

# Leading after the storm: New York city principal's deployment of equity-oriented leadership post-Hurricane Maria

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Patricia M. Virella  and Sarah Woulfin

## Abstract

As principals navigate numerous priorities to lead their school, crises continue to seize principals' attention. We collected and analyzed qualitative data to comprehend how principals responded to the influx of Puerto Rican students into New York City public schools post-Hurricane Maria. We attend to how these principals' leadership activities matched tenets of equity-oriented and equality-oriented leadership. We found that sampled principals enacted equity-oriented leadership along four dimensions: (a) engaging in self-reflection and growth for equity; (b) influencing the sociopolitical context; (c) allocating resources; and (d) modeling. Our findings depict how principals in a large, urban district enact equity-oriented leadership while responding to a crisis. Moreover, we raise questions about supporting, preparing, and empowering leaders to enact equity-oriented leadership.

## Keywords

Principals, equity, equality, leadership, principal preparation, crisis leadership

Similar to many other social services in the United States, education is grounded in the premise of egalitarianism. An egalitarian education system posits equal access to services, and experiences yields equality across students, erasing the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Schools are expected to deliver similar and equal access to education to each student, regardless of background or need. Although equality appears to be fair on the surface, it presumes that the education system provides equal assets to schools and that all students benefit from the same type of instruction and services. According to Milner (2007) and Ford (2016), equality-oriented schools are defined by the sameness of experiences and materials for students from diverse backgrounds.

Further, the egalitarian orientation does not account for the specific contexts in which schools are located. Rawls (1971) claimed that the lack of sameness also extends to human capital assets, with different communities attracting different types of teachers who vary in experience,

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## Corresponding author:

Patricia M. Virella, Montclair State University, 1 Normal Avenue, Montclair, NJ 07043, USA.

Email: [virellap@montclair.edu](mailto:virellap@montclair.edu)

background, and capacity. Additionally, the equality-orientation positions principals as leaders who should apply the notion of sameness in their schools.

As a branch of the social justice movement, which aims to support the needs of marginalized populations broadly, equity has emerged as a paradigm promoting investments in services to those who need it the most (Equity for Children, 2013). Recently, a focus on equity in education has surfaced as a logical pathway to improving all students' education. Yet, across districts and within schools, people must do the work of equity. Principals are at the helm of leading these equity-oriented changes.

Principals take on multiple roles to reach many goals for their school. That is, principals are asked to be accountability managers, instructional leaders, and leaders of diverse school communities (Grissom and Loeb, 2013; Rigby, 2015). Principals' multiple, dynamic roles contribute to the complexity of the principalship (Gonzalez-Falcon et al., 2019; Hutton, 2017; Lattuca, 2012; Theoharis, 2007). Over the last decade, the principals' role has increased in complexity (Wieczorek and Theoharis, 2015). It is apparent that principals are expected to enact an equality-oriented leadership stance in which they consistently apply standards and educational opportunities to serve students in their schools (Rodela and Rodriguez-Mojica, 2019). For example, principals ensure teachers provide the same curriculum to all students and ask the same questions to all potential teacher candidates during the hiring process. This treatment is intended to alleviate potential bias. One example of sameness being applied by principals is the curriculum given to all students regardless of their needs.

Despite the premise that equality-oriented leadership provides students with opportunities to thrive, it has become apparent that equality is necessary but not sufficient. Instead, equity-oriented leadership is required so that principals can reflect upon and enact systems that yield equitable outcomes for each student. Equity-oriented leadership includes an in-depth consideration of the community principals' serve and acknowledgment of the American educational system's systemic inequities. Thus, equity-oriented leadership has arisen as a vital issue for research and practice (Lopez et al., 2006; Skrla et al., 2004). Whether principals' leadership practices enable (or impede) equitable outcomes for students and communities remains a critical question. It is necessary to consider how principals' activities function toward equality- or equity-oriented leadership.

Along with their everyday work, principals encounter events, such as mass migrations, which turn their eyes toward responding to these challenges and away from tasks such as instructional leadership and strategic school improvement planning (Madariaga et al., 2017). Also, crises occur regularly, requiring various leadership skills and knowledge from the principal to respond (Nye, 2016; Smith and Riley, 2012). Research on leadership responses to a crisis have found that principals lead through an ethic of care (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021) to contextual and relational factors (Mutch, 2015). Furthermore, principals may be ill-prepared to respond equitably (Bush, 2020). For these reasons, it is crucial to study events such as the influx of Puerto Rican students, post-Hurricane Maria, to understand how principals lead through a crisis and determine how they deploy equity and equality orientations.

