

TEACHING AND LEADERSHIP DURING COVID-19: LESSONS FROM LIVED EXPERIENCES

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“The urgency of planning for change is paramount. We are asking people to go through a lot of change in a very short amount of time. Even if the change is good there is still loss involved.” - Kenneth McCants Persall

Our practitioner inquiry explored leader and teacher pedagogies and their impact on student learning during the COVID-19 pandemic through the stories of the leaders and teachers serving in this crisis. We came together as leader-researchers to examine how teachers, leaders, and school communities worked to be adaptive during the final months of school and into the summer of 2020. Teachers across a variety of schools shared their powerful wishes to engage in responsive pedagogy to meet the various needs of their students during COVID-19 and to predict what approach, style, or strategy could be adapted, refined, revised, and/or eliminated when school became a place to go and not a thing to do. One of the most significant things both teachers and leaders shared was the need and the drive they felt to connect to their students in order to foster and support their social emotional needs, and, further, the power of rapport in shaping content delivery and overall engagement. Leaders set the tone for how all of this happened.

We studied live adaptive leadership from district and school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are district and school leaders ourselves, CEO, gentleman of color, The Community Charter School of Paterson, New Jersey, Principal, woman of color, Two Rivers Charter School, Washington D.C, Superintendent, white woman, Vernon Township School District, NJ. We spoke with fourteen leaders to explore the complex leadership moves and decisions they made during the onset and ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. These leaders shared the range of ways that they quickly re-envisioned and revised academic structures for remote learning and promoted instructional planning and teacher engagement in a remote setting. They shared the urgent nature of these re-envisioning processes, and we explored their unique experiences to understand what is shared across them. The specific contours of support for communities, families, students, and teachers from each leader differed according to their communities' diverse needs. Yet across these leaders is a demonstrated resilience, clear drive, applied intelligence, and deep and abiding care for their communities during a time when pandemic-related stressors and limited information were prevalent, even in their/our own lives and families.

Teachers and leaders across school settings including urban New Jersey charter K-8, urban New Jersey charter - K-12, rural New Jersey public - K-12, and metropolitan charter K-8 in Washington D.C. indicated evidence of similar kinds of connections that share how much they value not only the academic rigors of schooling, but even more importantly, the social fabric that bonds teachers and learners. While the specific insider school and district perspectives differ, the reflections and findings of heartfelt educators who miss their students, work tirelessly to create online content with little to no instructional design support is truly inspirational.

“When we don't have walls how do you pull people in and keep people tight?”
- Chelsie Jones

“Every interaction right now must be so intentional. There are no spontaneous interactions throughout the day.” - Jeff Hyke-Williams

Leaders in each context had to—quickly and with little clear information or direction—create processes to transition academics to online teaching and advising formats while simultaneously addressing a seemingly unending set of structural inequities that unfurled on our communities in terms of healthcare and income disparities as well as technology resource gaps that impacted the communities they serve in immediate and sometimes crushing ways. We found, again and again, that leader creativity and inner-resources combined with a visionary passion for teaching and value on professional learning make for vital ingredients for success in delivering content virtually as well as for teaching and leading more broadly during a period of flux (Ravitch, 2020).

“COVID-19 and the impact that this will have on our district is unknown. We don't have a playbook or policy to follow moving forward. However, we have an opportunity to re-envision what it means to provide high quality teaching and

learning to our 900 plus students. It's important that we all lean on each other in the days and weeks to come.” - Curtis Palmore

“Racism is a system, not a person. If I'm part of that system then I guess I'm (racist)....I don't take that with a badge of honor. I take that as a slap in the face but I don't know what to change.” - John Getz

Concurrent with COVID-19, we explored these leaders' and their school communities responses to the eruption of civil response to state-sanctioned police brutality and murder of Black people in the United States. The continued impact of systemic racism on schooling coupled with COVID-19 has forced educators to identify a continuum of responses throughout the pandemic, virtual learning, and the microaggressions and racist backdrop which has exploded to the forefront of all facets of the US especially education, which has served a socially reproductive purpose that upholds a racist system. We share the range of ways that these bold, courageous leaders continue to respond to this fraught leader journey. We do so through sharing the narrated experiences of educators challenged by the “new normal” though we know that racism in schools is far from new. The very structures that compose brick and mortar schools are being examined in this time given the ways that school changed overnight due to the pandemic. More importantly, however are the mindsets of leaders and educators. Without a shift in practice, structure, policy, and the hearts and minds of educators racism will continue to exist.

