g., younger students, ethnic and racial minorities, and students with low prior achievement) and negligible for high-achieving and affluent learners who will do well anywhere” (Reich, 2020). It is crucial for leaders to realize that the shift to online education is harder on marginalized communities, who could be left behind when students are no longer able to access campuses and shared resources, such as libraries and labs.

Even when schools, colleges, and universities can secure devices and internet services, online education can come with an online penalty for struggling and vulnerable learners (Dynarsky, 2018). According to Xu and Jaggars (2014) from their research on large-scale community colleges with massive online courses, many students earned lower grades and are not successful in online learning settings compared to their success in face-to-face courses. In fact, these difficulties are more exacerbated with marginalized communities. Reich et al. (2020) posited that the shift to remote learning will negatively impact students and families in households that are vulnerable to the effects of recession, food and housing insecurity, and limited access to healthcare in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ensuring Equity for Faculty, Students, and Families

To combat the impact of the digital divide and online penalty, it is important for educational leaders to embrace an equity imperative to ensure no one in the school community is left intentionally or unintentionally behind (Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Qadir, 2020). First, according to Qadir (2020) educational leaders seem to be adopting a do no harm approach to teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Contrary to this, Reich and Ito (2017) documented various incidents in which good intentioned interventions are neutralized and even transformed into interventions that are more harmful than beneficial. As a remedy, “Maslow before Bloom” became popular in educational circles.
Named after two well-known psychologists typically cited in educational institutions, “Maslow before Bloom” refers to prioritizing basic human needs before emphasizing academic learning (Qadir, 2020). In other words, educational leaders must be concerned with the safety, physical health, and mental health prior to delivering academic knowledge and skills. This is exceptionally important when considering equitable opportunities for our most vulnerable students and families from marginalized communities.

In addition, for purposes of equitable opportunities for special populations of students, students with disabilities and English language learners must be placed at the center of remote learning plans. As such, schools, colleges, and universities should thoughtfully provide services and learning opportunities for special student populations. With school closures and stay-at-home orders, parents of students with disabilities may require additional supports due to the distance from their support networks of health aides, therapists and coaches (Tinubu Ali & Herrera, 2020). Given a priority on special student populations, it is also important to grant access to schooling services to students and families.

Next, many school-aged children and their families, especially in rural and urban areas, face serious limits to accessing online learning (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Turner, 2020). Since this is an access issue, the provision of technological tools is vitally important for students and families. Families often have difficult choices to make, such as providing food rather than purchasing larger data plans to meet the needs of remote learning or having a single device to be shared among remote learners in their household.

With this massive shift to remote learning, Reich et al. (2020) suggested procedures for providing access to resources for students and families, including providing laptops, tablets, or hotspots for students’ families or partnering with internet providers in your community. Similarly, in order to reach more students and families experiencing housing instability, schools, colleges, and universities, should also consider providing printed materials and partnering with public libraries, community organizations and local television stations to provide enhanced learning opportunities (Reich et al., 2020).

Finally, often when we think of diversity in the classroom, we think of gender, race and culture, but we must add diversity in generations. Like so, teachers, faculty, and staff need technological support to make the shift to remote teaching. Older adults might be at a disadvantage if they do not keep up with new technologies. Teaching remotely requires skills and practice to keep students engaged and learning while providing personalized instruction and support (Lowell & Morris, 2019). As such, schools, colleges, and universities must assess the remote learning skills of their faculty and staff in order to provide professional development to address these needs.

METHODOLOGY

This project began as a traditional interview-based research project with 24 administrators from across the globe and from both K-12 and post-secondary education. This project focused on the experiences of educational administrators during the pandemic than began in early 2020, we made a purposeful decision to focus on U.S. based administrators due to the authors own experience and expertise. Despite this, we acknowledge the impact that this pandemic has had on the global educational community. Of the initial 24 that completed our intake survey, we interviewed 17 of these administrators. After our first-round of interviews, we moved on to a Photovoice element of the project (Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice is a particularly useful method for creating an in-depth understanding of the needs of a community based on the images that the photographers share with the researchers. Moreover, pictures may serve as proof
to complement and add another layer of validity to the narratives of the photographer (Castleden et al., 2008). It is, however, important to add context to these images, as they cannot stand alone, for without the narratives of the photographer these images may be misinterpreted and used in a manner that is antithetical to the meaning wished to be conveyed by the photographer (Call-Cummings & Martinez, 2016). Therefore, we followed up with each photographer to ensure our understanding of their images was rooted in their own interpretations and reasons for sharing the image.

