

FLUX LEADERSHIP: INSIGHTS FROM THE (VIRTUAL) FIELD

Flux Pedagogy was generated as an equity-oriented crisis pedagogy framework in March 2020, during the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, as the world, and our lives, drastically changed seemingly in an instant. Within the past six months of this pandemic-in-motion we have seen sweeping civic response to state-sanctioned police brutality and structural racism of the United States. All aspects of life are in a radical state of flux. Students, teachers, and leaders are concerned about their families and communities, their lives are disrupted in ways that affect daily experience, livelihoods, and well-being now and for the foreseeable future. Schools, indeed the field of education as a whole, is riddled with complex questions that require agile, justice-oriented, culturally responsive and racially literate leadership. Students—as well as those who lead and educate them in schools—have unprecedented concerns—how will the realities of today affect them and shape tomorrow? What does all of this mean for schooling?

The educational leaders in this section of Flux Leadership narratives were relatively new doctoral students in Penn GSE's Mid-Career doctoral Program in Educational Leadership when COVID-19 hit. The leaders, who were in a seminar focused on leader research, were thrust into chaos as shelter-in-place orders rushed over the country in early March 2020. These leaders' professional worlds became absolute bedlam overnight—in these early moments of the crisis, these leaders' secondary trauma from their students already in crisis was visible, palpable, and heart-wrenching. As we came together for class on their last day, March 13, 2020, of leading their schools and districts in person, we—all shaken up and in a state of true disbelief and confusion—connected as humans in pain engaging with people who were in even deeper pain.

We pivoted. These inspiring educational leaders, as inquiry teams, engaged in leader inquiry over the past six months. They share powerful stories of their lived crisis leadership experiences and those of leaders, community members, and students. These reflections illuminate what it means to say that we are not in what some keep referring to as a “new normal,” and that there's not a “new normal” coming—there is only constant change, now and for the foreseeable future. This educational change is long overdue. It's time to transform our education system so that it is the arm of justice rather than the arm of a racialized carceral state, and leaders are the ones who are situated to listen to, engage with, and lift up marginalized voices and concerns as a mission mode in order to achieve this. And, as we must not forget in all of this, leaders are also experiencing their own trauma, managing their own radically changed lives, and trying to lead in an education system that is up in the air due to the unknown ripple effects of a pandemic and social upheaval. We need to share these narratives in ever-widening circles so that their efforts are catalyzed. This is a step in that direction.

These generative practitioner narratives are all-the-more crucial in the truly harrowing social, political, and educational context of the United States today in the midst of a global pandemic with rolling shelter-in-place orders, with an onslaught of state-sanctioned police brutality and sweeping civic responses in U.S. streets for justice and peace, and with the carceral state in full force including the inhumane family separation and caging of Latinx immigrants at our Southern border. Even before these intersecting pandemics, the U.S. education system was deeply problematic and dysfunctional--standardized tests are a proxy for meaningful learning and scripted curricula are seen as rational and effective, where children live in fear of ICE raids and deportation as well as school shootings that are preventable but for White male dominance in government, where curricular content and pedagogical methods reflect mostly White middle-class male norms, where implicit biases lead to the hyper-policing of Black and brown students (and their families) in and out of schools, and where educational leaders yearning to engage in professional development that is thoughtful and constructively critical about equity are instead met with superficial workshops on district mandates and reactionary diversity meetings only offered on the heels of crises and incidents (Pak & Ravitch, 2021).

This collection of essays emerges at a national inflection point of change. Centralized in this contribution are 25 mid-career leaders serving in a variety of educational leadership positions who are also executive doctoral students. These leader-inquiry-based essays refine, expand upon, and give practical life to the conceptual frames of flux leadership. Together, they promote a critical hybridization of leadership practice as a driving force for educational change and transformation. By enacting flux leadership alongside leader-led inquiry, these leaders offer generative ideas for leadership; they lift up useful frames, concepts, and practices that educational leaders can integrate into your own work right now.

References:

Pak, K. & Ravitch, S. M. (2021). *Critical leadership praxis: Leading educational and social change*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

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