Lessons from the Field: Understanding Equity through the Pandemic from the Perspective of Female Leaders

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It is estimated that 1.6 billion students were displaced from the traditional school building in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic (UN, 2022; IMF, 2020). While the drastic change in how society normally functions was a shock for everyone, children and historically marginalized people suffered disproportionately severe impacts (GHO, 2022; UNESCO, 2020). Superintendents played a pivotal role in ensuring that students could continue to learn remotely until the end of the school year. Without the safety net of the school building, a focus on equity was crucial, as those already negatively affected by the status quo were faced with additional burdens. The purpose of the current study was to understand female superintendents' experiences with ensuring equity at the beginning of the pandemic. The researcher found that superintendents leaned on utilizing effective messaging, ensuring access and opportunities to school sponsored programs, leveraging community resources and support, and addressing resistance to changes. The strategies they employed helped them continue the focus on ensuring every family was well situated during the break in school and when schools reopened. This information can be used to inform new practices and policies that will support equity through future school interruptions or traumatic events. Inevitably, this includes ensuring that the culture of the district is aligned with its values and addressing the parts of the system that do not work for all students (Mitchell, 2021).

Keywords: superintendents, equity, women leadership, crisis leadership

It is estimated that 1.6 billion students were displaced from the traditional school building in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2022; International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2020). While the drastic change in how society normally functions was a shock for everyone, children and historically marginalized people suffered disproportionately severe impacts (GHO, 2022; UNESCO, 2020). School leaders, teachers, and families pivoted to out-of-school or remote learning in March and continued that format for the remainder of the school year. Superintendents played a pivotal role in ensuring that students could continue to learn remotely until the end of the school year. In addition to this basic charge, school leaders also struggled to maintain a level of services for those children who needed additional support for schooling. Without the safety net of the school building, a focus on equity was crucial, as those already negatively affected by the status quo were faced with additional burdens.

Regardless of the additional stresses due to the pandemic, striving for equity is foundational to ensuring that historically marginalized students have equal opportunities to realize their goals. Too often, though, leadership creates or initiates equity-based practices slowly, based on the speed of those who are not ready (Gorski, 2019; Gorski et al., 2022). The fear is that moving too fast will alienate or sabotage outcomes due to resistance. However, it is important to understand and empathize with the students who have borne the brunt of inequitable practices and outcomes for decades (Gorski, 2019; Gorski et al., 2022). The results of intentional or unintentional harmful practices can be seen in the over- and under-representation of students in special programs like special education and gifted and talented (Ford, 1998; Skiba et. al., 2008). The purpose of the current study was to understand female superintendents' experiences with ensuring equity at the beginning of the pandemic. This information can be used to inform new practices and policies that will support equity through future school interruptions or traumatic events.

The Effects of Trauma during the Pandemic

In addition to the pre-existing need for a more intentional focus on equity, the pandemic has had an outsized impact on families of color and/or low-income families (GHO, 2022; UNESCO, 2020). During the period of this study (academic years 2019-2021) not all schools in Texas had returned to in-person learning. But once in-person learning resumed, educational leaders, staff, and faculty had to focus on addressing the past and current effects of trauma resulting from the health, economic, and social justice stressors of the previous school years. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are experiences that occur before the age of 18 that cause extreme distress and can result in long-term medical, mental health, and behavioral issues. For school leaders, understanding the impact of ACEs in K-12 schools is a social justice imperative. Research shows an "effect between the number of ACEs and risk of poor school attendance, behavioral issues, and failure to meet grade-level academic standards" (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018; Zyromski et.al, 2020, p. 352).

Trauma-informed schools and leadership are even more necessary when considering the widespread exposure to death and turmoil beginning in 2020. Generally, schools have been a constant and stabilizing environment for children, especially for those who are vulnerable (Downey, 2012; Greig, et.al., 2021). However, when school buildings shut down, that constant was lost. It was incumbent upon school leaders and faculty to address the complex needs for schooling, food, specialized support, and counseling of children and families in a virtual environment. In addition, school leaders had to juggle planning for the eventual safe return of kids and teachers into the building.

