The Four Rs of Leader Efficacy

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Self-efficacy is considered a key component for successful leadership; however, educational leadership doctoral programs do not often focus on leader self-efficacy (LSE) for principals. The purpose of this study was to understand perceptions of Ed.D. alumni who are currently principals regarding what contributed to the development of leader self-efficacy (LSE) and how programs can develop LSE. Bandura's theory of self-efficacy and Paglis and Green's three-dimensional construct for LSE served as the conceptual framework. The results of this study may provide insights for programs into how LSE can be developed in a doctorate and thereby improve student academic outcomes.

Keywords: leader self-efficacy, principalship, Education Doctorate, self-efficacy, leadership

The leader of a K-12 school has many challenges and responsibilities to lead its teachers, staff, and students towards success. To lead successfully, a principal has been found to be a catalyst for change to enhance and transform the culture of the school positively towards the outcome of improved student learning (McKinney et al., 2015; Tingle et al., 2019). The effective leadership of a principal has been found to improve overall school performance (Fullan, 2014; Mesterova et al., 2015) as well as enhance the performance of troubled schools (Cordeiro & Cunningham, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004; Mattar, 2012). Self-efficacy was found to be a key element in successful leadership (Dwyer, 2019). According to the claims of the social cognitive theory, when a principal has high self-efficacy, they engage in challenging responsibilities and tasks, and even more important, they persist through barriers (Bandura, 1986; Paglis & Green, 2002). Self-efficacy has been found to be a crucial perspective for a leader, to be able to view oneself in a principal's role, and therefore, motivate themselves as well as others to make the right choices and decisions (Bandura & Locke, 2003; Fowler et al., 2020). As the principalship is a complicated and challenging role, preparation can build the self-efficacy and competence necessary to fulfill the role (Allen, 2020). Principal preparation programs, professional development within schools and districts, leadership programs, and doctoral programs have all been a part of the preparation landscape for principals over the years in the United States. Principals prepared in doctoral programs have been found to be more effective in developing high-quality teacher teams resulting in greater student learning gains (Allen, 2020; Fuller et al., 2011; Ni et al., 2017). However, principal preparation programs and doctoral programs have been critiqued for a lack of rigor and effectiveness to prepare leaders for success (Levine, 2005; Mango et al., 2019; Pérez & Breault, 2018; Perrone & Tucker, 2019). Many studies have researched what a successful school leader does (Gurr, 2017; Leithwood, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2017; Leithwood, 2019), but not how they learn and develop leader self-efficacy in a doctoral program. This study will explore the perspectives of doctoral graduates and their development of leader self-efficacy as a K- 12 principal within their program.

Problem and Purpose

The research problem is that educational leadership programs have not intentionally focused on leader self-efficacy as a program outcome (Seibert et al., 2017), although self-efficacy is considered a key component for successful leaders (Dwyer, 2019). The connection between participating in a doctoral program and building leader self-efficacy is not understood and limited in research. McCormick et al. (2002) found that leadership self-efficacy predicted leadership behavior and distinguished leaders in different fields from non-leaders. Leader self-efficacy can be developed, and leadership development programs may be more effective if more was understood about the development of leadership self-efficacy (Mango et al., 2019). This study may help fill a gap in the research by exploring the perceptions of doctoral program alumni regarding how their educational leadership program supported the development of their leader self-efficacy in their current role as a K-12 leader. The purpose of this basic design qualitative study was to understand graduates' perceptions of their education doctoral program and how their participation in their program developed their leader self- efficacy as a current school leader as well as suggestions they had for how doctoral programs can develop leader self-efficacy in school leaders.

