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<https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.3711>

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Sustainable Leadership During Turbulent Times

by

Paul Marietta

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education
in
Educational Leadership: Administration

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Portland State University
2024

Abstract

Teachers, administrators, and staff in schools are leaving the profession at unprecedented rates. The principal pipeline has significantly decreased in the past years and our public school system is at a breaking point. Now more than ever, we need to focus on sustainable leadership during turbulent times and helping the organization, students, families, teachers-and also their leaders-thrive. This dissertation proposal follows the Portland State University (PSU) multi-paper format which comprises a compilation of three papers in a journal article style format, with sole or multiple authors, and although PSU policy does not require it, the topic of the papers in this multi-paper electronic dissertation are closely related, with the focus on sustainable leadership during turbulent times.

Acknowledgements

I set forward in my doctoral study to gain insight on how to better do my job as a school principal. Starting this program before the COVID pandemic and then continuing the study through challenges provided me a place to harness my feelings and focus as I experienced significant personal struggle. I am forever grateful to my committee for their guidance and support both as a person and as a scholar, and specifically, I am grateful to my chair, Dr. Deborah Peterson for her insight, provocations, and expert knowledge on how to make doctoral work practical and helpful to both myself and other educational leaders.

I also want to thank my wife, Jenny, and children for their patience and understanding as I navigated the time commitments during a tumultuous time in our lives. Finally, I would like to honor both of my parents, Dave and Mary Marietta, who both were diagnosed and ultimately died of cancer during the course of my study and writing. Their presence and guidance will continue to be felt for the rest of my life.

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
List of Figures.....	iv
Chapter One: Introduction	
Problem of Practice.....	1
Changing Landscape in Education	4
Researcher Positionality.....	8
Validates Existence of Problem.....	10
Researcher Stance.....	12
Significance of Study.....	14
References for Chapter One.....	20
Chapter Two: Scholarly Practitioner Paper 1	
The Multi-Paper Dissertations: Lessons Learned as a Doctoral Candidate.....	29
References for Chapter Two.....	46
Chapter Three: Scholarly Practitioner Paper 2	
Stronger Leadership through Personal Crises: Invisible Backpack.....	49
References for Chapter Three.....	58
Chapter Four: Scholarly Practitioner Paper 3	
Who Are You, Where Are You Going, and... <i>Why?</i>	60
References for Chapter Four.....	68
Chapter Five: Conclusion and Scholarly Practitioner Paper 4	
Sustainable Leadership During Turbulent Times.....	70
References for Conclusion.....	83

List of Figures

Figure 1.1 Micropolitical Leadership Matrix.....	19
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Chapter One: Introduction

Background of the Problem

Educators in the United States are leaving the profession at unprecedented rates, with many factors contributing to their departure. According to a 2022 Gallup poll of more than 12,000 professionals,

More than four in 10 K-12 workers in the U.S. (44%) say they ‘always’ or ‘very often’ feel burned out at work, outpacing all other industries nationally. College and university workers have the next-highest burnout level, at 35%, making educators among the most burned-out groups in the U.S. workforce (Marken & Agrawal, 2022, paragraph 1).

A 2022 poll by the National Educators Association (Walker, 2022), revealed that the primary drivers for the mass exodus include general stress, unfilled positions at the school, low pay, student behavior issues, and lack of respect by the community. The poll further found that 55% of teachers of all races are currently thinking about leaving the field of education, with 60% of minoritized teachers indicating they are considering leaving the field.

The high rates of principal resignation and attrition have significant impacts on teacher longevity and, ultimately, on student outcomes. Nearly 50% of principals who completed a National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) survey indicated “their stress level is so high, they are considering a career change or retirement” (Camera, 2022, paragraph 1). NASSP president Gregg Wieczorek responded to this crisis by noting the following:

The principal pipeline is becoming increasingly fractured at all levels, in every region of the country and in all school types. Recruiting and retaining school

leaders will become even more difficult, if more is not done to support educators in our schools (Wieczorek, 2021, paragraph 2).

The impact of this exodus of teachers and school leaders will directly influence every child's experience through the K-12 system. If we do nothing about the increase in teachers and leaders leaving the profession, our schools and communities will experience a continual churn of new teachers, or worse, positions remaining vacant and unfilled. In a 2004 study published in the *Journal of School Finance*, Watlington et al. (2010) determined the financial cost of replacing a teacher. In Broward County where they conducted the study, the cost in 2004 of teacher turnover was approximately \$12,000 per teacher. One critical element of improving teacher effectiveness is retention and making sure the environment is conducive to collaboration. Kini and Podlksy (2016) note: "teachers' effectiveness increases at a greater rate when they teach in a supportive and collegial working environment" (p. 286). Further, Kini and Podolsky note that Teaching experience is positively associated with student achievement gains throughout a teacher's career. Gains in teacher effectiveness associated with experience are most steep in teachers' initial years but continue to be significant as teachers reach the second, and often third, decades of their careers (p.286).