This article draws on the conceptual framework of equity leadership to analyze principals' responses to the influx of students from Puerto Rico. We portray five components of equity-oriented leadership: (a) engaging in self-reflection and growth for equity; (b) influencing the sociopolitical context; (c) allocating resources; (d) supervising for improvement of equitable teaching; and (e) modeling. In so doing, we reveal how principals responded during this crisis and advance our understanding of equity-oriented leadership.

To understand the process by which principals responded to the arrival of students from Puerto Rico, post-Hurricane Maria, we respond to the following research question:

How do principals' activities reflect the tenets of equality- or equity-oriented leadership?

Our results present the responses and activities of principals before, during, and after the influx of students from Puerto Rico to New York City after Hurricane Maria.

## **Literature review**

This investigation of principals' responses to a crisis is grounded in the literature on equality- and equity-oriented leadership. Educational leadership plays an integral role in providing educational opportunities for all students. We draw on the equality and equity leadership scholarship, considering how principals elect to enact equality- versus equity-oriented leadership.

### *Principals' roles in reform*

Principals play critical roles in staffing, instructional improvement, influencing various stakeholders, and implementing reform efforts. Dolph (2017) argued that principals are in "ideal positions to provide support, pressure, and leadership for school improvement efforts" (p. 372). Depending upon their socio-political context, principals can apply different aspects of their leadership to yield specific outcomes. For example, Kowalski (2010) pointed out that school reform efforts require extensive demands from principals to exercise effective leadership. Further, Silverman (2005) explained principals are also tasked with ensuring their schools are safe communities while striving to achieve high academic standards. As a consequence, principals may vary in their attention to issues of equity depending upon their context.

### *Equality-oriented leadership*

Existing research presents equality-oriented leaders as treating all students the same with equal access to resources and educational experiences (Arar et al., 2015; Borman and Dowling, 2010; Caldwell et al., 2007; Oplatka, 2019; Parrillo et al., 2012). Stemming from this, students from all communities would have the opportunity to receive equal educational opportunities improving equality in educational outcomes amongst racial/ethnic groups (Borman and Dowling, 2010). However, scholars have argued against equality-orientation because it neglects the roles of systemic racism and individual sensemaking, including how longstanding inequities affect schools and communities, and how values and belief systems shape conceptions of equality. For example, Lumby and Coleman (2016) posited that the equality-oriented leadership stance emphasizes inequalities by not acknowledging the American education system's systemic inequities.

Furthermore, school leaders may interpret equality's connotative meaning, depending on their organizational context (Blackmore, 2009). Scholars (Arar, 2015; Marshall, 2004; Theoharis, 2007) have argued that starting from an equality-oriented leadership stance is far better than not. Equality-oriented leadership draws upon the egalitarian belief system, which proves impossible given the multiple inequalities amongst our society.

### *Equity oriented leadership*

Recently, educational leadership scholars have highlighted principals' work and their actions toward a social-justice-oriented school (Rivera-McCutchen, 2014; Rivera-McCutchen and

Watson, 2014; Theoharis, 2009). For example, Dantley and Tillman (2010) define social justice as “deconstructing those realities to disclose the multiple ways schools and their leadership reproduce marginalizing and inequitable treatment of individuals because their identities are outside the celebrated dominant culture” (p. 22). This definition draws our attention to one of the ways to be a socially just leader by becoming equity-oriented. Several scholars (Karpinski and Lugg 2006; Lugg and Shoho 2006; Shoho et al. 2011) agree that social justice leadership is about transforming schools to be more equitable. Yet, some scholars argue that a drawback of using social justice as a theory is the narrow definition it offers (Tillman et al., 2006). Because of the social justice leadership theory’s narrowness, we consider that equity-oriented leadership becomes a necessary subset of conceptual analysis under the social-justice theory to provide leaders with concrete actions toward change.

Scholars such as Singleton and Linton (2006) describe educational equity as “raising the achievement of all students while narrowing the gaps between the highest- and lowest-performing students and eliminating the racial predictability and disproportionality of which student groups occupy the highest and lowest achievement categories” (p. 46). This definition focuses on outcomes, while leaving out the leaders’ role in enacting equitable opportunities or practices. Rodríguez et al. (2016) explain that equity does more than level the playing field for students, but also offers the ability to serve “as a reflection of unique needs, demands, and approaches for diverse populations that require unique and greater resources” (p. 232). Namely, equity must be offered to students on the margins, allowing them to attain their peers’ academic success in the hegemony. Scholars such as Pollack and Zirkel (2013) have argued that equity gives voices to people of color on the marginality. Yet, it appears clearly defining equity-oriented leadership in schools remains challenging.