Research Question

What are the perceptions of educational leadership doctoral program alumni regarding how their program developed their leader self-efficacy to navigate challenges as a current leader/principal?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was drawn from Bandura's theory (1977) of self-efficacy as well as Paglis and Green's (2002) three-dimensional construct for leader self-efficacy (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
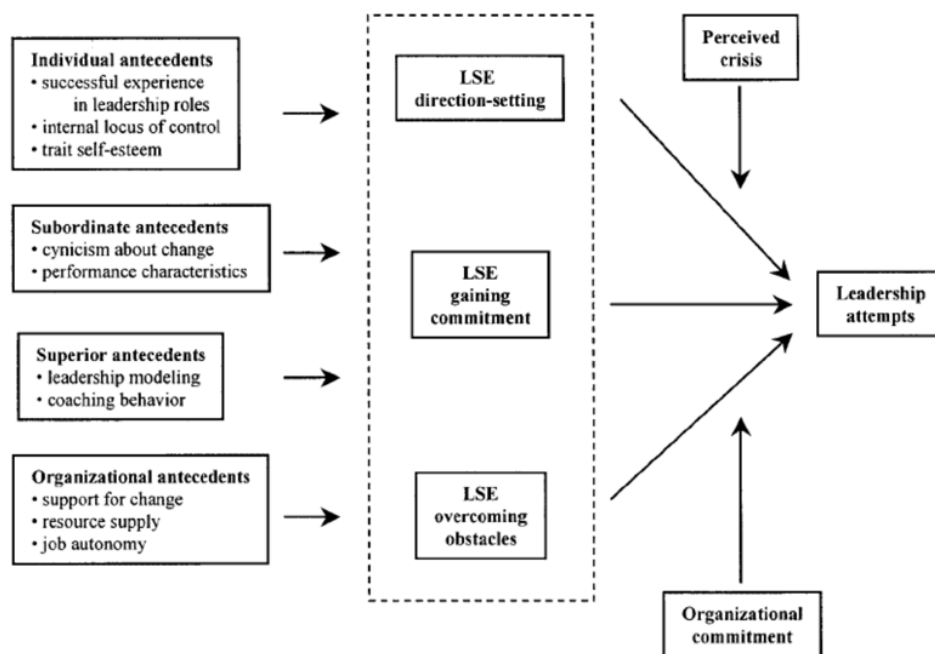
Bandura asserted that expectations of personal efficacy determined the initiation of coping behavior, how much work would be expended, and for how long. Paglis and Green defined the construct of leadership self-efficacy and developed a three-dimensional measurement used in their study based on Bandura's social cognitive theory. Paglis and Green's study tested their leadership self-efficacy model that focused on manager's motivation for attempting the leadership of change. The assessment included direction-setting, gaining commitment, and overcoming obstacles. These three dimensions of Paglis and Green and Bandura's theory guided interview questions and probes.

Methods

The criteria for participation in this study was current K-12 leaders in districts with at least 3-7 years of leadership experience who have also graduated from a doctoral education leadership program in California. Saturation was reached with 10 qualified participants who agreed to participate were interviewed. To address the research questions, I relied on a

qualitative research design and focused on interviews with 10 school leaders, 2 male and 3 female with four to 16 years of experience as principals in a California school, having reached saturation. Two of the 10 participants were Hispanic, one was Asian, and the remaining were Caucasian and included both high school and elementary school site principals. Participant's doctoral programs were completed at either a private university or a state school (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Institution	Specialization
Eric	Public	EdD in Educational Leadership
Karen	Private	EdD
Justin	Private	EdD in Organizational Leadership
Anita	Private	EdD in Educational Leadership
Cathy	Private	EdD
Caroline	Private	EdD in Organizational Leadership
Janet	Private	EdD in Organizational Leadership
John	Private	EdD in Organizational Leadership
Elizabeth	Private	EdD in Educational Leadership
Loren	Private	EdD in Educational Leadership

Data was analyzed through thematic analysis across six steps: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and writing up the results (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Keywords were used for coding and then codes were categorized to highlight keywords across all interviews. I formed categories related to themes and completed several reviews of the transcripts to check for themes overlooked (see Table 2).

Table 2

Overview of Thematic Structure

	Theme	Subthemes	Codes
RQ1 RQ2	Relationships	Faculty, cohorts	Family feel, connections, conversations, communication, feedback, observations, role-play, intentional, tribe, transparency, collaboration, encouragement, accountability, support, chair, faculty, networking, mentor, cohorts, group work
RQ1 RQ2	Relevancy	Practical & real-world scenarios,	Ethics, practitioner, dissertation, data analysis, leadership

		dissertation process	framework/theory, systems analysis, political leadership, cerebral view, practical, real-world practice
RQ1 RQ2	Reflection		Imposter syndrome, strengths/weaknesses, emotional health, mental health, feedback, practices, self-exploration, problem-solving
RQ1 RQ2	Responsibility	Self-care, importance of the job, resilience	Self-care, organization, balance, priorities, navigate, importance of job, follow-up, well- being of others, resilience, time management

Findings

Initial results of analysis of participants' perspectives of their experiences in their doctoral program that impacted their leader's self-efficacy supported Bandura's research related to his social cognitive theory. Overall, four themes emerged related to the development of leader self-efficacy through a doctoral program. These themes, displayed relationally in Figure 2, are relationships, relevancy, reflection, and responsibility.