While research has codified how trauma can manifest in individuals, there is still a lack of research on the effects of trauma on school systems and "how existing school culture can act as an enabler or barrier to embedding whole school approaches, and what that might mean for leading whole-school approaches to address community and childhood trauma" (Greig et al., 2021, p. 67). Understanding trauma from an individual perspective will not be sufficient to address the lived experiences of children, especially in marginalized communities, without looking at the systems in school that may perpetuate inequities that can re-traumatize students. Greig et al. (2021, p. 67,) succinctly summarized the concerns school leaders need to consider:

> Whereas trauma-informed school leadership practices primarily rely on centering intervention on student outcomes (Brunzell et al., 2016; Dorado et al., 2016), this risks drawing attention away from the systems, structures and policies that can serve to entrench or reinforce trauma in schools, which can have the effect of exacerbating trauma exposure, particularly for marginalized communities (Ginwright, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; van Dernoot Lipsky, 2010).

Community-Engaged Leadership during the Pandemic

At the height of the pandemic, educational leaders were faced with the notion that traditional, status quo leadership approaches may not be sufficient in the face of widespread trauma and massive changes in everyday life and in schools. This context required leadership with a more critical, social justice foundation. In every crisis is an opportunity. This moment provided an opportunity for leaders to be relational and collaborative in order to create schools dedicated to social change for and with the communities they serve (Ospina & Foldy, 2010; Priest & Kliewer, 2017).

Educators were tasked with creating new ways for students to learn and interact with the system of education during the pandemic. During this time, leaders focused on equity and socially just practices could also develop "new ways of thinking and capacities required to intervene in established systems [which] calls for a shift in focus from the development and accomplishment of individuals toward collective leadership approaches that are cocreated, participatory, and can account for degrees of social, political, economic, and moral agitation" (Priest & Kliewer, 2017, p. 37). The work and learning required to achieve this change in social dynamics was met with both support and resistance from various constituents.

Responding to Resistance during the Pandemic

Community-engaged work on behalf of social justice and equity will focus on how school systems actively oppress or liberate students and families (Kliewer & Priest, 2017). It will require a paradigm shift, a discussion of values, and collaborative learning about how systems create barriers that education should eradicate (Kliewer & Priest, 2017). Building new capacities, paradigms, and shared experiences during the pandemic is a form of learning and as communities learn new ways of thinking and being, that is also a form of change (Alas & Sharifi, 2002).

Change in any complex organization will be met with resistance from both inside and outside the organization. This can be defined as "perceived as opposing or blocking forces that can redirect, reject, or prevent change" for various reasons (Sabino et al., 2021, p. 269). According to researchers, resistance to change can be attributed to:

(i) the threats to established resource allocations; (ii) the threat of established power relations; (iii) the threat to specialization; (iv) group inertia; (v) the limited focus of change; (vi) organizational cynicism and skepticism (caused by pessimism about future efforts and lack of trust in the agents of change) and (vii) structural inertia (Blanca & Ramona, 2016; Helvaci & Kilicoglu, 2018; Holt et al., 2007; Sabino et al., 2021, p. 270; Seijts & Roberts, 2011).

Too often, social justice initiatives are focused within school systems (Berkovich, 2014), however, leaders focused on equity and sustainability must engage, communicate, and co-create shared values and capacity within schools and communities despite resistance.

Framework

Social justice leadership is the framework for this study. Social justice leadership is the practice of educational leaders advocating for students and families "by examining current social and educational arrangements and taking actions to promote school initiatives and practices that support justice and equity" (Wang, 2018, p. 471). During the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, superintendents were navigating changing directives, mandates, politics, and public health information. However, amid new and sometimes contradictory information, superintendents had to make quick decisions on how to support their students and families while the school facilities were closed.