In order for us to retain our best teachers, school leaders need to focus on the critical elements that leaders can control. We cannot control federal changes in policy, state initiatives that change when political leaders change, or policy issues at the school board level that change with new elections. However, we can change our leadership strategies. I believe that *leadership matters*. According to the work of the Wallace Foundation (2021), "Studies using new data and methods show that the importance of

principals may not have been stated strongly enough in earlier work, given the magnitude and scope of principals' impacts on students and schools (paragraph 1). Leithwood et al. (2004) support this focus by finding that the quality of the principal is, among school-based factors, second only to the quality of the teacher in contributing to what students learn in the classroom.

It is not necessarily *what* school leaders must do, it is *how* they go about doing it that will lead to success or failure. Too often our principal preparation programs focus on the technical side of the work. Aspiring leaders have often been indoctrinated in the core belief that our responsibilities are in telling teachers what to do. John Hattie's (2008) meta-analysis in *Visible Learning*, and before him, Robert Marzano's (2001) *Classroom Instruction That Works* identified all the things that teachers should do. Further, Charlotte Danielson's "Framework for Teaching" (2007) identified areas of teaching that principals could use to coach teachers for improvement; sadly, the rubric was converted to a checklist for teacher evaluation with 11 components, and 38 sub-components of observation in which to evaluate teachers. These noted educational leaders wrote books that are filled with technical tools. However, the set of technical tools sent administrators, including myself, down a rabbit hole of narrowing the focus during feedback cycles on the techniques the teachers were using. Much of the professional development and resources were dedicated solely to the technical side of teaching and education. National student achievement data show that during this time of focusing on technical solutions, student outcomes stagnated or declined. Barshay (2020) noted that on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), first administered in the early 1900s, student achievement, particularly in math, steadily improved until the late 2000s,

then student achievement flatlined. Reading scores also stagnated during this time (Hechinger Report, 2018). Further, during the pandemic, outcomes for students of color decreased at a higher rate. According to the NAEP, as compiled by Modan (2022), “Black students saw a 13-point decrease, almost three times the size of the decline for White students” (section 3, paragraph 2) during this time. These data do not prove causation; however, the correlation is worthy of examination.

Heifetz (2002) notes that in each context, we need to identify whether a change is a technical change or an adaptive change. Bryk et al. (2015), noted educator who promotes the use of Improvement Science, notes that variation in context requires a solution based on contextual issues, rather than a technical, top-down, one size fits all solutions. School boards, superintendents, and principals need to be more engaged in adaptive changes that can endure and that result in improvements in student outcomes. Quoting Heifetz (1994), Daly and Chrispels (2008) say “Adaptive leadership is required when both the problem definition and solution involve learning, not the mere application of a ‘quick fix’” (p.33). Improvement Science focuses on using local, timely data to engage in learning or improvement cycles that are context specific, rather than broad-scale technical solutions.

Changing Landscape in Education

In *Tinkering Towards Utopia*, authors Tyack and Cuban (2001) best frame the historical challenges to school reform acknowledging that much of the “reforms” have come from the outside in. They further state that many reforms and changes in education do not occur precisely due to the structure of decision making that does not take key

stakeholder perspectives into consideration. Among reasons that people are leaving the profession is the negative public perception of teachers and the teaching profession.

Walton and Polluck (2022) of *The New York Times* note the responsibility of “the nation’s politicians, who’ve neglected and underfunded education for years, and scored cheap political points vilifying teachers” (paragraph 6). It appears the structural perspective also does not, at least to a great extent, consider the complexity of change within the variability of the people involved in the change. Following the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2002, educators were to be held accountable for achievement gains that became illuminated through the use of widespread standardized testing.

Altruistic in its motives, the mechanics of the legislation became problematic as they led to an expanded focus on summative data-informed practices for evaluation, rather than on formative data-informed practices that would improve instruction and help educators learn what works in their particular context.

The implementation of “interventions” or “programs” based on summative data, without regard for context, was a natural byproduct of schools striving to improve their baseline scores. Peterson, Carlile and McDaniel (2022) assert, “large scale experiments tend to mislead rather than inform practice and are a major reason that efforts to reform high poverty schools have had limited success” (p.2). Using a more contextual approach, Peterson, et al. continue, “There must be a critical reexamination of current systems, policies, and practices using a lens that is committed to making the changes necessary to improve outcomes for all” (p. 5). They, along with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and renowned educational leaders such as Tony Bryk (2020) assert that *Improvement Science* (IS) offers the most hope for improvement solutions that

are not top down, are context specific, and use localized data to help teachers and leaders identify the change ideas that need to be adopted, adapted, or abandoned, using local data in short cycles of improvement inquiry. In addition to top-down mandated changes, initiative overload and initiative fatigue may also be contributing to educator burnout or disengagement.