Figure 2

The LSE Doctoral Program Target

Relationships

The first theme of relationships included the participation in cohorts with colleagues and faculty through projects that required collaboration, accountability, and support. The repeated references to the impact of relationships on participants' LSE were coded 259 times, more frequently than any of the codes for the other three themes. Relationships and impact related to faculty were coded 155 times, and those related to relationships in cohorts were coded 109 times. The theme of relationships appeared in response to all the interview questions. The theme of relationships was the most dominant and was related to all participants' perceptions of the impact

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of the participation in cohorts through collaboration with fellow students and faculty as well as other colleagues outside of their program who provided accountability and support that all participants perceived increased their LSE.

Faculty

Relationships with faculty and chairs were the most impactful on their LSE, as reported by nine out of the 10 participants. Anita was especially impacted by relationships with faculty.

> And when I was going to be the principal, they [the faculty] wrote my letters of recommendation and they're my…Those are the guys that did it. You know what I mean? So, it…Yes. I mean sure. Does that have an impact? Absolutely. The fact that there are two sitting superintendents on my dissertation committee telling me, "You got this, this is great. You're good to go. This is just the beginning." Yes. …. It helps your belief system, right?

Elizabeth shared the impact of the level of engagement faculty had with students, herself included, that increased her LSE.

> But they would know who you were, they would remember the papers you had written, they would ask you about your topic for your dissertation, they would know specifics about your ... project and how it was going. And just like their investment in me and my successes really made me feel like, "Oh, okay. If they think I can do it, I must be able to do it. Right?"

Cohorts

Cohorts were the second most impactful relationship, as perceived among the 10 participants. Only for one participant of the 10, where cohorts were more important than faculty relationships. All programs attended by the participants were cohort-based.
Cohorts were of varying sizes from five to 10 and were usually assigned by the university in the four programs represented by the participants, and for all participants their cohort became their support and encouragement through the program. Eight out of 10 participants shared the perspective that the support and encouragement was also impactful to their development as a leader in the program. Eric has suggested to other leaders, the importance of finding support as a leader whether in schoolwork or as a principal and said,

> I always advise them to get a tribe. Get a tribe and don't do this alone. Do this with a group. You might have two separate industries, it could be separate, my dissertation topic and yours are not even at the same ballpark, but if we could sit in the library and write together that's helpful. Or we can drive to school together and just vent about how my wife wants to kill me. Those things are really helpful.

John reflected on the importance of cohorts to his schoolwork and leadership,

> And you need those other people there, along with you that are saying, "You got this, here's where I am in the process." It helps me to be able to help other people

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in my cohort, helped me to be able to help them with an assignment and probably helped some with that self-efficacy of doing the right leadership work.

Some university programs attended by participants offered the option of a dissertation capstone which allowed cohorts to work together writing their dissertation all focused on the same topic. Cohorts would work together to write Chapter 1 and 2 collectively, then split off to collect their data targeted on a specific population, different from their cohort members. This proved to be an impactful choice with impact on their LSE for eight of the 10 participants, including Elizabeth who, when given the option at a workshop, said

> We had gone to one [workshop] that was specific to...[the] dissertation, and I'm like, 'This is the way to go!' Like, why would we not divide and conquer? We already know we work so well together. We trust each other. We all have very similar interests and what we would want to research.

Several participants mentioned the importance of relationships in cohorts and its impact on their group collective efficacy that led to LSE. Karen referred to her experience with others as,

> That family feel, and [we] went through the cohort and classes together and they spent a lot of time together. They had study groups, they were encouraged to hold study groups outside of class…being that close knit and again hearing each other's stories, leaning on each other. It was almost like a collective group efficacy.