Scholarship on equity-oriented leadership often focuses on district leaders’ implementation of an equity framework and how principals understand this expectation. In their study about Latinx school leaders, Rodela et al. (2019) found that the district definition of equity was general and did not explicitly address “systemic forms of racism, xenophobia, or deficit ideologies about families and communities like the ones they came from” (p. 17). Research has also set out to describe discrete categories that identify equity strategies. However, the extant literature does not account for system-level shocks requiring principals to swiftly respond or pivot with an eye toward equality or equity. Researchers agree that principals are critical levers of implementing an equity orientation on behalf of their schools to benefit their students (Ross and Berger, 2009)

While acknowledging the barriers to enacting equity, researchers and practitioners have argued toward deepening equity-oriented leadership. One obstacle in enacting equity is staunch opposition from politically powerful parents (Pollack and Zirkel, 2013). Another obstacle affecting the enactment of equity-oriented leadership is that it adds to the numerous tasks principals are already saddled with (Gardiner and Enomoto, 2006; Ross and Berger, 2009; Zaretsky et al., 2008). Accordingly, these studies describe a necessary move toward equity-oriented leadership due to equality-oriented leadership limitations.

## **Theoretical framework**

We use the equity framework from Galloway and Ishimaru (2015) to analyze principals’ activities. Their framework identifies ten central practices for equitable leadership. These practices are: (a) constructing and enacting an equity vision; (b) supervising for equitable teaching and learning; (c) developing organizational leadership for equity; (d) fostering an equitable school culture;

**Table 1.** Galloway and Ishimaru's (2015) ten best practices and equity-oriented examples.

Equity leadership best practices (Galloway and Ishimaru, 2015)	Equity-oriented leadership example
Engaging in self-reflection and growth for equity	Principals define their core values. They ask, "Who is and is not being included?"
Developing organizational leadership for equity	Principals conduct dialogues about equitable teaching practices.
Constructing and enacting an equity vision	Principals have high expectations for teachers and student achievement.
Supervising for improvement of equitable teaching and learning	Principals ensure culturally relevant teaching practices are enacted in the school.
Fostering an equitable school culture	Principals challenge deficit mindset thinking.
Collaborating with families and communities	Principals believe families are partners and engage in a two-way communicative relationship.
Influencing the sociopolitical context	Principals serve as allies to all families, using their positional power to ensure systems are equitable.
Allocating resources	Principals advocate for equitable resources through the district.
Hiring and placing personnel	Principals demonstrate a strong commitment to staff of color. Principals match student needs to teacher strengths.
Modeling	Principals lead by example in the service of equity.

(e) allocating resources; (f) hiring and placing personnel; (g) collaborating with families and communities; (h) engaging in self-reflection and growth for equity; (i) modeling; and (j) influencing the sociopolitical context. Table 1 defines and presents examples of how these practices may be enacted within schools.

Equity leadership provides marginalized students with the necessary support to achieve academic and social-emotional success (Galloway et al., 2015). Gutierrez and Jaramillo (2006) maintain an "equity-oriented agenda" that must be disentangled from "one that considers equal opportunity as the single organizing principle of reform" (p. 174).

Educational leadership scholars have described equity-oriented leaders as culturally responsive (Khalifa et al., 2016), countering deficit perspectives of marginalized populations (Hernandez et al., 2014; Martinez et al., 2016; Murakami et al., 2016; Rodela and Rodriguez-Mojica, 2019), appreciating community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), and confronting issues of equity head-on when in predominantly white spaces (Rodela and Rodriguez-Mojica, 2019). These characteristics challenge the sociopolitical climate of equality and maintaining the status quo in educational settings. More concretely, an equity-oriented school leader ensures their school is one in which students can participate in all parts of the school program, such as gifted education based on the students' contexts and backgrounds (Ford, 2016). An equity-oriented leader also considers the needs of their students. Rodela and Bertrand (2018) ascertained equity-oriented principals attended to the individual students and families, only adopting policies or initiatives that fit their community's needs.

By engaging in this equity-oriented way, leaders can respond to the crisis in ways that directly meet their students' needs. We draw on these strands of equity-oriented leadership to understand how principals responded to the influx of students arriving from Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria.

