COVID-19 as a Window for Equity-Oriented School Leadership: What Have we learned From Principals' COVID-19 Response?

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that principals' capacity to advance equity might have been constrained by pre-COVID conditions. Drawing on the emerging literature on school leadership during the pandemic, the current article discusses how principals' capacity to advance equity was expanded as a result of the window of opportunities created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the increased frequency at which schools experience crises, understanding these opportunities may allow stakeholders to better support principals' efforts to enact equity-oriented leadership practices. Implications for leadership preparation, school funding, accountability policies, and future research are discussed.

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

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted school closures globally, forcing schools to transition to remote instruction. Data from Education Week (2020) estimates that the pandemic-induced school closures affected approximately 55.1 million students in 124,000 public and private schools across the United States. While scholars initially considered the pandemic as the great equalizer, assumed to have affected everyone equally (Grooms & Childs, 2021), emerging research shows that individuals from minority and low socioeconomic backgrounds were disproportionately affected by the pandemic (Curriculum Associates, 2020; Dorn et al., 2020; Gee et al., 2023; Hammerstein et al., 2021; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; Kuhfeld et al., 2023; Lewis et al., 2021). These studies have also shown that historically marginalized students were less likely to have the resources and support needed to engage with distance learning; more likely to be served by untrained teachers and under-resourced schools; and inevitably, experience greater academic losses than their more privileged peers (Curriculum Associates, 2021; DeMatthews et al., 2023; Hammerstein et al., 2021).

Leadership for Equity During COVID-19

The emerging literature on school leadership during the pandemic demonstrates principals' attentiveness to these issues and their role in mediating these inequities across their schools (Grooms & Childs, 2021; Jackson et al., 2022; Lavadenz et al., 2021; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Virella & Cobb, 2021). In a descriptive analysis of nationally representative data on school leaders' priorities, Hamilton et al. (2020) and Trinidad (2021) reported that addressing academic achievement gaps became a higher priority for more than two-thirds of all principals across the United States; these findings were especially larger across high-poverty schools. Other studies, though mostly qualitative, identify three broad areas in which principals advanced equity for marginalized students (DeMartino & Weiser, 2021; Grooms & Child, 2021; Hayes et al., 2021; Jackson et al., 2022; Lavandenz et al., 2021 McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Price & Mansfield, 2021; Reyes-Guerra, 2021; Supovitz & Manghan, 2022; Virella & Cobb, 2021). First, principals worked earnestly to provide students with laptops, tablets, and internet, and at times they even provided technical support for these services so students could engage with schools virtually. Second, extending beyond addressing resource deficiencies and learning loss, feeding families and providing socio-emotional and mental health support was prioritized in principals' crisis response (Brion & Kiral, 2021; Longmuir, 2021; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). Third, research describes the efforts of principals who acknowledged and challenged systems of inequities across their schools. Principals attended to the structural roots of inequities across their learning environs by

challenging racist policies and practices and deficit thinking about marginalized students at the school and district levels. Taken together, these studies suggest that principals' attention and capacity to advance equity might have been constrained by pre-COVID conditions (see Grooms & Child, 2021; Jackson et al., 2022; Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020; Virella & Cobb, 2021)In this essay, the COVID-19 pandemic is framed as creating a *window of opportunities* for principals to engage in equity-oriented leadership across their schools (Kingdon, 2010). In doing so, this essay recognizes how the pandemic heightened our critical consciousness of systemic inequities in our current educational structures (Farmer-Hinton & Closson, 2023; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Zhao, 2020), as well as provided the opportunity to reimagine these structures through what Ladson-Billings (2021) recommends as a *hard reset*.

DISCUSSION

In the words of Virella and Cobb (2021), the pandemic "brought out the best in school leaders, who have reacted in creative and equitable ways" (p. 2). Likewise, Jackson (2023) suggests that "before the pandemic, principals might not have taken such a proactive stance in challenging inequitable policy and practices" (p. 66). These efforts have been applauded by at least two scholars, who acknowledge that school leaders' "focus on doing what is best for kids may never have been more apparent" (Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020, p. 367) than it was during the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a light on long-standing inequities across schools and the need for school leaders to mediate these inequities. Given these arguments, this discussion conceptualizes the pandemic as creating a window of opportunities that might have influenced principals' consciousness of, and attentiveness to, inequities. These arguments are explored in more detail below.

Exacerbated Inequities

While the pandemic did not create many of the inequities that surfaced, it exacerbated those that existed before. For example, students' lack of access to technological resources and academic support at home was highlighted as schools transitioned overnight to virtual learning. Students from low-income, Black, and Latinx households were less likely to have access to the technology and internet required to participate in online learning (DeMatthews et al., 2023; Haderlein et al., 2021; Stelitano et al., 2020). Furthermore, despite Hispanic, Black, and low-income students engaging with remote learning at a lower rate than their White peers, these individuals were least likely to have access to in-person instruction during the pandemic (Camp & Zamarro, 2022; Haderlein et al., 2021). Prior to the pandemic, these inequities might have gone unnoticed as schools compensated for these inequities (Supowitz & Manghan, 2022).