Top coded for relationships included faculty and cohorts with categories of support, encouragement, conversations, observation, and communication that were important within those relationships. The most impactful relationship, in the perception of six of the participants, was relationships with faculty and chairs.

Relevancy

The second theme of relevancy addressed activities, projects, collaboration, and coursework they perceived as relevant to participants' current and future leadership placements. Of the 109 codes within this theme, practical experiences, real-world practice, and the dissertation process were most frequently evident in the interviews and are addressed below as subthemes. Nine out of 10 participants shared that relevancy of their doctoral program to their current role as a leader impacted their LSE.

Practical and Real-World Scenarios

Participants reported on the value of practical and real-world scenarios shared in their doctoral program. They described listening to the experiences of faculty or other leaders or acting out real-world situations with other students with guidance from faculty. Loren shared an example,

> Being placed in a rigorous environment where you have to come up with answers quickly and then refine your answers. So that was something that we did, was, "Okay, you said that this way, let's try and say it this way." Or hearing somebody

else say it in a better way really helped me kind of imprint and have a model for how I wanted to speak as a principal and how I wanted to portray myself. So that's one thing that I feel really grateful for from the program. I don't think I would have received otherwise.

Loren also reflected upon the real-time impact this activity had on her leadership during a school emergency due to floods in the area.

> I was just so grateful that I had been forced into these scenario types of conversations because I had ... NBC News come and show up at my school the day before we were evacuating and asked me, "So tell me about the floods and where are you going? And are the students going to be safe going to school here?" All these questions and talk about self-efficacy, I felt so comfortable just answering. I knew what not to say, because I'd been through this whole seminar about kind of what they're trying to get at, right? They're looking for anything that would be juicy that they repeat over and over again, right? And the idea of sharing the message that you want to share, whatever they ask.

Several participants shared that class time and conversations with other students and faculty generated examples and ideas for use in real-time. Janet said, "I can do this. I'm going to take all this stuff and implement it. And you know this is going to be great for my team. And I would get tons of ideas from those [conversations]."

An aspect of the curriculum considered impactful by all five participants from the same university was a project, separate from the capstone dissertation, that followed students through their program and was developed further each semester, building to a final presentation to share the impact of their change implemented on their campus. Loren explained the project as students needing to,

> Pick something within your organization that you would like to change, not just transactionally, not to just shift, but transform and so that is sort of what I'm referring to. We had to do it in other areas with needs assessment in the strategic plan, but that was something that we worked on for the whole 3 years, identifying needs and actually implementing the change and then showing the results of that change within your system. So being forced to actually select an area that you can have impact on and see it all the way through to fruition. And of course, if it's transformational change it's going to take years and years.

Loren also reflected that the project, "created a huge sense of self-efficacy…". At one university, immersions were held every 3 months with a cohort of students and faculty all together for an entire weekend with speakers, workshops, and networking. These immersions were separate from the project and separate from the dissertation capstone. Cohorts rotated each immersion event to assure networking with new people each time. A faculty member served as a cohort mentor and followed the cohort through the program. Many talked about the fact that these times were stressful because of engaging with new people and practicing networking, but integral to their growth.

Curricular Elements

Curricular elements considered most impactful to participants' LSE included the immersions, and a change project mentioned previously, but the dissertation process the work towards the final product was considered the most impactful. During immersions, the five participants who graduated from the same program, had the opportunity presented for them to choose to complete a dissertation together and was offered in a workshop. Others shared how motivated they were by researching a topic of great interest to them and that would directly impact their school site and community building their LSE. Loren said, "But I think the actual time researching and paying attention to the leaders that I was researching I feel like that for me, that was the biggest growth. And then that leads to the self-efficacy." Although the stress of her final oral dissertation was great, Caroline felt the practice of presenting her research was impactful to her LSE and said, "Doing that made me, that was an opportunity to realize, 'I know this stuff, I know this research. I know what I'm doing here.' So, just things like that that I could generalize to a greater sense of self-efficacy."