As such, after our first interview with each participant, we invited them to continue on with this project by sharing with us images that they had taken, or might take that would typify and add context to their experience as an educational administrator during the pandemic. The majority of the original 17 agreed to participate in the second element of the project (Table 1). To delineate these individuals when we are discussing their work, those who participated in the second photo-based round we will refer to as photographers, otherwise we will refer to them as participants. Some were initially hesitant to contribute to this element, as sharing images is a very personal, and potentially fraught experience. As such, when using visual data in research, it is particularly important to engage in continuous and on-going consent in all phases of the research project to ensure the images are being used ethically and with the intent of the photographer (Weiser, 2020). After consenting to engaging in second part, participants shared with us their images and we scheduled a follow-up conversation where we engaged in photoelicitation to use these images as a starting point to check back in with them in regards to their experiences with the pandemic. These images ranged in content and format. For instance, some images illustrated graduation parades held for students (K-12), others were names posted on campus of all their graduating students (higher education). Some were more personal, such as one participant sharing with us an image of his keys on a desk in an empty room as he was leaving his job for a new one, and due to the pandemic that is how his farewell went. Similarly, one K-12 administrator shared an image of him and a long-time fellow administrator posing on her lawn as she was retiring, and that was her goodbye party. Some participants shared memes that blossomed into popularity during the early part of the pandemic. Many of these memes were so popular that the research team had already seen them prior to them being sent to us.

After all the interviews were conducted, we used computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) to help us organize the data and to help code the data. We coded both the narrative data, as well as the photographs. These two pieces of data, along with our fieldnotes helped us to make connections and meanings across time and location. We first coded the narrative data using structural coding and in vivo coding processes (Saldaña, 2015). From here, data were themed to continue to build upon our understanding. One of the struggles of this project was the recursive nature of the research – we were often asking participants to engage in a medium (video conferencing) that they were likely spending time on all day for their work and as such were likely exhausted.

To ignore visual data in research is something that we do at our own analytic peril (Clarke, 2005). While visual data needs to be treated differently than narratives, we still must attend to the visual in qualitative research. As such, we treated these images as sources of rich data. To simply code visual data as textual base data seems particularly fraught, as it may lose some of the richness of the visual medium. As such, we coded the images to serve as guides to accompany the visual data, but not to stand in place of the images themselves (Saldaña, 2015).
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Findings: The Administrative Responsive to the Global Pandemic

Our findings are thematically by communication, team support, and equitable solutions, including electronic devices, high-speed internet, and daily nutrition. Although we understand there are limitations to these findings regarding equitable solutions, we present these data as they were presented to us by our participants. Broadly, we speak to some of the themes we discovered through our research. These themes are displayed in Table 2, with operational definitions for each theme, as well as outlining which participants echoed these themes in their narratives or their images.

Table 2. Table of themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>K-12 Educational Leaders</th>
<th>Higher Education Leaders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Consistent means of communication, including via bulletins, email, telephone, and social media</td>
<td>Laura, Phyllis, Bowie, Frank, Zach, and Kelly</td>
<td>Alima, Lisa, and Suzie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Support</td>
<td>Support for personnel in the schools, colleges, and universities</td>
<td>Kelly, Laura, Frank, and Bowie</td>
<td>Suzie, David, and Sam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equitable Solutions</td>
<td>Caring acts; Access to electronic devices, high-speed internet, and daily nutrition</td>
<td>Kelly, Phyllis, Laura, Richard, and Bowie</td>
<td>Lisa, Sam, and Annamae</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
K-12 Educational Leaders

In the K-12 space, our participants came from multiple areas of leadership, including teacher leaders, principals, district coordinators, school board members, and superintendents. In terms of equity in practice during the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors spotlight the work of district and school leaders who supported their faculty, students, and families with consistent communication, team support, and equitable solutions, including electronic devices, high-speed internet, and daily nutrition.

Communication

In K-12, communication varied in terms of support, including the depth of transparency and consistent communication with faculty and staff. Laura, a K-12 district administrator, stated her efforts to be fully transparent with her school administrators, teachers, and staff. Accordingly, when they first started with remote learning, there were daily meetings with directors, administrators, and teacher's union representatives. In fact, she noted, “there’s nothing that anybody on my staff could not ask me”. Likewise, Phyllis, a teacher leader, noted that her district had the appearance of transparency as she received frequent communication with her principal, the special education department, and the curriculum department.