The shift from technocratic leadership to one of authentic leadership necessitates a renewed focus on the human element of schools. Paul Begley (2006) defines authentic leadership as leaders who encapsulate professionally effective, ethically sound, and consciously reflective practices in educational administration. (p.570) Begley describes such leadership as “knowledge-based, values informed, and executed with skill (p. 570). He further states:

Leadership by definition refers to practices that extend beyond the usual procedural context of organizational management. Authentic leadership implies a genuine kind of leadership – a hopeful, open-ended, visionary and creative response to social circumstances, as opposed to the more traditional dualistic portrayal of management and leadership practices characteristic of now obsolete and superseded research on effective principal practices of a technical nature. Moreover, in recent years management has been negatively portrayed as mechanistic, relatively shortsighted, and a precedent-focused enterprise. Begley promotes an integrated image of leadership and management that is more in keeping with current times is values-informed leadership – a form of leadership that acknowledges and accommodates, in an integrative way, the legitimate needs of individuals, groups, organizations, communities and cultures –not just the

organizational perspectives that are the usual focus of most leadership literature (p. 570).

Similar to the shift from technocratic leadership to authentic leadership is the shift in higher education leadership preparation programs from an antiquated preparation of PhD school leaders who are trained in research methodology to transformative, practitioner-scholar EdD programs that focus on impacting practice through the multi-paper dissertation or job-embedded studies of improvement such as *IS* studies (Hinnant-Crawford et al. (2023).

This dissertation is guided by Portland State University Graduate Studies policy (n.d.) multiple-paper electronic dissertation format, with the focus of my papers including my journey as a practitioner-scholar in an EdD program and an examination of my leadership in turbulent times. While examining the conditions of one person's leadership journey may not provide a definitive road map for success of others in different contexts, *self-study* as research has gained traction in academia. Hauge (2021), citing Bullough and Pinnegar (2004), state self-study is, "used in relation to teaching and research on practice with the intention of better understanding of both oneself (in the different roles one holds as teacher educator), instruction, teaching and learning; and the development of knowledge related to these factors" (p. 1). Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009) narrow the definition further stating that self-study, "seeks to explore the gap between who I am and who I would like to be in my practice" (p.12). The goal of self-study should benefit both oneself and others who have the opportunity to learn from an experience vicariously. Hauge (2021) notes, "This means that self-study should not only be of significance to the person who is conducting the examination, but also of

importance for creating meaning and contribute to increased understanding and knowledge for other teacher educators” (p.2).

This dissertation examines how we as leaders can help the people in our organizations thrive in challenging and turbulent times, and just as importantly, how leaders can maintain our efforts without experiencing compassion fatigue or burning out ourselves. In a recent article, Kendrick (2021) notes, “The consequences of ignoring educational caregivers’ burnout and compassion fatigue might lead to a high turnover of professionals, an inability to attract new employees and difficulty retaining experienced professionals” (paragraph 15). The theoretical framework supporting this exploration includes research on the “invisible backpack” of everything that is impacting our ability to lead in turbulent times, a backpack that we carry while working in education; our values and purpose in our work; and how to sustain the spirit of social justice leaders. Following the PSU guidelines for the multi-paper electronic dissertation, this dissertation will include an introduction, three papers prepared for publication, and a conclusion that ties the concepts together that is also being prepared for publication. The articles include the following:

1. The Multi-Paper Dissertations: Lessons Learned as a Doctoral Candidate
2. Stronger Leadership through Personal Crises: Invisible Backpack
3. Who Are You, Where Are You Going, and.... *Why?*
4. Conclusion: Sustainable Leadership During Turbulent Times

Researcher Positionality

It is important to acknowledge my positionality in a world that privileges people

based on race, gender, sexuality, and socio-economic status. I am a white, heteronormative, male in a position of power in schools. Based on this positionality, I know that I have unearned privileges, and my experiences are not fully transferable to others whom our society does not privilege in the same role.

I am now in my 25th year in education. During that time, I have served in multiple roles, including as an elementary teacher, special education teacher, high school dean, basketball coach, and administrator. Potentially due to my privileged status as a white male, I became an assistant principal at age 27, was soon thereafter offered a role working for a prestigious educational consulting firm (McREL) and then the state department of education, which led me back to a district office where I became a principal of an elementary, then middle school. By my 39th birthday, I was an assistant superintendent of a large urban school district. At this point, I was on track to serve as superintendent by the age of 40. In a study conducted by Rosette et al. (2010), it was found that when an organization credits a white leader for their work they were evaluated as “more effective leaders and as having more leadership potential” (p.758). I believe I have benefitted by this bias as well. As a principal, my measures of “success” were based on performance reviews, praise by central administration and school boards, and from a population who also benefits from privileges based on their positionality: a lot of public praise from mostly white families.

However, as many educators have experienced in the past several years, my world shifted dramatically. Loved ones in my immediate family started experiencing significant struggles with mental health, and my perception of the “path” that I was meant to be on, no longer looked or felt appealing. Both my mother and father were diagnosed with

cancer and an internal reckoning took root. I took a critical look at my professional life choices and, at that moment, I believed where I could do my best work was in the school where I had served as principal for the previous six years. I love my job. I love helping students, staff and families.