Through an analysis of survey data obtained from a nationally representative sample of principals across the United States, DeMatthews et al. (2023) found that schools serving high proportions of Black, Latinx, and free and reduced-price meal-eligible students were more likely to be ill-prepared to mediate the inequities noted above. Likewise, schools serving high proportions of marginalized students were more likely to be under-resourced, be served by inexperienced teachers, struggle with issues of teacher shortages (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Carver-Thomas et al., 2022; DeMatthews et al., 2023). Given the disparities in access and learning opportunities noted above, it is no surprise that the pandemic disproportionately impacted the academic achievement of marginalized students— American Indians, Blacks, Hispanics, and those from low-income homes—widening the already-existing achievement gap (Curriculum Associates, 2020; Diliberti & Kaufman, 2020; Dorn et al., 2020; Hammerstein et al., 2021; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; Kuhfeld et al., 2023; Lewis et al., 2021). Given these inequities, the pandemic appears to have provided an imperfect opportunity for principals to develop awareness of systemic inequities that have long existed, and the conviction to redress them, or at least attempt to do so (Hamilton & Ercikan, 2022; Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020; Virella & Cobb, 2021).

Relaxed Accountability Expectations

In response to challenges around preparing and administering federally mandated accountability tests during the pandemic, states were invited to apply for waivers from the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) accountability requirements in March 2020. Ujifusa (2021) reports that as of June 24, 2021, 41 states and the District of Columbia received waivers from certain accountability mandates. This waiver temporarily lifted ESSA requirements for statewide standardized tests, school grading, and accountability-based report cards. Studies emerging from the pandemic are already acknowledging the benefits of waived accountability mandates on principals' leadership capacity. Taken together, these studies suggest that the pause on external accountability enables principals to develop internal systems that benefit schools' responsiveness to their students' needs (Francois & Weiner, 2020; Weiner et al., 2021), thereby expanding their capacity to advance equity. While proponents of accountability might argue that standardized tests are intended to advance equity by shining light on inequitable outcomes,

other scholars have found that these practices might have "sabotaged equitable outcomes" (Francois & Weiner, 2022, p. 1; see also Au, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2007). Moreover, Goodwin et al. (2003) argue that accountability mandates oftentimes trespass on principals' autonomy, affecting their ability to engender their own equity-oriented actions.

Increased Autonomy

Although principals exert broad control in their execution of school-based decisions, this autonomy is often constrained by district policies (Flessa, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2012). A robust body of literature on school district relations suggests that principals are brokers between their schools and districts (Shaked & Schecter, 2017; Spillane et al., 2002), implementing policies to which they have no authority to change (Flessa, 2012). However, the pandemic appeared to have altered these routines. Though principals were tasked with translating district regulations regarding distance learning, school reopening, and other safety mandates, Hubbard et al. (2020) and Anderson and Weiner (2023) found that principals had great discretion in their sensemaking and implementation. In its simplest form, school leaders at times have challenged or subverted district policies when they perceived they policies to be at odds with the best interests of their schools and students; at other times they have chosen to pursue more equitable actions (Anderson & Weiner, 2023; Jackson et al., 2022; Kaul et al., 2022). Hubbard et al.'s (2020) study of 120 principals across 19 states also noted increased autonomy from some districts that recognized the importance of individualized school-based crisis response, especially across districts where existing infrastructure and resources were already in place. In these instances, district leaders restricted their role to providing guidance and support to school leaders where needed. On the other hand, the absence of district guidance and support appears to have empowered some principals to engender bold and brave equity-oriented actions in pursuit of their institutional needs (Hubbard et al., 2020).

Funding Provisions

Between March 27, 2020, and March 21, 2021, Congress allotted approximately $190 billion for State Education Agencies (SEA) to expand their local education agencies' (LEAs) capacity to address the impact of the pandemic on their constituency. Passed in three waves, the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds were administered to K-12 schools to mediate COVID-19 learning loss and to facilitate reopening schools. Thelen-Creps and colleagues (2022) explained that these funds were explicitly designed to advance equity as evidenced by the legislation's maintenance of equity provision, which means that historically disadvantaged students—including students from low-income families, students of color, English learners, students with disabilities, and students experiencing homelessness—must receive an equitable share of state and local funds in states' COVID-19 response. As an example of how these funds have been used to address equity, the School Superintendents Association [AASA] (2021) surveyed district leaders to understand their plans to utilize ESSER funds. The AASA reported that ESSER funds created opportunities for schools to remedy technology access issues by providing students with computer devices and internet access, mediating learning loss through intensive summer programs and enrichment activities, and expanding schools' capacity to support students during school closures by allowing them to hire additional instructional support staff and specialists. These provisions most likely benefitted particularly marginalized students more likely to be negatively impacted during the pandemic. Moreover, Malkus (2021) noted that the limited restrictions on ESSER funds use will likely lead to better learning conditions since schools might use these funds to address pre-COVID inequities, such as inadequate resources, additional staff, and building conditions.