On the contrary, Bowie, a school board president and educator, discussed the challenges associated with full transparency. According to Bowie, it is the role of school leaders in crisis to not share everything but to be able to distinguish between what people need to know and full disclosure. She stated in a crisis moment, it is about what people need to know “because they’re grappling with so much and they’re trying to juggle so much. What do they need to know to allow them to continue doing what we need them to do to move the work forward?”.

Also, Frank, a school principal, discussed the struggle of rapidly changing information on school administrators. He said, when delivering information to his faculty and staff, “it was here’s what I know. Please know that this could change in 10 minutes”. Likewise, Zach, a school principal, described the challenges of keeping his faculty and staff informed as much as possible and experiencing the physical impact of that demand. According to Zach, “keeping open lines of communication between everyone was absolutely essential and just encouraging everyone to stay connected”. Given the challenges faced by these educational administrators, communication with faculty and staff was both consistent and strategic.

Moving to utilizing social media to engage the school community, Zach talked about Facebook as one of the best avenues for his school because they can directly connect with their entire school community to share what is available to them. In addition, Frank worked closely with the other administrators in his area to send joint Facebook messages that went out to the school community with consistent messaging. Pivoting to another communicative technology tool, Frank said he used social media more for parents, but used Remind to send out for quick text messages to faculty and staff to keep them updated on district and school information.

On the other hand, communications were top-down, as well. For example, in Kelly’s role as district superintendent, she works with her principals and the principals inform their teachers. She said, “so, it’s pretty much from the bishop, down to me as superintendent, and then out to the principals and the pastors.” In addition, when discussing returning to school in the fall, Kelly stated, “I still am very much against the hybrid...I basically told our principals, five days [in-person] or we’re remote learning.” In this way, without considering the input of her leadership team, Kelly dictated the return to school plan. Given the presence of top-down leadership, the authors pivot to the potentiality of team support in crisis.
Team Support

The K-12 administrators in this study showed team support by increasing their accessibility, lauding the commitment of their teachers and staff, and the public displays of mobile celebrations. Kelly, a district superintendent, talked about her accessibility to her school principals 24 hours a day to collaboratively handle issues as they arise. In addition, Laura celebrated the tenacity of her teachers during the shift to remote learning. She stated, “our teachers went above and beyond anything I could have ever asked of them”. Similarly, Frank talked about the team support from members of his faculty and staff. More specifically, he said his faculty and staff were supportive and creative when it came to supporting their students, faculty, and staff through celebratory events. For example, they arranged mobile celebrations and made car trips to the homes of many graduating seniors (see Figure 1) and marked their property with school spirit signs.

Figure 1. Frank’s faculty mobile support team getting ready to celebrate student graduates
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stated, she “set up instructional coaches so that they can jump on during office hours for anything”. In addition, Laura set up a menu of options for technology support, from Google classroom training to a variety of webinars, to provide her teachers choice in professional development options. Also, Frank set up faculty PD facilitators to support his faculty in their transition to remote learning. He said, “myself and a tech coach went around, and we grabbed all the teachers that were the most tech savvy and asked them to prepare shorts sessions of professional development around Zoom, Loom, and Google Classroom”. In contrast, Bowie’s district failed to transition to a 1:1. As a result, they were severely behind in the training of teachers to shift to remote learning. In fact, she stated “PD, you can’t make that happen overnight so that transformation didn’t happen. So, our curriculum department ... pretty much had to standardize the curriculum”. Although technology training is significant for the shift to remote learning, other equitable solutions are best to support the greater school community.

Equitable Solutions

In addition to school support teams, the K-12 administrators made advancements towards equitable solutions. It is important to remember that these data were gathered at the onset of the pandemic, when both the researchers and participants were still traumatized by the impact of the COVID-19. Although these equitable solutions are limited in scope, we present these data as described by our participants. As such, these advancements included providing electronic devices, high-speed internet, and daily nutrition. Also, most of our administrators provided special services and learning opportunities for special student populations.