However, I have seen significant changes in the world of education since my first day as an elementary teacher. When I first became an administrator, there were hundreds of applicants for each position. The teachers who were applying for positions were well trained and well educated. Most applicants had experience in education and were looking to transfer, or they were internal student teachers whom we trained. Now, I often post a position and get fewer than five candidates, and not all of them are qualified. In addition, I see my principal colleagues leaving for other positions, and more often, leaving to work outside of the field of education all together. The self-study process of this dissertation may provide tools for me and others to help stave off the mass exodus, and it doing so, perhaps provide some insight on how to sustain ourselves in our efforts to lead schools where every child is successful.

Validates the Existence of the problem

The burnout that is causing educator to leave the profession has increased substantially during the global pandemic. Ed Week Research Center (2022) at Merrimack College reveal that 44% of public-school teachers report they plan to leave in the next two years (compared to 29% in 2010). The danger of the potential departure of current teachers is the fact that fewer people are pursuing teaching as a career path. According

to a recent study, between 2008 and 2019, enrollment in teacher preparation programs dropped by over a third (Knox, 2022).

Adding to the complexity of burnout is the increase in mistrust of the public-school teachers and leaders. In her book, *Trust Matters: Leadership for Successful Schools*, Tschannen-Moran (2014) notes the changing dynamic of school leadership stating

Schools once enjoyed the implicit trust of their community school leaders felt they could take for granted the trust of their internal and external constituencies. School leadership was, by and large, a high-status, low-stress job. Now, too often, the reverse. We live in an era in which all of our social institutions and their leaders have come under unprecedented scrutiny” (p. x).

Where teachers and leaders were once trusted, respected community servants, we are now subject to online attacks, attacks on our families, and an assumption of incompetence. We experience scrutiny unprecedented, and because we are human, we are likely to make errors, and those errors are now widely shared in social media, resulting in public shaming. Many districts manage the public relations around errors and do not allow principals to correct the record or even contribute to correcting the record, resulting in an assumption that what is shared on social media is correct. The trauma of our public health pandemic, racial and political strife, and threats to the very safety of our school children on a daily basis cause me, and many of my colleagues, unbelievable stress, contributing to the exodus of school leaders. During current political times, this scrutiny has only increased, with vague local and state laws resulting in teachers and school

leaders being fired for reading books or sharing ideas that had become widely accepted during a previous political administration.

Research Stance

At its inception, I would argue that education as we know it is rooted in the original ideals of forced assimilation towards white, male, upper class norms. Within this system, when students struggle, rather than address the white, male, upper class norm upon which public schools were founded, educational “bandages” are applied. This contributes to a deficit model for students of color, female and non-binary students, and students living in poverty. The goal of this structural functional epistemology is to strive towards efficiency. Preserving the existing social order in which white, male, upper class students are privileged seems to be the goal. Citing work from Capper (2018), describes this noting, “Educators from structural functional epistemologies tend to view the existing social order and its institutions as legitimate and desirable” (p. 11). In other words, not only do instructional methods remain static, so do systems of decision-making. The tendency here may favor school leaders to strive for harmony rather than conflict when facing difficult decisions that are intended to end the existing structure of privilege. When we rely on tradition and established formal mechanisms for input, as well as informal relationships and agreements, leaders may be seeking confirmation rather than confrontation.

Within the interpretivist epistemology linked to the problem of practice, the social interaction of people and their perception are the primary reason the status quo remains intact. Capper (2018) states that when looking through an interpretivist

epistemological framework, “we see the notions of ‘the way we do things around here’ reflected in our systems of privilege and power that most often reflects white and other privileged assumptions... the expectation that all will fit into this culture of simultaneous privilege and oppression” (p. 62). The potential exploration of how members of external stakeholder groups perceive access to, or have a sense of agency or influence differs. I am intrigued by the notion of “intent versus impact” and how interpretivists may be unaware of exclusionary practices. An interpretivist may strive for harmony more than conflict. In doing so, when looking at the problem of practice, practitioners may often seek confirmation bias that validates the efforts they are making and can blind them to the true impacts of practices and policies on teacher and students, particular students of color.

This problem of practice mostly lives in the critical theory epistemology. The goal of leaders informed by critical theory is to identify and address sources of domination, alienation, exploitation, repression and competition for resources that have been reduced in order to marginalize already underserved populations. Within Bolman and Deal’s (2013) political frame, regardless of who “wins” or “loses” in the conceptualization of politics, the existing system remains intact. For example, in the pandemic, everybody lost. However, the economic impact of the pandemic had disproportional negative impact on families of color and students of color (Fortuna et al., 2020). When we experience a community-wide tragedy, everybody loses. When some are disproportionately impacted, we again have to ask for whom the system is working and for whom it is not. We also need to ask, “how do we recover individually and collectively?”

Significance of Study

As noted earlier, principals have the second largest impact on student outcomes, after teacher impact. We now know that “Principals are pivotal for creating schools that meet the needs of all students” (Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022, p.210). This exodus is accelerating post pandemic. Principals are experiencing greater levels of workload, stress, and burnout. Regretfully the tools to handle this increased level of stress are often framed as “self-care.” This may include consistent exercise and better sleep (Su-Keene & DeMatthews). Organizations who focus on these issues are missing a significant element. Reekie (2022) notes, “Self-care should never be seen solely as an individual responsibility” (paragraph 5). Organizations and leaders within the organizations have a responsibility to their staff.