Socio-Political Happenings

At the onset of the pandemic, the brutal killing of George Floyd sparked national attention and conversations about the experiences of African Americans with law enforcement officers. These discourses gave traction to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, an umbrella term used to denote the movement for racial justice for African Americans. The New York Times estimates that the protest attracted over 15 million participants nationwide and has been described as the largest in the history of the United States (Buchanan et al., 2020). In addition to this, the apathetic responses from political leaders, such as former President Trump, and later, the attack on Critical Race Theory, offered school leaders the opportunity to recognize and discuss with their staffs how social inequalities and injustices affect schools (Grooms & Child, 2021; Virella & Cobb, 2021). In the emerging literature, school leaders' reflections on these happenings influence their anti-racist and equity-oriented leadership practices. In support of this, Reyes-Guerra et al. (2021) and Virella and Cobb (2021) reported that principals in their study were compelled to challenge the deficit thinking of their staff and district personnel regarding the performance and engagement of marginalized students through difficult conversations centered around race, poverty,

and inequities. These socio-political happenings force school leaders 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" (Virella & Cobb, 2021, p. 2).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As we begin to reimagine an education system post-COVID, it is important that we not forget the lessons learned. While the pandemic did not create nor cause many of the inequities seen, it exacerbated those that existed before. More importantly, the equity-driven responses from school leaders nationwide suggest that these efforts might have been constrained by pre-COVID conditions. The *window of opportunities* created by the pandemic, as discussed, is not exhaustive. However, it provides an understanding of how pre-COVID conditions might have and might continue, as we return to normalcy, to stifle principals' capacity to advance equity. In support of this view, Stone-Johnson & Weiner (2020) argue,

> Principals have long had to operate in increasingly uncertain environments under tremendous pressure with limited resources… current structures and systems may fail to elevate, and may even suppress, principals' ability to move their schools to meet the challenges awaiting them. (p. 368)

While acknowledging the heroic efforts of school administrators to support students throughout the pandemic, Supovitz and Manghan (2022) caution that until changes are made to the structures within which principals operate, "their efforts will pale in comparison to the challenges they face" (p. 15). Considering this caution, the discussion presented in this essay has several important implications for educational policies and practices across the K-12 landscape and offers insights for education practitioners and policymakers.

1. First, the pandemic highlights the critical roles played by school leaders in mediating inequities across their constituency. As was evident from the pandemic, principals' roles extended beyond the walls of their schools and into their communities where they attempted to address community-based inequities that were exacerbated by the pandemic. While the arguments contained within this essay are pandemic-specific, they illuminate the equity-oriented leadership dispositions and actions required of principals during non-crisis periods. However, scholars have long held that principals remain largely unprepared for these responsibilities, raising criticism targeted at principal preparation programs (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015; Gonzales et al., 2022; Green, 2018; Marshall, 2004). For these reasons, greater attention should be given to how principals are prepared for this important role. That is, principal preparation programs should develop the critical consciousness of aspiring school leaders by exposing them to the experiences of marginalized student groups and providing opportunities for them to engage in action that could potentially redress these issues.

2. Second, considering the reality that much of principals' autonomy is constrained by district leaders and the policies that are enacted, leadership preparation programs should extend these considerations to district leaders and staff. Like programs centered on preparing school-based leaders, those geared towards district leadership roles such as superintendent licensure programs should consider embedding coursework that also develops the critical consciousness of these individuals and their preparedness to enact *systems-focused equity leadership* (see Honig & Honsa, 2020). As noted by Barbara and Krovitz (2005), if principals are to successfully lead for equity, this needs to be fully supported at the district level.

3. Next, while inequitable school funding and the current accountability systems are no strangers to criticisms of perpetuating inequities, the current paper fosters a renewed call for attention to be given to these practices. On one hand, increasing K-12 funding provisions beyond that provided through federal and state allocations might allow principals to better cater to the needs of their most vulnerable learners, holistically. On the other hand, there is a need to rethink current accountability structures in a manner that fosters both improved and equitable learning outcomes for all students.

4. Future research should examine principals' perceptions about their capacity to advance equity before and after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Scholars could use qualitative methods to probe principals' perceptions about how the pandemic supported their ability to engage in equity-oriented leadership. Likewise, survey designs could also be used to assess principals' awareness and attentiveness to inequities before and after the pandemic. These studies could provide support for the arguments throughout this paper and substantiate the recommendations made within.

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