While the pandemic was disruptive to the traditional notion of schooling, it was not the first disruption that school leaders had to face over the last few decades. Those leaders focused on social justice leadership and community advocacy were able to recognize the continued unequal circumstances many of their constituents who identify as historically marginalized, English language learners, special needs, and/or low income. Therefore, the leaders in this study and many others had to do the work to understand and attempt to mitigate the effects of school closures continuing to interrupt inequity (Wang, 2018).

Methodology

The researcher used a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand the lived experience of female superintendents during the pandemic. Creswell (2015) noted that qualitative research is ideal when the researcher aims to explore a situation and develop a detailed understanding of the central phenomenon. The researcher conducted one focus group of five female superintendents in the state of Texas who were present during a statewide meeting. Each of the participants served in this role during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years. Each of the superintendents self-identified as white, worked in rural schools, and had between 2 and 11 years of experience in the superintendency. The question the researcher sought to answer was: What are the perceptions of female superintendents' equity challenges during the pandemic?

The researcher used a convenience sample, as each of the participants were members of the same leadership organization. The focus group was conducted during the 2021 state-wide meeting. Due to the small sample size, future studies will build on this foundation to include leaders of varied ethnicity, school type, and gender. The focus group questions were semi-structured, open-ended questions that allowed participants to reflect and respond thoroughly based

on their lived experiences. The interview was intended to be semi-structured as the researcher would only have one opportunity to interview the participants during this gathering (Bernard, 2011).

The face-to-face interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using a computer program. The transcripts were then reviewed for accuracy. Afterward, the researcher studied the data (transcription and observational notes) from the focus group to find patterns. The data were then coded and analyzed for themes related to equity.

Results: Lessons from the Field

Based on the analysis of the focus group, four themes emerged (see Figure 1). These were communication, community, access and opportunity, and resistance.

Figure 1

Four Themes from Focus Group

Lesson One: Utilizing Effective Messaging

Each of the participants in the group were in the process of addressing inequities in the community when the pandemic closed schools in March 2020. When the school buildings were closed, traditional routes for communication became more challenging. The goal was to adapt to the new and temporary environment of learning from home while still pushing forward on initiatives already in progress. In addition, these superintendents addressed how to discuss equity in a way that would communicate the impact and importance of these initiatives in general, but the message became even more complicated because of the Covid-19 crisis. One participant summarized it this way:

COVID brought to light a lot of things that fall through the cracks when, when they're in the building and when they're not in the building. And then finding ways to reach out to them virtually was difficult. But we tried our best.

Each leader understood the ability to adapt to a constantly changing and fluid environment that year was going to be vital as they still wanted to focus on teacher and student success.

Beyond the health crisis, that summer was also rife with discussions of race inequality that further divided communities. The leaders also hoped to communicate success for each student using equity as a vehicle to ensure that goal for every child in the community without creating further divisions. One superintendent created an equity task force in the fall of that year. During this time, the leader did not want to make this newly formed group public until they were ready to unveil the work. The superintendent stated,

> We launched an equity task force in the fall, but I deliberately kept the work not necessarily secret. There was a strategy behind keeping it quiet for a while until we were ready to really unveil the work cause I was, uh, not sure how the community would respond.

She was intentionally thinking about when and how to communicate the work that would protect the task force during their early deliberations. In addition, she balanced that concern with the understanding the group would still want and need input from the community. As a result, the committee utilized coded language to obtain the information. According to the superintendent, the committee sent out a safety survey to the community, but its questions hinted toward equity practices. Each of these superintendents was fully aware of the differing views about race and equity in their communities and felt they needed to work around those in order to arrive at their desired outcomes. One of the participants stated, "And trying to get them to understand that all of our students don't have the same resources and supports, and don't even know sometimes what they don't know and that that's not their fault."

