



Leveraging the Crisis for Equity and Access in the Long Term: A Brief Research Report

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For years, crises have occurred in and out of schools. School leaders have had to make meaning of these crises and lead during them. Common rhetoric in today's media describes the educational inequities children have faced as a result of the current crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic. In an effort to understand how school leaders respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, we spoke directly to principals, listening for ways in which they confronted issues of inequity. Our research was guided by the question: How do principals advance equity for students and families while leading during the COVID-19 crisis? This study focuses on the opportunity's principals have created during the COVID-19 pandemic to address issues of equity in their schools. We present three main findings resulting from our data analysis. Overall, our findings indicate principals acted upon two primary opportunities for achieving equity in their school community. The findings from our study illustrate two specific opportunities principals were presented with as a result of the crisis to engage in equity responses.

Keywords: crisis leadership, equity-oriented leadership, principals, COVID-19, educational leadership

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INTRODUCTION

"Never waste a good crisis to transform a system," he said. "We see this as an opportunity to finally push and move and be very strategic in a very aggressive way what we know is the equity agenda for our kids"—Chancellor Richard Carranza, Chancellor of New York City Public Schools (Algar and Feis, 2020)

In May 2020, the Chancellor of New York City Schools called upon schools to seize the pandemic crises as an opportunity to enhance an equity focused policy agenda. His declaration sent ripples through school districts across the country (Algar and Feis, 2020). Many saw his comments as callous during a time which New York City became the COVID-19 epicenter. Although his choice of words smacked of insensitivity, his message about striving for equity during a crisis was both sensible and responsible. Beginning in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic would challenge how schools lead, taught, and adjusted to the needs of students and their families. This prompted our inquiry into whether and how principals were enacting equity-oriented leadership in their schools. We draw on Rodríguez et al. (2016) notion of equity "as a reflection of unique needs, demands, and approaches for diverse populations that require unique and greater resources" (p. 232). Equity is offered to students on the margins, allowing them to attain their peers' academic success in the hegemony.

Common rhetoric in today's popular media describes the educational inequities children have faced as a result of the pandemic. Because learning shifted from in-person to remote, most media accounts focus on the disparities in access to technology devices and Internet connectivity in students' homes (e.g., Aguliera and Nightengale-Lee, 2020; Balingit, 2020). Other reports speak to the

lack of knowledge among teachers on how to effectively pivot to online learning—for instance, some teachers struggled to implement remote learning platforms such as Google Classroom (Goldstein, 2020; Heitner 2020). The focus on inadequacies in technology and teacher preparedness to deliver online instruction is critically illuminating. However, often left out of the picture is the work of principals who are on the front lines of leading during this crisis in their own communities (Goswick et al., 2018; Hemmer and Elliff, 2019). Principals continue to face a daunting array of challenges to effectively serve their students and families, particularly the most vulnerable among them. Principals are forced to respond to an immediate and entirely new set of needs. In many cases, the crisis has brought out the best in school leaders, who have reacted in creative and equitable ways. The crisis has prompted school leaders across the nation to reexamine their perceptions on inequity, to help their faculty confront their own assumptions, and to act in bold new ways to redress the grave disparities revealed by the pandemic. In other words, like the NYC Chancellor implored, they have seized opportunities to re-envision the way things are done in their schools, particularly with respect to home-school relations.

Background

Taking action in times of crises is difficult work. Organizations and individuals within them experience chaos and uncertainty during crises. Most principals lack the specific training to swiftly and efficiently meet crisis-borne demands (e.g., Mutch and Marlowe, 2013; Mutch, 2015). Nevertheless, they are the ones in charge and must rely on their intuition, prior preparation, and capacity to lead immediate organizational change to meet the enormity of demands.

Changing the way things are done can happen out of necessity, such as when children lose out on daily meals provided in school and the school figures out a way to provide those meals. Meeting such challenges may require technical changes, which Heifetz et al. (2017) describe as those that can be addressed by expert knowledge. Other challenges require considerably more effort, skill, and attention on capacity development. In contrast to technical changes, adaptive changes necessitate new learning and novel ways of conceptualizing a problem.