**Table 2.** Demographics of participants in study.

School Level	Gender	Age (years)	Years of principal experience
Elementary	F	42	1
Elementary	M	58	26
Elementary	F	44	18
Elementary	F	46	16
Elementary	F	32	4
Elementary	F	34	2
Elementary	F	36	3
Middle	F	45	10
Middle	F	47	8
Middle	F	40	8
High	M	64	32

## Methods

We derived data for this study from a larger project which explored how principals responded to the influx and the influence of a political spectacle on principal responses. To answer questions on principals' responses to the influx of students from Puerto Rico, we used qualitative methods. According to Tierney (1998), qualitative inquiry provides essential components for a meaningful scholarship. It enables us "move toward a newer understanding of reality, ourselves and truth" (p. 56). Additionally, the methodology allows researchers to gain deep insight and better understand the principals' orientation.

## Setting

This study was set in New York City, the largest school district in the United States. New York City schools educate over one million students, 41% of whom are Hispanic (NYC DOE, 2019). In 2019, there were 1866 public schools, including 260 charter schools. New York City was selected as the setting because it was one of the top three receiving cities of students post-Hurricane Maria (Author, under review, Hinojosa, 2018). New York City received 411 students over three months in late 2017 (Hinojosa, 2018).

## Participants

Participants of this study were New York City principals during the 2017–2018 school year. Table 2 describes the participants' demographics. A purposive sample was selected based upon elementary school principals in New York City. We selected the 12 participants due to their receipt of Puerto Rican students during the post-Hurricane Maria migration. Most schools in New York City did not receive Puerto Rican students during this time despite the news that approximately 400 students migrated to New York City. Participants of this study included 12 principals who led during the 2017–2018 academic year. The principals represented schools from the Bronx, Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn, and Staten Island. In this study, two principals were charter school principals, while ten principals were traditional neighborhood public school principals. Three principals led schools at the middle level, eight from the elementary level, and one from high school. Principals ranged in age from 28–66 years, including two men and ten

women. In this study, principals ranged from early career to veteran principals with two years or more leadership experience.

### ***Data collection***

In total, 12 in-person, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interview protocol asked questions such as “What equity-oriented leadership activities did you conduct or enact related to the influx?” and “What does equity mean to you as a leader?” Each interview was transcribed verbatim.

### ***Data analysis***

We analyzed interview data of 12 New York City public school principals in Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software. We analyzed data through a two-step process with interview transcripts and applied deductive and inductive coding methods (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Saldaña, 2009). In doing so, we constructed codes derived from the literature on equity leadership and school leadership. Specifically, we conducted multiple readings of the transcripts, and initial codes were generated on equity and equality orientations. After we determined that equitable leadership instances were found mainly, we applied the tenets of equity leadership (Gouwens and Lander, 2008). Although we coded the data for all ten codes, the findings below focus on four equity-oriented leadership components.

### ***Reliability and trustworthiness***

To establish the reliability and trustworthiness of our study, we applied two techniques during the study. First, we adhered to Brooks and Normore’s (2015) guidance that interviewing the elite or gatekeepers of organizations requires interview protocols that probe to get concretized actions of the leader. When interviewing, we relied on this technique so principals could move away from vague statements and name actions they took during the influx. Second, we collected the interview data, and conducted debriefing with faculty in educational leadership programs and current district/school administrators. We drew upon their input to refine codes and ensure coding reflected broader leadership work which solidified our findings, and explored alternative explanations for the way principals responded.

Throughout stages of analysis, the researchers applied techniques to reduce certain forms of bias. This included developing and applying a transparent code book (Creswell and Creswell, 2018), engaging in multiple rounds of analytic discussion to address the nature of coded transcripts, and memoing to link qualitative evidence with conceptual and empirical literature. This interview-based study did not engage in triangulation, and we recommend future studies with observational evidence on principals’ equity-oriented work which would triangulate responses from interviews.

### ***Findings***

We determined principals used equality-oriented and equity-oriented leadership orientations while carrying out various leadership activities throughout the influx of students. These orientations are interrelated in responding to a crisis, and it is necessary to consider how different leaders applied multiple tactics. Thus, we present the findings on four components from Galloway and Ishimaru’s

(2015) equity-oriented leadership frame. These components are: (a) engaging in self-reflection and growth for equity; (b) influencing the sociopolitical context; (c) allocating resources; and (d) modeling. The first finding shows how participants responded in ways influencing the sociopolitical context they work within. The second finding illustrates that participants engaged in self-reflection about their responses to develop their sense of equity. The third finding highlights how participants allocated resources in their schools, focusing on allocating human resources. Finally, the fourth finding demonstrates how participants modeled equity-oriented responses in their schools in distinct ways. Thus, our conclusions center on how principals engaged in equity-oriented activities related to these domains.