The literature discusses the connection between communication and crisis leadership (Marshall, et.al., 2020; Jahagirdar, et.al., 2020). Specifically, communication can be more difficult during a crisis when stakeholders are looking to be put at ease that there is a plan to address the issue (Marshall, et. al., 2020). During crisis management, the role of the superintendent is to communicate clearly, effectively, and timely through collaborative channels, or directly with stakeholders (Marshall, et.al., 2020). During the pandemic information was changing rapidly and there was some uncertainty of the immediate future of the students and families due to the virus. Communication channels were altered to favor a higher focus on technology. However, due to the limitations of communication through technology, the message itself can be interpreted or misinterpreted in various ways based on the reader. Leaders must then innovate so knowledge creation and communication are linked with community-engaged strategies that focus on equity.

Lesson Two: Ensuring Access and Opportunities to Various Programs

Each of the participants in the group expressed concern regarding equitable programming during the pandemic. They had a full understanding that access and opportunity to various school programs were problematic before the pandemic. For instance, one participant explained that she had been looking to reduce or sponsor costs for families that could not afford cheerleading or other sports. Extracurricular activities were important, but the participants also addressed how income inequity affected services and outcomes. Some lamented the fact that the populations in their special programs were not representative of the communities they served. One leader addressed her work with dual credit courses as an example. There is a plethora of research that address the over- and under-representation of black and brown learners in programs such as special education,

and gifted and talented due to structural systems like race and socio-economic status (Ford, 1998; Skiba et. al., 2008).

In the end, the leaders were aware of how systems can be a bridge or a barrier to college success based on race, language, and income. One participant stated, "I don't mean this in a negative way, but truly they were buying their rank because of the weighted grades for honors and advanced placement classes." Gorski (2019) asserts that if equity is to truly be seen in schools, there must be a fundamental shift in how opportunity and access to resources prioritize historically marginalized populations. One participant fully acknowledged that Covid "brought to light a lot of things that fall through the cracks when, when they're in the building and when they're not in the building."

Taking a critical look at the extent to which school policies and practices are crafted with the lived experiences of students and families as a focal point is a key indicator of the school's or district's focus on equity. For social justice leaders, this becomes the ideology or the lens through which decisions are made (Gorski, 2019). Thereby, leaders can enact their own form of resistance to the status quo by improving school systems, centering the capacity of staff to build and utilize an equity mindset, and strengthening relationships with the community (Theoharis, 2007).

Lesson Three: Leveraging Community Resources and Support

During the period the study was conducted, economic woes were rampant. Since the pandemic had left many families without work, economic struggles impacted what families could afford in and out of school. Schools are not a closed system, so social, political, and economic concerns in the community also affect what happens in the school building (Sarason, 1997). Schools were also managing an equitable education with dwindling budgets. In some cases, superintendents were able to allocate funds to address some community concerns. However, not all these initiatives to support the community were well received.

There was also the notion that each of the superintendents would need to seek community support and resources. This was the strategy one participant articulated to address the disparity of dual credit courses, "So we went to community organizations, got scholarships, made those available. And as a district said, we're covering the costs of dual credit courses because our kids need to have equal access."

Community support in both tangible and intangible forms was vital during this time. In times of crisis, neighbors, friends, and businesspeople may be generous and support each other. While some of the superintendents did experience this, it was not without complications against the backdrop of the racial tensions during the same period. Regardless, despite the socio-political push and pull leaders were experiencing, they were all adamant that support needed to be bi-directional. The district became creative to support families and they also reached out to various stakeholders to support teachers and students.

Lesson Four: Addressing Resistance

Resistance to change is inevitable in any organization. The superintendent as the head of the school system must be able to move the district forward in the face of resistance. During this school year, change (and resistance to it) was rampant. The lives of everyone in the country were upended. Schools and businesses closed their doors or attempted to innovate in various ways to keep business going. Resistance and outrage were also a part of the climate, from resistance to

mask-wearing to resisting harmful and targeted police practices. Schooling and their leadership were not immune to the frustrations, complaints, and resistance that existed throughout this time in the broader national context.

The leaders studied were aware that many of the changes due to the pandemic would not be well received. However, they also acknowledged that some of the resistance was due to prevailing attitudes on race and culture in the community. One participant stated that when attempting to provide hotspots to families so they would be able to fully participate in remote schooling, she would hear feedback like, "They can't afford to have the internet at home. Why should you be giving it to them? Why is the district paying for their internet?"