Previous literature suggests principals adopt multiple roles when responding to a crisis (Mutch, 2015; Hemmer and Elliff, 2019; Gainey, 2020). Amidst a major crisis that disrupts even the most basic normal routines, the work of principals is usually two-fold. On the one hand, their primary responsibility is to ensure children have continued access to instruction. At the same time, they also must directly assist in the recovery efforts of their communities. These new roles shed light on the complexity of the principalship and the many ways principals can and do lead during a crisis. However, crises can also present principals with opportunities to reveal and redress inequities in support of their most marginalized student populations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on the consistent inequities that plague historically marginalized communities and how they have been disproportionately impacted by this crisis (Aguliera and Nightengale-Lee, 2020; Casey, 2020; Owoseje,

2020). For example, a report by the NAACP (2020) claims the global pandemic exacerbated inequities in marginalized communities due to limited access to medical services, racism, and the digital divides curbing schools' and communities' access to remote learning. As a result, Aguliera and Nightengale-Lee (2020) explain that regardless of the intentions at the federal and local level, administrators can still neglect the everyday realities of some of their stakeholders. In this study, we explored whether and how principals centered equity as they lead during a crisis. Investigating how principals respond to issues of (in)equity during crises expands our knowledge of crisis leadership in schools. Further, it may reveal social justice leadership practices that promote inclusive, equitable education for all students.

METHODS

In an effort to understand how school leaders respond to a crisis, we spoke directly to a sample of principals, listening for ways in which they confronted issues of inequity. Our research was guided by the question: How do principals advance equity for students and families while leading during the COVID-19 crisis? We investigated this research question through a case study using an interpretivist design (Creswell et al. 2006).

The data for this study derive from a multi-state analysis of principals' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study focuses on the opportunities principals have created during the COVID-19 pandemic to address issues of equity in their schools. We employ an interpretive design (Creswell et al., 2006) to capture principals' responses and rationales in their local contexts. Because our intent was to illuminate equity-oriented practices, we collected and analyzed data through an equity lens. In particular, we were guided by Oyugi's (2015) concept of equity, which involve "practices that ensure equality and fairness for individuals who are underserved and underrepresented in current schooling arrangements" (p. 4). We also draw from scholars such as Galloway and Ishimaru (2015) and Scanlan (2013), who describe equity-oriented practices as work that "shift individuals' "cognitive frames" from "deficit" or "diversity" interpretations of disparities to "new ways of thinking that are more equity minded."

Participants

Given the unprecedented stressors and time-constraints on principals during the pandemic, we set out to gather a convenience sample through our professional networks, supplemented by snowball sampling (Cohen et al., 2009). We began by recruiting principals we had worked with or taught in the past and also who had, based on our perception, evidenced an equity orientation in their previous work. The snowball technique was also used here to potentially identify other participants who agreed to participate. The sample is one of convenience but with an eye toward identifying equity-leaning leaders. This was thought to be the most effective way to recruit participants given the overwhelming tasks principals faced reopening schools in August 2020. We recognized and were sensitive to

the heavy time constraints faced by principals and their capacity to participate in a study.

Our sample included nine principals located in seven schools in California, Connecticut, and New York, with five principals serving elementary schools, two serving middle schools, and two leading high schools. The principals have been in their positions at their school for an average of 12 years (range <1–15 years); five of the nine principals identified as female. Two schools had a mix of high poverty and high affluence, while the remaining five schools all served students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Six out of the seven schools primarily served Students of Color.

Data Collection

We conducted half-hour long individual interviews with principals in September 2020 using a semi-structured interview guide (Patton, 1990) to gain insight as to how principals responded to the COVID-19 pandemic from its onset in spring 2020 to opening of school in the fall and inquire about any issues of equity (or inequity) that surfaced during this time. The interviews were guided by questions and probes that allowed principals to describe the ways they enacted equity, felt supported by colleagues, and how they determined which equity issue to address. Conversation centered on how each school leader identified and then marshalled action toward achieving more equitable access and outcomes for students and families amid the pandemic. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

To better understand our data, we read the interview transcripts several times. The interview data were examined individually, and a cross-comparison analysis was completed in order to explore patterns across participants. First, we used the constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to identify the central themes and relevance for principals' descriptions of equity opportunities. Then, we applied four coding criteria to the constant comparative method (Boeije, 2002) for each interview: description of opportunity, aim, equity issue, and result of opportunity. Third, after interview data were analyzed using a constant comparative analysis method (Glaser, 1965; Boeije, 2002), we checked and rechecked for emerging themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994). We grouped responses to the prompt and compared the equity opportunities principals described in their interviews. The themes that arose from this preliminary analysis were then re-examined, looking for patterns across principals from different schools. This process of constant comparison "stimulates thought that leads to both descriptive and explanatory categories" (Lincoln and Egon, 1985, p. 341). In order to ensure the trustworthiness of interpretations, member-checking techniques were carried out as emerging themes developed and were shared with participants (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Findings

We present three main findings resulting from our data analysis. Overall, our findings indicate principals acted upon two primary opportunities for achieving equity in their school community.