Principals leave their jobs for many reasons; however, principal turnover has been on the rise nationally (Snodgrass Rangel 2018). Su-Keene and DeMatthews (2022) highlight how this practice correlates to lower educational experience for students noting, Schools with higher rates of principal turnover often struggle to recruit and retain high-quality teachers, which exacerbates long-standing equity issues within communities. Given the importance of school leadership, principal turnover is a central equity concern confronting schools across the country and around the world (p. 211).

When talking about educational significance, I remain affirmed that, **how** we lead matters as much, if not more than **what** we focus on. In his paper studying principals in China, theorists Tain, et al. (2012) note that principals have an important role in alleviating teacher burnout, with transformative leadership providing hopeful results.

Transformative versus Transactional Leadership

Principals have the unique opportunity to enact practices quickly. We need to listen as much as inform, and at times, be willing to look critically in the mirror, as opposed to looking out a window, to more effectively enact the changes needed. Often, we as principals, led the way we have been led in the past. In a speech made by Anthony Muhammed regarding the key learning from in his book *Transforming School Culture* to the Minneapolis School District principals, Dr. Muhammed discussed the phenomenon of why change is so hard in school systems. He stated, “When you look at educators, we need to reflect more on their own personal experiences. Most of the educators are white. Most of them were successful in school when they were students. They went to college, they student-taught in a traditional school, they then went into the traditional school system to teach... Why would they teach any other way than the way that worked for them? We are asking a group to think ‘outside of the box’ when they have only ever been in the box?” (2018).

Heifetz and Laurie (1997) described leadership actions which include leading from the “balcony view.” Heifetz and Laurie assert leaders must “View patterns in the environment as if they were on a balcony. It does them no good to be swept up in the field of action” and miss important, unfolding patterns of change (p. 125). In the book, *Leadership on the Line*, Heifetz and Linsky (2017) assert

The balcony view is especially important when the organization is facing what they call “adaptive challenges” (i.e., systemic problems with no ready answers): Without the capacity to move back and forth between the field of action and the balcony, to reflect day to day, moment to moment, on the many ways in which an organization's

habits can sabotage adaptive work, a leader easily and unwittingly becomes a prisoner of the system. The dynamics of adaptive changes are far too complex to keep track of, let alone influence, if leaders stay only on the field of play (pp. 125-126).

Similar to his description of teachers, principals are in a spot of continuing the practices, and at times perpetuating the same mistakes, they had experienced as they were led. Principals need to be reflective and “get on the balcony” to truly observe what is happening to ascertain how best to proceed. Henderson, Hoy, and later Tschannen-Moran (2014) states, “Authentic behavior consists of three basic aspects— accountability, avoiding manipulation, and being “real” rather than simply playing a role” (p.27).

As principals shift their focus from more technocratic management to true authentic leadership, skills must shift. According to researcher Zebylas (2010), principal preparation programs often focus on, “The effectiveness and efficiency of schools. This narrow emphasis fails to prepare school leaders to engage in the difficult emotional work that requires a shift in values, attitudes, and practices and limits their ability to address fundamental social justice issues” (p.26). As Tschannen-Moran (2014) writes, “School leaders bear the largest responsibility for setting a tone of trust” (p.15). Hoerr (2022) notes that:

Too often, the main thrust of a principal’s job is viewed as judging.

That’s understandable because an important part of leadership is deciding among competing voices and conflicting visions.... Exceptional principals create an environment in which everyone grows. They reach out and use empathy to understand and appreciate others’ feelings and perspectives (p.3).

We have not been formally trained in focusing on *how* we harness the use of empathy to build a coalition to support students. We use skills in emotional intelligence to make sure the teachers feel connected, heard, and supported. I once had a mentor tell me, “There are two kinds of people who work in schools—those who teach, and those who support teachers” (personal communication).

The power of empathy has recently become more prevalent in everyday discussions, perhaps because of the times in which we live. Ventura (2018) says, Empathy lets us better understand the people we are trying to serve and gives us perspective and insight that can drive greater, more effective actions. The seemingly magical power of empathy is the connection it helps us form with other people (p.5).

Brown captures the essence of these skills, stating, “We desperately need more leaders who are committed to courageous, wholehearted leadership and who are self-aware enough to lead from their hearts, rather than unevolved leaders who lead from hurt and fear” (Brown).