Whether the district was 1:1 or not, all our administrators discussed the importance of issuing electronic devices, such as laptops and Chromebooks to their faculty and students. According to Kelly, she instructed her principals to disperse “the laptops at school that you have to check out to families and get that going. And, you know, of course, we had to have an agreement signed and all this stuff”. Similarly, Phyllis said the district started at the top by distributing technology to high school seniors and worked their way down. She went on to say, “that everybody who needed technology received technology, the big caveat was, you know, no more than two per household and by the time we reached technology, the K-5 level, it was the end of April”. Switching to providing electronic devices as an equity issue, to provide for all students, both Phyllis and Laura talked about providing hard-copy packets of information every other week.

Providing electronic devices was the first step of countering the digital divide, the educational leaders from our study also needed to provide support for high-speed internet. Like so, Laura provided free internet service for grades 6-12, but only for students that qualified for free and reduced lunch. On the other hand, the other participants had less restrictions when it came to free high-speed internet. In fact, Richard, a district administrator, discussed the challenges and resolutions associated with the pandemic, “the digital divide is real and especially in the communities that our students living. However, we have received some private donations that goes directly to our families, getting internet and other sort of technological things.”

In addition to technological support, food distribution was important to ensure that students who rely on free or reduced-price meals at school are able to get the nutrition they need. All of our participants were involved in food distribution to their students and families. However, during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Bowie’s district set up 12 bus routes throughout the city with 8-10 stops on each route to deliver meals every day.
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Most of our administrators highlighted the efforts to create opportunity for their students with disabilities. According to Richard, “I really believe a lot of people came into the pandemic with the mindset that special education was going to be lost. It was a thankful surprise that we were so on it and that their child was going to continue to get those supports”. As a special education administrator, Richard went on to say, “all of our related services went to a tele-therapy model. Our speech services, occupational therapy (OT), physical therapy (PT), and counseling, as well. We set all the kids up to have their services be provided in in that tele-therapy model”. In addition, he sought different licenses and permissions to conduct initial special education testing remotely. He said, the “evaluation progress plan and what we did is assessed each component of the special education evaluation and determined if it could be done online or if we needed to delay. So, tele-assessment was something that was quite frankly, one of the most controversial decisions I had to make as an administrator”. Likewise, Phyllis was frustrated with the lack of federal and state guidance in the delivering of special education services, but her district created an accountability log to track the amount of special education minutes where their teachers provided individualized support. In addition, Laura spoke to working with her community partners to deliver specialized instruction for students with disabilities.

Higher Education Administrators

In a different frame than that of the K-12 administrators, the higher education administrators had a vastly different experience in continuing to support their students during the abrupt shift to online learning. The majority of our participants came from a student services administration space, rather than academic affairs. As such, their frame of student experience, and their locus of control related to academics are vastly different than those of the K-12 administrators. Despite these differences, the experiences that the higher education administrators shared with us still give us several things to consider as we think about equitable approaches to education, communication, and team support. Whereas the majority of the K-12 administrators were principals or were located in a district office, the majority of the higher education administrators were more entry-level and younger in both age and experience. The K-12 group had several individuals who had been with their current organization for more than 10 years and the higher education group, most of the individuals had been with their organization less than five years. This is quite common within higher education, that most student services administrators will move on from an institution every 4-5 years at the beginning of their career in order to seek out promotions. As such, despite the higher education administrators being considered administrators, they were likely more akin to teachers in the realm of power and control – to draw upon a K-12 frame. They were able to control their spaces, to an extent, but had little if any agency related to the decision making of the entire scope of the institution.

Communication

Communication for our higher education administrators was markedly different. This is likely due to the difference in the locus of control. Additionally, many institutions were concerned with understanding what their peer and aspirant institutions were doing, they were slow to react, waiting to see what others did before enacting their own plans. Alima summed this up by sharing that her school didn’t want to put out a plan on which they “couldn’t deliver” and as such, did not put anything out there but “silence”. Communication, due to the size of many of these institutions, were through not only e-mail, but through
social media as well. For Lisa’s institution, social media was the primary means of communication for the institutional community.

Often, this communication was also to better serve students. For instance, Lisa’s institution at the very beginning, the communication was about “making sure everyone had the technology they needed, or if they needed funds to get home”. This communication centered the care of the student. However, as planning began for fall, and questions started to come about plans, some of the communication and plans were a bit questionable according to Lisa. Likewise, for Alima, believed that the “communication to our students, faculty, and staff has really been lacking. And again, I think, we had a lot of communication when we first went remote in March, and while it’s only been three months, it feels like an eternity”.