First, most all principals conscientiously attempted to address deficit mindsets within their teaching staff regarding students and families. Second, the vast majority of principals shifted to aggressive advocacy mode—demanding that their school communities receive more resources. Principals uncovered these opportunities throughout the COVID-19 pandemic during meetings with their teachers about how to deliver remote learning. The third and unexpected finding among our principals was that they were less focused on technology access and the digital divide in their schools. Below we summarize each theme in more detail.

Confronting Deficit Mindsets Among Staff

Six principals in our study explained challenging their staff's deficit mindset of students, particularly Students of Color and those assumed to be of poverty. These six principals detected such mindsets through meetings with staff to troubleshoot how to make contact with students and families at home. The crisis had forced faculty to have these conversations as a result of the crisis; prior to the pandemic these issues rarely came up and there was little concerted effort to unpack staff assumptions about their most vulnerable students and families. For example, one principal reported that her teachers, "realized that they didn't know those students well at all." Additionally, another principal stated, "It's sad because one of the things I've said to my staff a few times is, there was like a false narrative." Three other principals shared similar anecdotes about how teachers and district staff made statements that unveiled implicit bias and racist, classist ideologies. After hearing this, principals felt compelled to use the time during the pandemic as an opportunity to develop an equity-oriented mindset about parents and students in their communities.

Most of the principals expressed that such deficit thinking was generally aimed at historically marginalized populations, English language learners, and students identified for special education services. Some principals reported beginning their equity work with their staffs by incorporating listening circles with their teachers and modeling restorative practices circles. One principal noted, I also just did one of those sessions [restorative practices] with families. With families, on Google Meets because at that point, that was the platform that family knew best because that's the one they were using with the children. So, they could just sign into their children's account and get on vs. trying to use a different platform with their own email or username and what have you.

Eight out of the nine principals suggested their efforts to focus on equity produced positive outcomes. For example, one principal explained how their school developed a common understanding of the concept of parental engagement. Staff discussions surrounding what parent engagement might look like for different families led to more nuanced conceptualizations. Traditional definitions of parent engagement, such as parents attending school events, gave way to other less obvious forms, such as parents urging their children to do schoolwork at home. Another principal reported the transformation of teachers' understanding of their students in temporary housing:

When we unpacked the students in temporary housing, which was one of the groups who was hit the hardest in terms of interaction, they realized that they [the teachers] didn't know that the majority of the students in temporary housing were not living in shelters.

Other principals suggested their focus on changing the deficit mindset around students and families resulted in more check-ins with parents in order to support their students. Our analyses suggest that principals tackled core issues of systemic racism and deficit thinking of special populations during the pandemic in order to get their students the academic and social supports they needed from teachers and support personnel.

Advocacy for Extra Resources

Principals enacted equity-oriented leadership through advocacy efforts. In particular, most principals in this study revealed their advocacy-orientation was in response to the lack of food security they found among their stakeholders. Principals reporting advocating on behalf of their families and students to their district or local governments to gain additional resources for food provisions. One principal explained, "We had issues with helping families get food access," a concern echoed by five other principals in this study. Other principals worked with communities to support the needs of their students and families. One elementary principal noted, We don't have a lot of supplemental funding. We were doing a lot of this [collecting resources] off of the backs of donations and community groups and things like that. We literally built a food distribution center in our middle school gym just to get food to people because there wasn't the resource base that you would have in a large metropolitan city where you go to a food bank.

Some principals advocated for resources that would aid families to meet fundamental needs such as food and healthcare. For some of these principals, this meant fortifying operational systems in their schools to develop better communication between students and families. One leader explained, I think the other opportunity that came out of it was in that need for structure, it gave me a lot of license to systematize a lot of things that needed to be done. It put everything that would've probably taken a year to do, I could get away in a month.

Another principal worked with local partners to create an onsite clinic so students could have access to regular healthcare during the pandemic: "I'm trying as hard as I can to get a community-based health clinic in this building. The free and reduced lunch [students], I don't think they have really great access to healthcare." This principal explained how having a healthcare crisis, and serving a community without any local healthcare options, surfaced as a major priority. In all, five of the seven principals described how they jockeyed for resources that were not typically covered in their budgets but were necessary for their families. These findings illustrate how principals responded to the particular issues of inequity that arose in their communities. They also demonstrate how principals felt responsibility over more than just

students—their purview extended to the families and in some cases the entire community.