“As a black leader, it is difficult being in a position that requires me to use my voice to talk about race. There is a deep knowing that we can no longer look away and we can no longer remain quiet. It is also deeply painful for black leaders to have to use their voices. - Kenneth McCants-Persall

“When I think about the future of education, I want to say restoration but restoration is the wrong word. I don't want to fix something that is broken. Rebirth. I want to teach our children about being human, how they should love, what they should reach for and rage against. ” - Chelsie Jones

Throughout these intersecting challenges, the lived experiences of leaders through this pandemic and the explosion of civil response to racism are influential in how we lead, what we prioritize, and the impact that the experiences of leaders have on our families and our sense of self as people and as leaders. The leaders we spoke with shared a range of continued reinforcement of racial acts as well as advocacy for people of color. Protests, marches, meetings, and courageous conversations in communities and with families are essential yet challenging. The continued experiences of racism lead in some cases to avoidance of family or friends. In other cases it leads to conflict within communities and passionate pleas for understanding.

Since the positioning of leaders differs, the impact that leadership has on each community differs as well. Communities across the nation are experiencing both racism and COVID-19 differently. The impact in the schools and school communities is an important part of this shift. Virtual learning, in some cases, has created a barrier in schools where teachers may not be addressing events of racism the way they would if school were in session. Or perhaps educators, even in live classroom instruction, might stick to their planned lessons, avoiding conversations on racism. This chapter documents the diverse continuum our communities are on. The shared beliefs and core values of each community impacts education in a profound way. As values show up during interviews with teachers and leaders, it helps us understand and plan the path to the future where racism no longer exists.

The major questions explored in this chapter are: *Will the individual paths need to be synthesized to find unity to change policy and practice? Will the continuum in varying communities need to have a shared trajectory in order for systemic racism to finally crumble? How will school leaders care for children, educate them, and be sure that equity happens for each and every child?*

Leaders shared their experiences of managing tremendous loss including COVID-related death and the loss of community connection. This directly brought despair, frustration, anger, and sadness to school leaders who desired the personal interaction pre-COVID. The loss of connection did nothing to drive our collective passion for the work of leading, teaching, and connecting. This resonates with us as leaders feeling so much loss and grief ourselves. Having to lead teams during a pandemic was initially paralyzing and brought up feelings of inadequacy and fear. Our teams often had more questions than there were answers for. Familiar spaces were no longer recognizable or comfortable to maneuver, as there was often not a policy or procedure in place for leaders to abide by the myriad of issues faced with COVID-19 and the related systemic racism. The authors discuss common themes of how leadership endured during this pandemic, including prioritizing connection, joy, grace, and being flexible.

As leaders are planning for reentry to the new school year, we are prioritizing empowering families, social-emotional connection with students and staff, and dismantling systemic racism in our organizations. Without the brick and mortar buildings, the need to reach out directly to families and give them spaces to share their needs emerged as critical in the planning of remote learning. Additionally, as these leaders design reentry plans they speak about the need to empower families with choice around what they

want and need for their children. School leaders are reimagining the informal daily connections with students, staff and families. How can these vital connections exist in a virtual space? Leaders talked about how they worried about their teams and students social-emotional wellbeing without them. Leaders also reflected on the weight of responsibility they are feeling as plans are being created to open schools. The balance of healthy practices regarding reopening during a pandemic, parent and student needs, and strengthening virtual instruction culminate into excessive pressure for school leaders.

Finally, as leaders plan for the future we hold common desire and hope to reimagine what is possible for black students in school. Leaders shared specific strategies aimed at dismantling structures that uphold racism in their institutions. Some outstanding models for anti-racist schools and connecting with the community about bias are shared. There is a deep desire not to return to the status quo in schools, this is resounding.

“The depths of this crisis has left educators with no choice other than to reprioritize what matters most for our children. America’s historic and long-standing obsession with competition through testing has been taken off the table, and instead we are now looking at the needs of the whole child. The prioritization of social emotional learning and response to trauma will ensure our students have critical life skills that will ensure personal success, and ultimately the advancement of our society as a whole.” - Dr. Lisa Lin Schneider

“It has provided a movement that we have to reflect and say what we are doing, why are we doing it and how can we do things better? We can’t go back and I am not sure what the answer is but I’m excited about the prospects.” - Maggie Bello

What’s clear across these leaders is the ardent belief that this moment in front of educators can’t be ignored and we can’t come out of it the same way we went in. Schools must be different. Teaching must be different. Leadership must be different. Education must be different. This charge requires leaders to be bold in our decisions. We must maximize this moment of tremendous loss and change with and through creative and hopeful leadership.

References:

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