Suzie spoke about how there was a lot of communication, but that it was sometimes confusing, in that a “little bit of language that changed from a 9 a.m. communication to a 5 o’clock communication” would be vastly different”. This rapid change of communication is starkly different from many of the others who complained about the dearth of communication. As such, we had institutions communicating too much, adding to confusion during an already confusing time, and we had institutions who communicated too little, adding to an alienation during an already alienating time. Neither of these are ideal situations for the administrators, and the larger community. As such, how did these institutions continue to build and sustain a team during such an alienating and confusing time?

**Team Support**

As we mentioned earlier about the recursive nature of this project and the complexities of asking participants and photographers to engage with us via videoconferencing apps, this was largely how these individuals continued to be together with their teams on campus. Suzie shared with us a team meeting she had with her colleagues where they all changed their backgrounds in their zoom meeting to reflect their various houses from the world of Harry Potter and dressed as if they were students at Hogwarts. David shared with us an image of many small figures on a green lawn, showing a way that his team worked together remotely to create tiny little figures with the names of all the graduating students from their college. They then came together to put these figures on campus to celebrate their students.

Sam shared many images with us about how her community continued to build community with us. Many of these were screenshots of amusing SnapChats she would send to her colleagues. For instance, Figure 2, features many members of her team behind text that reads “And that’s the way we became the SA bunch”. She also shared with us an image of her on a hospital bed with a hand-made mask featuring members of Marvel’s Avengers. This image has the caption “Note: Everything is fine, super minor procedure. Can someone get me a cheeseburger”. After this voluntary procedure, which was initially pushed back to the pandemic, she received many messages from colleagues and work-friends “sending texts of ‘I hope you’re feeling better’ and things like that”. And they “respected [her], thankfully, being away from work, which was nice”.

Despite being distant from one another, these administrators attempted to overcome the alienation and isolation of maintaining social distancing procedures by using technology to maintain relationships. One individual, David, changed jobs in the middle of our research project. Whereas relationships are often maintained using technology, it remains to be seen for individuals such as David, how relationships can be built using technology. Often higher education professionals, administrators and faculty, start new jobs in new institutions over the summer. How does a new professional build relationships and connections in a new space all virtually? This remains to be seen and is a potential follow-up research study.
Equitable Solutions

Many of the higher education administrators expressed a deep level of care for their students, something that we find particularly important in an educational space (Noddings, 2012). One participant, Lisa, shared how she and her institution were focused on taking care of the students “from an educational standpoint, but really being flexible with things like grading and you know, making sure everyone had the technology they needed”. One photographer, Sam, spoke about the difference in socio-economic
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status of her students and how that contributed to differential experiences of students on her campus. She shared that she would see some students, upon move out at the end of a typical year, “just leave behind MacBook computers and gaming systems, and they just didn’t care. So, it was a true spectrum of where people were coming from”. As such, these students would not have to consider the hardships of having reliable internet access and technology to complete their coursework that the abrupt shift to online learning forced upon all arenas of education.

Unlike the K-12 schools, higher education largely has adult learners, being over the age of majority. As such, their control and ability to help students through the pandemic educationally is vastly different. Due to this, many of the ways that the higher education administrators supported their students was through acts of service such as Figure 3, which features Annamae. Annamae, as part of a community organization, created hand-sewn masks which she then gave to some of the students she worked with. The brown bags in the back of the care are also hand-labeled with the names of the students so she could safely give these out to the students. This image was taken early on during the pandemic, when facemasks were rare and hard to come by. She made and gave out over 150 masks to the community. This was something that was done on her own time, but intersected with her professional job, as she gave many masks to the students with whom she worked. The response to her asking who needed a mask was fast and overwhelming. She remembered “having [her] phone on [her] that day and [she] was running errands and every five seconds [she’d] get a new email message from a student saying ‘I got the message. I need a mask if any are available’”. The response was also answered from students from far away and she ended up shipping “closer to about 50 of them, we ended up shipping out throughout the U.S.”. She also stated that “it wasn’t necessarily within my job description or job duties, but because I knew that a lot of our students needed them, it’s just another way that I was able to kind of help them during this time, versus just making a phone or virtual appointment”. This act of caring was not necessarily related to the student’s academic role in the institution, but due to the fact that many of her students also had jobs that were considered essential, this was a way that she could do something, that while not related to her professional role, was a way she could still work to support and care for her students.