John expressed the impact of collecting his dissertation data through interviews with exemplary principals and that it was, "a great learning process for me and gave me ideas on what to change [in my school]." He also noted about his literature review,

> Doing all the research for that Chapter 2 of the dissertation kind of the collective body of research was impactful along with the interviews of the 10 principals. I mean that's something that I think is probably some of the best professional development I've actually ever done.

Reflection

The third theme pertains to the importance of reflection and self-exploration as mentioned by all 10 participants as impactful on their LSE. Each participant mentioned some learning more about their strengths and weaknesses and how to use them effectively as a leader. Anita valued the Gallup Organization Strengths Finder assessment and that learning more about herself was, "…life-changing because I find myself anytime, in difficult situations, going back to those strengths." Anita also shared that the assessment helped her to, "use those strengths every single day to create positive content, to reach people, to make connections." In reflecting on the difficulty of the last year during the pandemic and school closures, Anita also shared that she,

> Felt very useful in a time where…I think as a principal, it could have been very dark in feeling un-useful, you know what I mean? And so, I felt very useful and felt very in control and I felt like I was creating a story, a narrative, by communications, right. That I had control over, and that was positive and beneficial to others.

Three of the 10 participants said that they used the strengths assessment with their own staff to build community and self-efficacy in their teams.

Reflection as a practitioner was mentioned by all 10 participants as part of their growth and development during their program towards more confidence as a leader. All programs required participants to complete regular written reflection followed by collaborative face-to-face sharing. This was reported to aid in learning from others and in building confidence. Six out

of 10 participants expressed reflecting on doubts in their ability to complete a doctorate, but soon, through conversations with others and hearing their encouragement, were able to move forward and complete their program and capstone.

All participants reported that reflection was also used to work through emotional and mental health issues as well as problem solving. One participant, Caroline, shared a time when she reflected on her responsibility as a cohort member and its impact on her LSE.

> And other people were just so invested and ready to do whatever that it did cause me to stop and reflect like, "Why am I the person that's holding up this process? Why am I the person that is giving everybody a hard time in the grand scheme of things, it's one day." And so, it caused me to question, I guess, whether or not I could always be up for anything and I'm not sure if that's reasonable. I think everybody gets to have moments where they feel grumpy and everything else. But it was more witnessing other people having strong leadership in the moment and exhibiting positive behaviors where I didn't feel like I was and that decreased my self-efficacy because I thought that I'm not being a leader right now. I'm being grumpy.

Responsibility

The final theme of responsibility was represented in comments from all participants, either related to developing their skills as a responsible leader or learning to be responsible for the challenging job of working on their doctorate as well as being a principal and balancing homelife. Analysis of data found responsibility included leaders practicing and understanding responsibility as a school leader through coursework, faculty mentorships, learning from experts, and watching the success and responsibility of other leaders and peers in the doctoral program. There were 76 codes related to responsibility and subthemes with the codes most often mentioned were: follow through, the importance of the job, and resilience.

Follow Through

Seven out of 10 participants mentioned follow through in response to stress as critical to being a responsible leader and building LSE. Many challenges were mentioned as creators of stress while completing a doctorate while leading, including academic challenges, on the job and family commitments, and feelings of being overwhelmed in general. To remain responsible and face those challenges, follow through was reported as important to increase in LSE. To mitigate stress, follow through was shown through being organized, finding balance, focusing on priorities, understanding the importance of the job, following up on those in their care, time management, knowing when a break was needed to step away, and seeking the support and encouragement of others. All 10 participants completed their doctorate while in positions of leadership as a principal.

Although each participant was faced with a moment of either feeling overwhelmed or self-doubt, all shared experiences of employing follow through to help them push through. The main support for their capacity to follow through for all 10 participants was the support of others. Anita noted how a buddy helped her follow through,

That's what really got me through, was having a buddy to do it with. That was…And he's in a different doctoral program than me. We were just doing our dissertations at the same time. And so, it was just better, to be honest, to be able to meet somebody, because I don't know if I could have kept going every night to get everything done.

Justin mentioned, "sharing with folks that have life experiences knowing that you're going through similar things and then some of them things were worse...so, to be able to share with other students the experience of the coursework and the grind of it all. I think it was super helpful."