While the bulk of the literature is how leaders can be more authentic themselves, there was limited information as to how they can also stay afloat in times of great distress. Again, according to researcher Zembylas, (2010)

The school leaders' emotional struggles have significant implications for their decision making, well-being, and overall leadership style. For instance, there is research that shows how school leaders are constantly engaged in emotion management processes, often with serious implications not only for their emotional health but also for their professional effectiveness; at the same time,

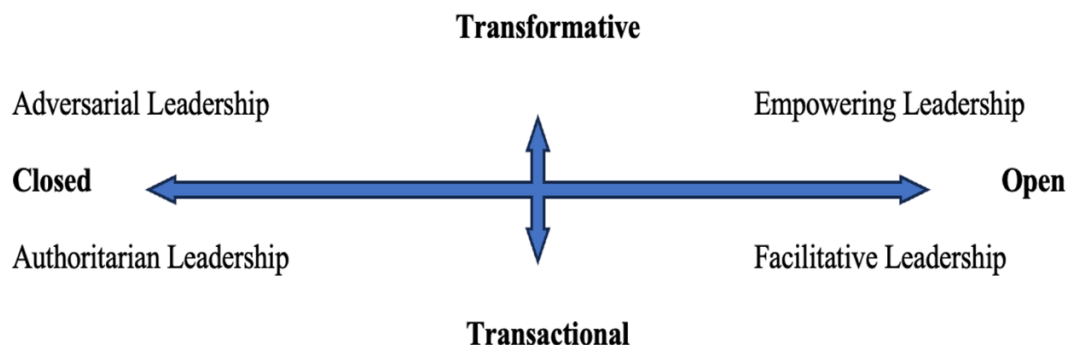
however, research also documents how mechanisms of emotion management help school leaders promote their own agenda, survive the high emotional demands of school leadership, and bring meaningful changes to their school (p.27).

The principal is at the intersection of the community and the school. Principals have the capacity to both make decisions and determine who gets included in that process. As Horsford, et al. describe in their book, *The Politics of Education Policy in an Era of Inequality* (2019),

Principals are in a unique position, since they have to mediate policies and politics horizontally (school-community relations) and vertically (from central office to teachers and students and vice versa). Almost every decision a principal makes will privilege someone over someone else, which make these decisions highly political and come with ethical considerations (p. 99).

Citing work from Blase and Anderson (1995), Horsford et al. (2019) continued to identify key traits of principals of being either, “open” or “closed” as it relates to inclusive of input. If a principal is open, there is the potential for true change to occur, but only when the topics are not “transactional” in nature.

Figure 1.1 Micropolitical Leadership Matrix



Note: This figure is adapted from Horsford, S. D., Scott, J. T., & Anderson, G. L.

(2019). *The politics of education policy in an era of inequality possibilities for democratic schooling*. Routledge. (p.100)

Transformative leadership is key, as is authentic leaders who are able to connect with staff, students and families in meaningful ways. We need principals who are aware of their own needs and well-being so they can sustain the efforts and provide leadership to the entire community. We need principals who respond to the needs of their colleagues, teachers, families, and students and the complexities of their unique situations. I am reminded of the importance of culturally responsive, reciprocal, caring relationships (Gay, 2010). My mentor reminds me that “nobody cares what you know, until they know that you care.” It is my hope that this multiple paper dissertation improves my leadership, as well as the leadership of others who are leading in tumultuous times.

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Chapter Two: Scholarly Practitioner Paper 1

Paper 1: The Multi-Paper Dissertations: Lessons Learned as a Doctoral Candidate

(The introductory section was co-written by Dr. Deborah S. Peterson and Doctoral Candidate Paul Marietta).

Practitioners interested in pursuing a terminal degree must consider whether to enroll in a traditional PhD program or an EdD program focused on preparing practitioner scholars (Perry, 2012). When considering whether to pursue the PhD or the EdD, it helps to ask what the purpose of your dissertation is. If the purpose is to conduct research, there is no doubt that the traditional research focus, resulting in a five-chapter dissertation, effectively prepares education researchers.

However, for practitioners whose professional roles require practitioner expertise, the EdD, with its scholarly practitioner focus, is appropriate doctoral program (CPED, n.d.). The Carnegie Project on the EdD (CPED) has led the EdD redesign effort and includes the following principles for rigorous EdD programs:

CPED's framework includes questions of equity, ethics, and social justice to bring about solutions to complex problems of practice;

Prepares leaders who can construct and apply knowledge to make a positive difference in the lives of individuals, families, organizations, and communities;

Provides opportunities for candidates to develop and demonstrate collaboration and communication skills to work with diverse communities and to build partnerships;

Provides field-based opportunities to analyze problems of practice and use multiple frames to develop meaningful solutions;

Is grounded in and develops a professional knowledge base that integrates both practical and research knowledge, that links theory with systemic and systematic inquiry; and Emphasizes the generation, transformation, and use of professional knowledge and practice (Perry, 2012, para. 14).

Thus, the EdD prepares scholarly-practitioners to be among the highest performing school or district leaders. CPED includes over 135 schools of education who are leading the charge to transform the Education Doctorate into the Professional Practice Doctorate in Education. Members are committed to rethinking advanced educational preparation through improved EdD program designs that offer academic rigor, practical impact, applied research, and value. CPED, the first action-oriented effort working to distinguish the EdD from the PhD, defines the EdD as one that prepares educators to become Scholarly Practitioners who can apply appropriate and specific practices, generate new knowledge, and steward the profession (CPED, n.d.).