### *Engaging in self-reflection and growth for equity*

All sampled principals engaged in self-reflection as a tool to evaluate the way they responded, conducted activities, and gave feedback during and after the crisis.

*Equality-orientated leadership.* Participants who conducted equality-oriented leadership demonstrated they used reflection when prompted but not as an individual activity for self-growth. Participants used reflection to recall if the principals had complied with a stated mandate and treated students equally. Eight principals reflected on their ability to meet compliance regulations prepared by the New York education departments for Puerto Rican students and families. For example, one principal stated, “I think when it comes to students, it helps to have the structures in place already.” Reflection on structures writ large is an equality-oriented leadership response because it does not interrogate whether the system is being applied in a manner that supports students given their needs. Thus, principals did not need to attend to the specific needs and recalibrate when students arrived. Instead, they relied on the education system as it stands to provide for their students.

Moreover, principals who self-reflected on the crisis did not connect it to larger oppressive structures after it ended. Instead, some principals reported that they generally spoke about the challenges of this moment. “It’s difficult, but we move on.” This quote demonstrates how most participants in this study reflected on their leadership actions in a compliant way to ensure equality of services to all.

*Equity-oriented leadership.* In contrast, principals who demonstrated equity-oriented leadership did not only engage in self-reflection but also tethered it to their equity growth. One principal identified the book *Between the World and Me* by Ta Nehisi Coates as key to her understanding of equity in marginalized communities and the position of power she is placed in as principal. When asked if there was anything they would do differently, and if so, what would that be, one principal explained:

I think that, especially with all of the work that we’re doing around equity, it makes me think about things that I could have done, like reaching out to all of our families that are of Puerto Rican descent and just finding out, just calling them in just to talk, even if it was just to talk about how they were feeling about what was happening in Puerto Rico and also including our staff members.

This principal concretely identified how she would have done things differently, given the New York City schools’ focus on equity and her growth from the previous year based on how she would



change her actions. New York City implemented equity-driven work throughout its district improvement initiatives. New York City has an Office for Equity and Access to provide all students with educational opportunities matched to their needs. Yet only a few principals in this study connected their leadership responses to their equity goals and applied them to their equity work and future crises.

### *Influencing the sociopolitical context*

Participants in the study engaged in an array of tasks to influence the sociopolitical context. We define the sociopolitical context as contemporary ideologies, regulations, policies, conditions, laws, events, and traditions of a particular community. During a crisis, sociopolitical contexts include the local community and the community affected by the crisis. In this study, this would consist of Puerto Rico.

*Equality-orientated leadership.* The findings of this study revealed all principals engaged in equality-oriented responses associated with the sociopolitical context. Equality-oriented principals sought guidance from previous crises that were similar instead of extending their responses to this crisis's specific dimensions. One principal stated, "I remember Hurricane Katrina. They had a curriculum. With Hurricane Maria, it was just more of a compliance piece rather than learning about it." Eight out of 12 principals who fell into the equality-oriented leadership stance explained they were looking for similarities with Hurricane Katrina's response. For example, one principal explained that they did not enact additional activities that would engage in a discussion about why the district should address this crisis differently, and so forth. Although it may appear that looking back to familiar events to inform future thinking is equity-oriented, it is labeled as equality-oriented because there was no follow-up action to address the current crisis.

*Equity-orientated leadership.* Four participants in this study engaged in equity-oriented tasks and carried out equity-oriented practices related to the socio-political context. Their equity-oriented practices reflected an understanding of inequities and a desire to challenge the equality-oriented status quo. Their equity-oriented responses ranged from reflecting on the services students were offered to challenging district norms about equity.

This finding aligns with previous literature describing how equity-oriented leaders challenge the fundamental conceptions of equity. For example, one principal responded:

My leadership is more than just looking at how teachers teach math and English and science and social studies. I think about how are we building this child? How are we treating this child? What kind of respect are we giving to this child? It's bigger than just that [teaching].

Specifically, three out of the 12 principals interviewed described responding to the influx by enacting equity activities in their schools and prompting the district they worked in to engage in equity for all students. Two principals discussed encouraging their district offices to include more curriculum and leadership discussion about what equity looks like concretely across their schools. Moreover, one principal explicitly acknowledged that a principals' position brings power, which should be used to pursue equity in their schools: "School leaders have a role in that just because of our position. That's the right thing to do."