The Importance of the Job

Each participant mentioned in one way or another the impact on them of understanding the weight and importance of the job as a principal during the time they were a doctoral student. This was observed in many ways by watching others above them in leadership and teachers and staff on their campus that looked to them to lead. This realization pushed two of the 10 to get their doctorate with Justin noting, "I didn't know the rules of the game." One of the participants, Elizabeth, reflected on whether the importance of the job was for her,

> And so, I think, there were some points in time, where I was like, "If this is what being a leader feels like, I don't know that this is what I really want for myself." I don't know if this amount of stress, this amount of time commitment, this amount of people depending on me to make these huge decisions, I don't know if that's what I want if I can't find balance in my life, I don't know if it's worth it.' So, there were times where just the stress became so much. I don't know if it was the I didn't think I could do it, but I didn't know if I wanted to do it.

However, Elizabeth shared that through her cohort, she was able to get through these doubts and develop LSE. "And so, even with the girls in my cohort, we all found success in leading...and so, as the more successes you have, the more your kind of built up in your self-efficacy and feeling like, 'Yeah, I can do this.'"

Resilience

Five of the 10 participants mentioned resilience as a strategy for being responsible and developing LSE for their school site, family, and doctorate, including the resilience to complete a task and how that completion impacted their self-efficacy. Anita said,

> And so, I think the fact that I could finish [the doctorate] and do well in the coursework and complete all of it, for me gave me a tone of confidence in that I can do anything. Because, if I can survive this, being a full-time AP, a full-time parent, coaching my kids' sports, doing all that and finishing my doctorate, then it was...I can do anything. There is nothing anybody can say is too much work. I just don't believe it. There's not...

Elizabeth reported the impact of resilience and the completion of her program on her LSE after completion,

> So, it wasn't one specific event, but program over all that really had such a huge impact on my self-efficacy, that, in reflecting on that, and what I thought going in, I did. I thought going into it, 'I'm investing this money now, so that I can have the title, so that I'll be ready for a promotion later on down the road and that's how it's going to pay for itself.' I didn't really expect it to prepare me to be in a better position to coach future leaders coming up. Those were all parts of my self-efficacy that were impacted by the program as a whole.

John referred to it as grit, "hone in on the grit and the determination that anything's possible." Eric referred to resilience to make it through his program as impactful on his LSE, "...being able to navigate [my program], that was insurmountable in terms of preparing me for increased leadership and having to work full-time at my job and still putting the work in to complete this." John mentioned watching the resilience of others through difficulties as impactful.

Discussion & Implications

A leader's relationship quality with subordinates has been connected positively to LSE (Paglis & Green, 2002). The findings of this study support the claim of Paglis & Green (2002) that leadership attempts develop LSE and provide direction setting, commitment to the task, and the ability to overcome obstacles. Many scholars have drawn on Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, including McCormick et al. (2002), who used it to develop the concepts of LSE and LSE development. LSE was used by Paglis (2010) to explore the concept more deeply, linking LSE with leaders' individual performance and collective efficacy in their schools and performance. All participants in the current study noted improved LSE, with the development of LSE related to their completion of a doctoral program being most mentioned. Participants noted that relationships, relevancy, reflection, and responsibility impacted their LSE. Each participant shared in their responses the impact of the four themes on the development of LSE and that other university programs should make them central parts of preparation programs and doctoral programs. Candidate recommendations for doctoral programs will be the focus of future work.

The experiences of principal participants in this study developed LSE through this construct and the impact of relationships, relevancy, reflection, and responsibility. The task of developing leaders for schools today is an extraordinary and urgent need for the success of students across the United States, especially after the recent impact of COVID-19 on student learning. Preparing leaders for success is an investment. School leaders may develop leader self-efficacy in many ways including through district programs, credentialing programs, professional development, and collaboration. A graduate degree, such as an Ed.D, is also an avenue that school leaders can develop LSE, but research is limited related to the advanced degree's impact on LSE. Understanding how a doctoral program can develop and should develop LSE could be impactful on the success of completing leaders. Through understanding what post graduate programs can do to increase leader self-efficacy in school leaders, leaders can be better prepared for success to impact teacher's efficacy and that of their students. School leaders will need to be ready to face challenges never faced before in education. The development of leader self-efficacy in

professional development programs may be one of the keys to building back lost learning for students of all needs and demographics.

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