While many academics consider the EdD to be less rigorous, CPED has effectively countered this narrative by questioning why completing the traditional research coursework including quantitative or qualitative studies and completing a traditional study would be considered categorically more rigorous than practitioner-focused, job-embedded research that results in improving outcomes for students in schools or districts. Leading change in complex organizations, in particular when leaders are working to end educational disparities for those historically underserved, is complex and rigorous work, as evidenced by the fact that so few educational organizations in the US have successfully addressed educational disparities among children of color, recent immigrants, and those living in poverty.

The Dissertation in Practice (DIP) and multi-paper dissertations reflect characteristics of EdD dissertations in that they identify a problem of practice, confirm its existence, include a serious literature review, identify potential solutions that are applicable to a particular setting, discuss the implications of learnings and in a concluding chapter, recommend next steps for study or implications for implementation. Thus, characterizing the DIP as lacking in rigor reflects a shallow analysis replete with biases from traditional academics. Traditional academics' arguments are soundly rebuffed by the CPED members and its network (CPED, n.d.; Perry, 2012).

As Perry (2011) argues, considering the EdD "PhD lite" is an inappropriate characterization of the EdD. To give more context to the evolution of the EdD's characteristics, Perry (2012) provides an extensive examination of the history of revising other practitioner terminal degrees, beginning in the 1920's. She includes the political backstory of why the research sequence was retained when PhD programs converted to EdD programs. Not unexpected, internal university politics were at play. Precisely due to internal politics, the Harvard EdD programs retained the traditional research requirements of traditional PhD programs, including the traditional research sequence, instead of engaging in a revision of the requirements of the EdD program (Perry, 2012).

Revisions in the requirements of the terminal degree of medical doctors and lawyers required practitioner-related evidence of competence as a practitioner. For example, your family doctor does not complete a 5-chapter dissertation. Nor does your dermatologist or orthopedic surgeon. Family doctors, like dermatologists and orthopedic surgeons, receive two years of medical training followed by two to three years of clinical rotations; these newly-minted MDs then complete three to four additional years in

residencies in which they receive on-the-job supportive training. When our loved ones need surgery, we want the most skilled surgeon to perform that complex surgery -- not the most published medical researcher who completed a research study.

Because of the influence of Harvard's policies and practices on other institutions around the nation, other universities around the nation followed suit and continued to require traditional research for the terminal practitioner degree in education, the EdD. While terminal degree programs for medical doctors and lawyers were revised to include complete job-embedded, rigorous training to earn their terminal degrees (the MD or JD), the terminal degree for practitioners in the field of education were required to complete a traditional study. The bias that favors traditional research-- even in practitioner-scholar EdD programs -- reflects shallow thinking and lack of clarity regarding the *purpose* of the EdD.

Perry (2012) also explicates the development of the Carnegie Project on the EdD, a project begun in 2007 with the support of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Despite the considerable success of CPED and the Carnegie Foundations support, the bias in favor of traditional research and the five-chapter dissertation persists.

To be clear, we are not dismissing the importance of quantitative or qualitative studies that inform education practices. We are not saying we do not need highly trained PhD researchers whose culturally responsive, scientific inquiry informs practice. We are, however, distinguishing the skill of conducting high-quality research from the skill of using context-based research to lead for equity in a specific school or district. As an example of context-based research completed in a community, we refer to Diaz, Strang,

Unger, and Van't Hof (2017) who were awarded the CPED dissertation of the year for their job-embedded research that resulted in a multi-faceted community-based response to the discovery of the lead exposure to residents and schoolchildren in the Flint, Michigan area. Their dissertation resulted in a widespread, multi-pronged response including educational brochures, you tube videos, a resource web site, and community engagement in an age-appropriate, research-based, culturally responsive plan to address a public health crisis that impacted the education and health of school children and their families. However, Storey et al. (2015) found in their examination of the qualities of submitted dissertations for the 2013 CPED dissertation of the year award that most submissions did not include evidence of *if* or *how* their dissertations impacted practice, one of the explicit goals of CPED and dissertations in practice (CPED, n.d.). We have yet to meet a k-12 principal, director, or superintendent who gushes about how the traditional five-chapter dissertation prepared them to reduce educational disparities or lead equity initiatives more effectively in schools.

The Evolution of CPED Influence and Rigorous EdD Dissertations at One Institution

(Note: the following section was written solely by Deborah Peterson)

At Portland State University in the Educational Leadership and Policy department, Dr. Peterson's mentor, Professor emeritus Tom Chenoweth, pioneered the concept of a dissertation consisting of a product of compelling interest, with one of his doctoral students successfully defending her dissertation which was comprised of a handbook on passing a school facilities bond in a low-income school district (Florence,

2014). When Professor Chenoweth retired, Dr. Peterson was appointed as assistant professor and given the task of leading a change process to revise the education administration EdD (Peterson, 2017). The work team successfully and unanimously approved dissertations that include “projects that are developed in collaboration with district, state, regional, and national educational organizations that are of value to the educational organization of the EdD student as well as to the field of educational administration in general” (internal department communication). Further, the team noted that education administration dissertations embodied these characteristics: identifies a problem of practice in educational administration leadership for equity in a k-12 educational setting; 2. Uses common data sets; or 3. Is evidence driven. In addition, we noted that the dissertation may be a “capstone project that produces a product of compelling interest to the school/district as well as the broader educational administration community.