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through our solutions and recommendations, the authors hope the gap between the unknown and the known is decreased and potential choices for leaders under crisis are increased (Low, 2008). Consistent with the literature on crisis leadership, our educational leaders were underprepared for crisis (Pepper et al., 2010; Trust & Whalen, 2020). In fact, they didn’t know what they didn’t know, but they were willing to exhaust their resources to provide equitable opportunities for their students and families (Christensen & Alexander, 2020; Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Low, 2008). Although there were times when decisions had to be made rapidly and without any certainty of success (Bishop et al., 2015); they had to collect information, disseminate information as it became available while considering the effectiveness of full transparency, work with their human resources, and ultimately provide equitable solutions to support their entire educational community. These recommended strategies as well as pitfalls and challenges related to these strategies are outlined in Table 3.
Striving for Equity in Pandemic Times

Figure 3. Annamae volunteering with masks

Table 3. Strategies and pitfalls

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Pitfalls &amp; Challenges</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enhancing Equity</td>
<td>Participants attempts to provide equitable opportunities for their faculty, staff, students, and families</td>
<td>Lack of depth associated with equity; Moving from performative to substantive and sustainable equitable reforms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual Relationship Building</td>
<td>Creating and maintaining relationships in an online environment</td>
<td>Zoom fatigue; Uneasiness with remote gatherings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balance</td>
<td>Maintaining appropriate boundaries and managing exhaustion</td>
<td>Lack of awareness in relation to respecting the time of personnel; Lack of flexibility; Failing to separate work and home</td>
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Enhancing Equity in Times of Crisis

By refusing to return to the old “normal,” we can challenge the dangerous assumptions about perpetuating inequities in our COVID-19 responses, but we can build practices and systems for justice in education as we step through the “portal” of this pandemic (Ishimaru, 2020). As such, in alignment with our findings, our educational leaders made valiant attempts to provide equitable opportunities for their faculty,
staff, students, and families. Given the gap created by the digital divide, all our participants provided electronic devices to their educational communities. Similarly, as Laura and Phyllis referred to, in order to reach more students and families experiencing housing instability, schools, colleges, and universities, should also consider providing printed material. Although some of our leaders provided more supports, like open access to free high-speed internet or the homegrown provision of masks, most were cognitive an equity imperative to ensure no one in the school community is left intentionally or unintentionally behind (Qadir, 2020). In addition, the digital divide was interrogated by multigenerational lenses as our school leaders recognized there are different types of school community members with different needs and acted upon those needs. While there will be overlap between different generations, it is crucial for leaders to remember that strategies may need to be adjusted to meet the generational needs of school community members (Lowell & Morris, 2019).

In addition to the reckoning of the digital divide, the educational leaders displayed Maslow before Bloom by prioritizing basic human needs before emphasizing academic learning (Qadir, 2020). The identification of food scarcity and the plans to continue food distribution were notable. Also, in the higher education space, the attention to consistently meeting virtually with their teams speaks to the basic human need of keeping connected under crisis. Next, the emphasis on special populations, especially the focus on students with disabilities, is well documented in both the literature (Reich et al, 2020; Tinubu Ali & Herrera, 2020) and our study, as well. In sum, it is important for leaders in crisis to continue to broaden the scope and prioritize equity considerations in policy guidance to evaluate digital divides, accessibility issues, and all elements of remote learning practice (Reich et al., 2020).

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Building Relationships Virtually

As we mentioned previously, summer is a common time that individuals get new jobs or change jobs in education. For many, this is an ideal time, as it is the beginning of a new year for academics, so it is potentially the smoothest transition point. However, the pandemic has vastly and dramatically changed this. In higher education, it is common to have multi-day long interviews on campus before being offered a job. This gives individuals to learn more about the community (both on-campus and beyond) and the individuals they would be working with. This was interrupted and many schools did their interviews completely via video-conferencing apps. Likewise, once you begin a new job, how does one create relationships and build community when there is not the prototypical watercooler in which to congregate in order to begin to build community. These are questions that have arisen through engaging in the project, and one that we hope to follow up on, not only with these participants, but with other educators moving forward. This is a time ripe for this research and may illuminate how work-relationships are built not only during remote times such as this pandemic, but in all aspects of relationship building.