Leadership Beyond the Digital Divide

We anticipated principals in this study to express concern over a lack of equity regarding technology and availability of devices; however, no principals indicated their students lacked devices. For instance, one principal explained, "It wasn't really the access to technology. There were certainly hotspots and getting the Wi-Fi." Another principal echoed this sentiment, explaining, "we got a computer for every single kiddo that said they needed them. We were able to actually use some of the CARES funding." These comments suggest that despite the public narrative (Casey, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020), technology was not the biggest issue impacting schools, at least from the perspective of our informants. Instead, principals found issues of systemic racism and classism to take priority instead of access to technology with respect to inequities among their most vulnerable populations.

Part of the reason the principals had moved beyond remedying technological inequities is that many of them had addressed it when the pandemic first hit. In some instances, the district or city was helping take care of these needs for students and families. For our sample of principals, they came to understand even more insidious disparities and injustices; one might view these as systemic inequities, in contrast to the programmatic (or technological) gaps presented at the outset of the pandemic.

DISCUSSION

This study's purpose was to explore how principals advanced equity for students and families as a result of and in the midst of a crisis. We found that most principals engaged in two primary ways during the COVID-19 crisis. Principals in this study demonstrated their willingness to use the crisis to engage in difficult conversations about race with their teachers and, in some instances, families. Many of the principals described they had not initially thought about addressing inequalities such as deficit-mindsets prior to the transition to the remote learning, but later realized this was a priority. In our view, the results are directly connected to the political climate and unrest witnessed during the school year. The deaths of George Floyd, Ahmad Aubrey, and Breonna Taylor became nightly conversations across the country thus filtering into the schools. The recent events are an extension to the oppressive and racist actions employed by the Trump administration in educational settings (Kohli et al., 2017). The heightened discourse about racism offers unprecedented opportunities to discuss how social justice and equity issues affect schools. As a result, principals may have had to discuss issues of deficit thinking and inequalities due to the inevitability of political rhetoric.

We also found that the majority of principals interviewed were not worried about acquiring technology or remote learning. We believe that this is a result of many districts seeking one-to-one technology programs and the emphasis on STEM in some school curricula. Moreover, we believe that this shift in priorities occurred because teachers use a variety of digital platforms already in their

daily work. As a result, principals were mostly “freed up” from worrying about technology and remote learning; or, at the very least, placed these as lower priorities under their purview.

We were surprised by the principals’ lack of concern regarding technology and believe principals went from focusing on programmatic inequities, such as supplying computers and instructional materials to marginalized communities, to focusing on systemic inequities, such as racism (deficit-mindset thinking) and social caste (food security) (Wilkerson, 2020). The political climate may have spurred conversations about race and access to food due to the disproportionate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on People of Color and due to the Black Lives Matter protests. We find that principals seized the opportunity to have difficult conversations on race and poverty and acted to combat systemic issues plaguing their school communities. Principals focused much of their effort on challenging and altering staff beliefs regarding families from vulnerable populations. Their end goal was to enact deeper and more meaningful change within their school communities. To do so, school leaders adopted both an advocacy and activist role on behalf of their most marginalized student and family populations (Rallis et al., 2008).

Limitations

Our study findings face at least two significant limitations. The first significant limitation is the data is yielded from self-reporting among principals, as they interpret and experience the crisis, their actions, and the impact of their actions. The research warrant is thus limited to perspectives from among our principal informants and lacks other corroborating evidence. Secondly, because our interviews more or less directly asked principals how they considered equity during the crisis, their responses may have been influenced to produce socially desirable answers.

CONCLUSION

The findings from our study illustrate two specific opportunities principals were presented with as a result of the crisis to engage in equity responses. These results extend the knowledge base of school crisis leadership tethered to equity leadership in the midst of a crisis. Previous scholarship has begun to explore how school

leaders respond to crises as an opportunity to provide more equitable education for all students. (Author Review) Additionally, the results offer compelling evidence for principal preparation programs considering new curricula when developing aspiring principals. Principal preparation programs should be keenly aware of ways to incorporate modules or case studies about preparing for a crisis. For instance, the *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership* published a case analysis that interrogates how principals respond to natural disasters (Potter, Pavlakakis and Roberts, 2020). These materials should go beyond simply theoretical applications of leadership, instead focusing on leveling the field to stimulate equitable and inclusive schools. Moreover, principal preparation programs can add an overarching theme of an “equity lens” to be applied throughout their course work so that it becomes a habit of practice for principals to always consider equitable options and responses during a crisis. As a field, we need to continue to develop opportunities in professional development and principal preparation that develops the understanding of principals in equity-oriented, crisis response leadership.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Sarah Lawrence College IRB Department. The Ethics Committee waived the requirement of written informed consent for participation.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

CC and PV designed the interview protocols, PV conducted and executed all interview protocols.

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Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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