Equity-oriented principals explained their advocacy to evoke change came at a cost. When asked how they would characterize their leadership on the broader sociopolitical context, one principal responded:

People can call me controversial if they want . . . because they need to be aware of who they are, where they are, and where they're going, and the truth about where they're going. It was about developing sensitivity for those who didn't know and those who knew, making them aware that we were once there.

These principals self-reported their actions as isolating, pointing out how they felt alone by engaging with the more substantive contextual elements of equity.

### *Allocating resources*

The interview data analysis revealed principals paid the most attention to how they would allocate resources in their schools while responding to this crisis. Most described how they used personnel as a human resource for students and supported them by allocating resources. Overall, we found principals who thought critically and intentionally about where to place personnel within a school were the delineating factor that demonstrated equity-oriented leadership.

*Equality-oriented leadership.* We determined most principals carried out equality-oriented practices. Specifically, 9 out of 12 principals in this study reported activities matching the equality stance. Principals described using protocols supplied by their districts to communicate how students would be received and what services to provide. The protocols, however, did not differentiate dependent upon the crisis, thus reflecting an egalitarian approach. Additionally, a leader with an equality orientation draws the student into their community by providing the same opportunities for all children, no matter their specific demographic or background. One elementary principal offered, "I have money in my budget for students in temporary housing, and I just used that money, and I bought them everything they needed in terms of school supplies and metro cards." This principal echoed other equality-oriented actions in this study and their responses to students by providing them with the resources any child could access. Another principal shared, "If they [students migrating from Puerto Rico] had an IEP, we gave them the equivalent services." This quote further illustrates how some principals approached access to resources for students migrating from Puerto Rico with a sameness mindset.

*Equity-oriented leadership.* According to the findings based on our qualitative analysis of the data, equity-oriented principals devoted greater attention to allocating human resources for the migrated students. They shared taking preventative actions such as alerting their students and staff to the influx and instituting other procedures to support their students before the admittance of students from Puerto Rico. For example, one principal explained:

We [the leadership team] did talk about our current students, and I know that we have an extensive social work team and interns, and so, I spoke with the director of social services. We spoke about students who may be affected and all of the students. At that point, we had about 300 students, and more than a third of them get preventative counseling for one reason or another. So, it was discussed in their preventative counseling.

Out of the sampled principals, 4 out of 12 principals adopted an equity orientation to tailor their communication to staff based on the influx's unique characteristics. In particular, these principals communicated their expectations of personnel to respond and welcome Puerto Rican students.

Another principal added, “I was prepared for an influx of students. I met with my staff to share that this might happen and what steps we need to take, and my staff was on board.”

Principals also described how they assigned incoming Puerto Rican students to classrooms. Principals considered the class they were being put in to facilitate connections between the school and students. For instance, a principal admitted if the student spoke Spanish only, they would place the student with Spanish-speaking teachers to ease communication. Moreover, this principal instructed the teacher to allow the child to communicate in their preferred language.

By paying attention to which teachers with which competencies were serving students, principals exhibited equity-oriented leadership. In other words, principals’ rationale for placements was not merely about students learning academic content but extended to being connected with people who understood their culture. Moreover, equity-oriented leaders did not presume that placing students with a similar background was always proper. Instead, they reevaluated placements if a student was not bonding with their teacher.

### *Modeling*

Modeling equity-orientation was the least observed component of the framework, as detailed by Galloway and Ishimaru (2015). In our study, less than half of the principals interviewed modeled equity. In all, we found three principals in our study that modeled the equity-oriented stance. Below, we describe these two ways and offer in-depth accounts of the leaders’ actions.

*Modeling by everyday practice.* One principal described modeling everyday practices as a strategy for enacting her equity orientation. For this veteran principal, she told her staff and teachers needed to see that equity orientation was for children and them. She explained, “People need time to make a phone call to deal with that. You have to give them space to be able to do that.” She then described a time when she took over a classroom after a teacher caught her in the hallway and told her her mother was calling, and she hadn’t heard from her in over a month. “I remember stepping in to cover a class while someone took a call several times. Excusing them from duties, taking over duty for them so that they could sort some things out. Listening to people if they cried, that kind of thing.” The principal stepped in several times throughout this period of crisis to support teachers in their building.