Maintaining Appropriate Boundaries and Managing Exhaustion

Some of the administrators that we spoke with spoke to two particular common themes that we have not been able to address within this particular chapter. One is the struggle to maintain some semblance of normative working experiences when there is no clear division in time and space between work and
leisure. This is something that is already often difficult for educators when there is an expectation that education is more than a vocation but is a calling. As such, these boundaries are already often quite porous. As such, it will be interesting to consider how these boundaries are reaffirmed, or not, when the vocational aspect of educational labor is back situated outside of the home-space – if that occurs at all. One photographer, Suzie, spoke to how she doesn’t imagine she will go back to working full-time on campus. This raises the question if administrators, who often have more meetings than faculty and must be on campus more often and with the near universal adoption of video conferencing, will begin to work more often from home. This is something that the second author considered in some of their earlier work (Weiser, 2018). Will administrators work realities become more in alignment with faculty experiences – being on campus only when necessary (DeMartino & Weiser, 2021)? This is something to consider and watch moving forward.

The second, and somewhat related experience that may drive the answer to the first one (and is also related to the building of relationships in a videoconference reality) is the notion of what some people are calling Zoom exhaustion (Hickman, 2020). With the science-fiction based reality that is our contemporary era – where our affective realities are disembodied from our physical realities, how do we not only maintain appropriate boundaries of work and leisure, but also build relationships, and maintain mental and physical health when our working realities are situated in the same place as all of our other lived experiences. Moreover, for those who take precautions and maintain their lives in isolation, how do they maintain persistence in light of others not taking precautions. Will there be animosity that is maintained between those who maintained their shelter-in-place and those who do not? Finally, what impact will the distance education, shelter-in-place, and the pandemic writ large have upon education and educators. It is already being discussed the ways that the publishing pipeline has been impacted, particularly for those who identify as women (Viglione, 2020). Given the current circumstances of two raging pandemics rearing their heads simultaneously, COVID-19 and white supremacy, how will this time further disenfranchise scholars of color? It seems that this time is posing more questions than it is answering, and only time, research, and (hopefully) activism shall illuminate.

CONCLUSION

We are certainly living in unprecedented times, something that needs no reminder, yet we are reminded in so many official messages and channels. We are certainly living in unprecedented times, something that needs no reminder, yet we are reminded in so many official messages and channels. While every school’s situation will be different, educational leaders who experience a crisis have unique insights from which future leaders in crisis can learn from (Pepper et al., 2010). Even at a time of great trauma, this project illuminated some of the strengths of the compassion, humanity, and care that leaders and administrators demonstrated during the pandemic. It has also illustrated some of the shortcomings of bureaucratic model that administration is accustomed to and the imperative to critique and pose a new model of leadership that they call the post-bureaucratic framework of leadership. Perhaps it is long past time that education take some of the worst instincts from a business model into their leadership styles. If education is meant for liberation, why should we take from a capitalistic framework of business, for truly business has never created liberation for anyone.
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REFERENCES


Striving for Equity in Pandemic Times


Striving for Equity in Pandemic Times


ADDITIONAL READING


KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Arts-Based Educational Research:** A qualitative method that is a transdisciplinary approach that combines the tenets of the creative arts to knowledge building and research.

**Crisis Leadership:** The ways that leaders do (or do not) respond during a crisis. This involves leaders taking the time to analyze the situation, situate their focus, and respond despite the on-going emergency.
Digital Divide: This refers to the differential access of information and technology. This gap further exacerbates already present inequities along the lines of socio-economic status, gender, race, and age.

Higher Education Administrators: Individuals who work in some aspect of administration in higher education. This may be an academic advisor, a residence hall director, a department chair, a vice-president.

K-12 Educational Leaders: Individuals who have agency and leadership beyond the K-12 classroom. These individuals may school-situated (teacher-leaders, department chairs, assistant/associate principals, principals) or orientated within the district office (curriculum development, coordinators, school-board members, superintendents).

Online Penalty: An experience related to the move of education online experienced by one side of those on the digital divide. This may take place in an intrinsic penalty (grades) or an extrinsic penalty (differential understanding of the material being taught).

Phenomenology: A qualitative methodology rooted in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl. As part of experiencing a phenomenon, this method asks participants to reflect on their experiences in as much detail as possible.

Photovoice: A research process where people identify, represent, and enhance their community using photography.

Post-Bureaucratic Leadership: Not a real system – but an ideal, one grounded in taking from the limitations of bureaucracy to form a new model of leadership built on an expectation of change wherein individuals are empowered to make decisions to follow not the mission of the organization – but to understand the guidelines of action.