The participants also lamented how feedback and criticism were shared. Some of the participants led in small rural districts. They stated they would sometimes read concerns and complaints via social media instead of more personal interactions. While effective communication is essential to implementing change (Gilley et al., 2009; Sabino, et. al., 2021) it is incumbent upon the leadership to create, learn, understand, and empathize with the needs of every member of the school and community. The dichotomy of using leadership as a tool to educate and promote social justice values for those that have been marginalized by the system is critical to ensuring the success of students during and after the pandemic.

The "New" Normal

Each of the participants in the study reflected on their current circumstances and how to improve the culture of their district when the school buildings were again safe for children. Inevitably, the results showed a commitment to equity and the barriers that are inherent in achieving that goal. The results of the study highlight lessons and key takeaways for any leader focused on a socially just approach to improving school systems. The recommendations following were based on the research and themes from the focus group.

Be creative and strategic about district messaging and communication. It is important to utilize multiple venues, but also to build relationships and trust with the community. Part of effective messaging is sharing space and creating values with constituents to better connect lived experiences to policies and practices. Without this step, messaging can be ignored, misinterpreted, or devalued.

Take a critical look at the story told by district program data. Which students have the most access and opportunities to participate in all the district has to offer? Look at who is not participating in various programs and what effect may that have on their sense of belonging in the school and community. How does the messaging reach those that are not a valued part of the community? The community is fundamental to the livelihood of the school, especially in times of crisis. A strong community with shared values will be important to the success of the district. As such, the power to create the narrative of the district must be shared with the faculty and staff. However, the leader must ensure that all voices are heard and understood it is truly representative of all facets of the community.

Finally, leaders must be able to withstand resistance to change. Within any system or individual, resistance to change is normal. However, when resistance becomes a barrier to improved academic and social outcomes for students who continue to be oppressed, the leader must be steadfast. Building equitable systems will require system change that will breed discomfort, but black students, indigenous students, and other students of color deserve a leader who will advocate for their success.

Conclusion

Managing an educational system during a crisis is not easy. The superintendent serves as the face of the school district. As such, they are tasked with understanding and implementing the mission and vision of the district (Meier, 2018). Inevitably, this includes ensuring that the culture of the district is aligned with its values and addressing the parts of the system that do not work for all students (Mitchell, 2021). Too often, school leaders adopt an "equity approach [that] coddles the hesitancies of people with the least racial equity investment while punishing people with the most investment" (Gorski, 2019, p. 57).

Based on the research from the focus group of 5 female superintendents, the importance of communicating through effective messaging, leveraging community resources and support, focusing on the continued access and opportunity of programs during and after the crisis, and addressing resistance to encourage forward momentum were important during the pandemic. While Covid-19 was new and unchartered territory, these leaders have been through other crises during their careers. The lessons gleaned from leading during the pandemic are applicable to all leaders as they navigate future difficulties in their leadership roles.

The significance of this study is understanding how the participants adapted their leadership in the wake of the pandemic. Those lessons can shape how current and future leaders think about messaging during emergencies. Leaders will inevitably face resistance on various issues but building a relationship with community members will be valuable support in the midst of a crisis (Theoharis, 2007). Finally, during and beyond the crisis the leader must understand how to meet the needs of those students and families that have been marginalized. The research shows that equity-minded leaders can navigate current events while planning and preparing for more opportunities once the emergency subsides.

The pandemic (or any crisis) is an opportunity for leaders to look critically at the policies and practices of the school that do not serve children and move to eliminate those barriers. It is easy to get lost in the mundane as teachers and students interact with school systems daily. However, those interactions can be oppressive and harmful to the very students who look to schools to promote and protect the public good (Fabionar, 2020). The superintendent must maintain the fortitude to manage the complex political, social, and economic systems at play in the community to realize a truly equitable and excellent education for every student.

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