For another principal, modeling through everyday practice meant revealing her background. They expressed: “I’m an immigrant, so for me, acculturation is always a big thing. Coming into a new space, knowing what it requires for myself as an adult.” They also noted, “I, too, experienced Hurricane David in 1980, so I know first-hand how it is to lose your home, the roof of your home, and get out, and there’s nowhere to call home.” Given these principals’ experiences, she used her experiences as a bridge with her students and teachers:

I think it makes you even more sensitive when other communities are going through the same thing. We [the school] did have a [fundraising] drive for them, and we knew first-hand what it was to experience that. To not have school, for the school to be a shelter, for our very own children to lose their homes in [hurricane] Sandy. I guess we were hypersensitive towards that. Some children brought canned foods, people donated, teachers donated. The community came together to give back.

Even though this principal did not receive any students from Puerto Rico, her notion of equity was profoundly connected to providing real opportunities to share her stories, connect to her students, and offer others support in the world.

*Modeling by commitment to equity.* Principals who model a commitment to equity did so by conducting equity-oriented activities, despite potential push-back. “I led the restorative justice circle so I could show my teachers and students why it was important to understand these children’s experience,” shared one principal about why they modeled equity to their faculty and staff. Some principals did not engage with restorative circles, leaving their teachers to be the leaders of this practice. One principal explained her moral compass centered around equity. As a result, she used Hurricane Maria’s crisis to facilitate a restorative justice circle before the admittance of a Puerto Rican student. She and the classroom teacher engaged in a restorative justice circle to unpack how the student could be welcomed into their school community.

The same principal also conducted a school-wide restorative justice circle to discuss the events in Puerto Rico. Once the child had arrived at the school, a second restorative justice circle was held, in the classroom, to hear the child’s story, which the principal attended. The principal articulated: “It was important for me to hear [the child’s] story. I am a first-generation immigrant, and I wanted [the child] to know we were here for her.” Sampled principals engaged in these activities because they felt it necessary for their staff, faculty, and students to learn Puerto Rican students’ stories.

## Discussion and implications

Our qualitative study of New York City principals’ responses after Hurricane Maria indicates leaders relied on both equality and equity orientations in their leadership activities. In particular, all principals enacted at least two equity-oriented leadership components, showing attention to serving students to reach deeper, equity-oriented outcomes. The findings illustrate how structures enabled principals to carry out equity-oriented responses, especially while engaging in technical leadership activities and fulfilling mandates. In this way, we show how policies and structural forces can play a role in encouraging—or even guiding—equity-oriented leadership. These results widen our understanding of how principals do the work of leading from an equity-orientation.

Despite the literature (Kruse et al., 2015; Mendez-Morse et al., 2015; Santamaria, 2014) describing equity leadership as challenging to enact due to lack of preparation, we determined that principals wielded their agency and power to engage in equity-oriented activities, especially to align with their values and beliefs. Moreover, these principals leaned on district initiatives, such as the equity work designed by the New York Department of Education Office of Equity and Access, while enacting equity-oriented leadership. These tailored professional learning opportunities gave principals more guidance and comfort with enacting equity-oriented leadership. In sum, we depicted how principals are, indeed, engaging in equity-oriented leadership practices (Galloway and Ishmaru, 2015) to meet students’ needs.

A subset of principals elected to respond with an equity-orientation due to personal beliefs and experiences. It is clear leaders’ beliefs and experiences influenced their sensemaking of the crisis and appropriate ways to respond at the school level (Spillane et al., 2002). Leaders made sense of the migration of students and families and the unfolding crisis in Puerto Rico. This shaped their decision-making to respond in a just manner, rather than merely responding with an equality

orientation to arriving students. This result bolsters other scholarship on the role of leaders' identity in reform implementation (Fernandez, 2005).

By portraying principals' responses and attending both equality and equity-oriented activities, we contribute to the leadership literature in several ways. First, we expose the flaws of equality-oriented responses in school leadership. In particular, equality-oriented leadership usually fails to dismantle inequitable social structures, policies, and educational systems and routines. Thus, principals must leap to equity orientation to appropriately support students, especially marginalized students who have experienced crises/trauma. Second, the findings point to the complexity of the principalship. Each school makes multiple, in-the-moment, on-the-ground decisions amid an ever-changing social context that can advance or impede equitable outcomes. It is vital to improve principals' development and support so these leaders can more consistently engage in equity-oriented leadership. Leadership coaching holds the potential to build leaders' capacity to utilize equity-oriented strategies, especially if coaches encourage principals to share evidence for how their work moves beyond the equality-orientation.

Third, we reveal leaders' responses to a crisis, showing that leaders instituted a range of responses while dealing with an influx of students after a natural disaster. Notably, as school leaders respond to COVID-closures, they may, again, draw upon equality- and equity-orientations to readjust students, teachers, and staff to their buildings. It will be important to consider the interplay of racialized structures (e.g., policies, school funding, healthcare) with school leaders' daily work to reopen schools and recuperate from the broader COVID crisis.

### *Limitations*

Although this study depicts principals' responses to a crisis and operationalized facets of equity-oriented leadership, it has several limitations. First, the sample of principals does not fully represent all New York City principals. As such, this study's findings connecting to theory and practice do not aim to generalize to all contexts. Second, our interview methods relied on each school leader to self-report how and why they responded to the influx of students. It is possible some principals over- (or under-) reported their equity-oriented leadership practices. As such, we recommend future qualitative research using observation methods to "see" principals' practices.

### *Implication*

This study also has implications for policy and practice. First, as policymakers and reformers design policies and systems to respond to crises, they should consider their principals' desired leadership strategies and orientations. That is, do they expect principals to engage in equality- or equity-oriented tasks? And, how will they mandate and encourage equity-oriented activities in schools? It is plausible that additional resources, tools, and time would be beneficial so that principals can operate under conditions enabling an equity-oriented orientation.

Our results on principals' varied responses have implications for principal preparation programs and district leaders. First, principal preparation programs should include more in-depth instruction on the distinction between equality- and equity-oriented leadership. We encourage programs to incorporate active learning activities, tasking students to observe and reflect on whether—and how—current school leaders carry out equity-orientated work. Second, district leaders should frame how and why principals should adopt an equity orientation, especially in the wake of crises. That is, district leaders should clearly communicate the necessity of equity-oriented leadership,

motivating principals to engage in equity-oriented activities that prioritize reaching more equitable outcomes. This framing should occur in concert with learning opportunities for principals to institute equity-oriented leadership activities more fully.

Finally, researchers should continue to investigate how principals enact equality- and equity-oriented leadership in their daily work. This scholarship should interrogate how leaders' background and experiences shape their decisions and responses vis-a-vis these stances. For example, do principals of color, compared with white principals, more frequently apply equity-oriented leadership in certain situations? And what are the system and organizational conditions pushing and pulling principals' equity-oriented responses? Do principals in some district contexts more frequently engage in equity-oriented leadership? This scholarship could surface supporting factors that enable principals to conduct equity-oriented leadership and, as such, could be used to design infrastructure for such forms of leadership.

## Conclusion

Our findings depict how principals in a large, urban district enact equity-oriented leadership while responding to a crisis. Moreover, we raise questions about supporting, preparing, and empowering leaders to enact equity-oriented leadership. This work adds to the growing body of research about equity leadership. This work is critical because we revealed how principals enact equity during a crisis. Currently, district and school leaders are responding to the crisis of COVID. Although the current COVID-19 pandemic does not have the exact dimensions of the post-Hurricane Maria crisis, there are still parallels that can be drawn to support school leaders, namely, the treatment of COVID-19 stricken patients has affected more communities of color than their white counterparts (Millet et al., 2020). This in and of itself presents an equity opportunity for principals to respond to, including supporting students and families coping with this crisis and their losses. Principals can prepare for and make equity-oriented changes for the long-term based upon their reflection of past crises. As such, the education field needs to examine how principals work toward equitable outcomes amid crises. Further, improvements are required to better support principals to conduct the ten practices of equity-oriented leadership.


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## ORCID iD

Patricia M. Virella  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5736-3422>

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### Author biographies

**Patricia M. Virella** is an assistant professor at Montclair State University in the Educational Leadership department. Dr. Virella applies critical lenses and qualitative methods to investigate how school leaders enact equity-oriented leadership through crises. Dr. Virella also investigates how educational reform policies shape school leaders equity-orientation and impact districts that serve marginalized communities. Dr. Virella seeks to answer research questions to enable transformation and liberation in school leaders, districts and policies.

**Sarah Woulfin** is an associate professor at the University of Texas at Austin’s Educational Leadership and Policy department. Dr. Woulfin applies lenses of organizational sociology and qualitative methods to investigate how policies, organizational conditions, and educators shape district and school reform. Dr. Woulfin seeks to answer relevant research questions to enable district and school leaders to improve structures and practices and reduce inequities.