These new policies were unanimously approved by the department and doctoral program council. Since leading the revision of our education administration EdD, Dr. Peterson chaired ten of educational leadership doctoral dissertation committees. Every doctoral student was working full time in school or district leadership role and these successful graduates included three leaders of color, two bilingual leaders, six men and four women. Many of the students were first generation college graduates. Following the EdD program policies, two students collected and analyzed a common data set, two completed the multi-paper dissertation, and six completed a traditional five-chapter dissertation with a focus on equity. Several doctoral students were extremely anxious about the traditional research sequence and/or their writing skills. Dr. Peterson followed

Dewey's concept of learning by doing by co-conducting a traditional research study with one student, co-writing chapters or articles with several students, but always focusing on the practitioner's goal of improving the practice of school leadership. The program policies also led to the endorsement of using job embedded research using Improvement Science with considerable nationally recognized outcomes (Peterson, 2016; Peterson, 2017; Peterson et al., 2017; Peterson & Carlile, 2021; 2022

Within the past several years, the early pioneering work of Professor Tom Chenoweth was followed by the leadership of then-department chair Professor Candyce Reynolds. She whole-heartedly endorsed the working principles of CPED along with the use of job-embedded research such as Improvement Science. In addition, Professor Reynolds subsequently was the first doctoral committee chair in the educational leadership and policy department to chair a multi-paper dissertation on leadership in higher education. Professor Reynolds' guidance, along with PSU graduate studies policy on the multi-paper dissertation, gave Dr. Peterson the support she needed to chair doctoral students' multi-paper dissertations. The PSU multi-paper dissertation allows for two types of electronic theses or dissertations (ETDs) as per Portland State University policy:

There are two standard formats for ETDs—the monograph format and the multi-paper format. The monograph format focuses on a single subject and has a single author whereas the multi-paper format is a compilation of papers (typically three), often in a journal article style format, and may have multiple authors. The multi-paper format is more commonly used in dissertations than theses. In the multi-paper format the papers do not have to be closely related to each other, but it is

required that there be both an introductory and concluding chapter that link the papers together with a common theme. The decision whether to use a monograph or multi-paper form is made in conjunction with your adviser and committee (PSU Graduate School, n.d.)

As an example of the multi-paper dissertation, Dr. Carpenter, one of the top rising school superintendents in the nation and leader of one of the top places to work in Oregon, used Improvement Science to lead his school district during the dual crises of a wildfire evacuation and the pandemic (Carpenter, 2022). Writing several articles and chapters in books for his multi-paper dissertation, Dr. Carpenter said this regarding his successful dissertation:

For me, the multi- paper dissertation served as the culmination of the research and implementation strategies that were already representing significant contributions in the field. This innovative approach to the dissertation model not only allowed me to demonstrate expertise and mastery of the work I was already engaged in, but also allowed me to advance my knowledge, push my boundaries, and make an actual impact in the community which I serve (private correspondence).

Dr. Cass Thonstad, a central office administrator and current principal also used Improvement Science to improve attendance and math scores. Dr. Thonstadt subsequently used Improvement Science principals to design and serve as the founding principal of a new alternative school. For her multi-paper dissertation, Thonstadt (2022) authored articles submitted to a prestigious practitioner journal and was also successfully published in books on Improvement Science. The dissertations of both Dr. Thonstad and Dr. Carpenter met the PSU requirements for the Education Administration specialization

as well as the PSU multi-paper dissertation. Their work was presented to the committee as an electronic dissertation, as per policy, and then reduced to a traditional paper format for final submission to the Graduate Studies office, again, as per university policy.

However, beyond meeting expectations for our department, college, and university, their multi-paper dissertations impacted practitioners in the field as well as their own practice.

Peterson and Carlile (2021, 2022) include numerous job-embedded Improvement Science efforts that reduce inequities in education and highlight the work of several successful doctoral students.

When the Traditional Five-Chapter Dissertation Is No Longer Relevant

(This next section is written solely by Doctoral Candidate Paul Marietta).

As a doctoral student, I wanted my learnings and experiences to be heard, to be used to inform what others are doing, to make a difference in our profession. I followed our College of Education policies regarding the doctoral qualifying examination, which is a “core paper” that reflects our learning in the core doctoral courses. This paper was over 30 pages long on a topic that I had completely lost interest in by the time I had finished it. I found myself unmotivated and lost, an experience other people in doctoral programs often discuss.

The idea of writing a full traditional dissertation filled with jargon that would only be read by few others in academia felt disingenuous. It felt like jumping through a hoop. Most doctoral students at our university expand on their core paper to develop the traditional dissertation. As I began to write my full dissertation proposal, feeling more and more that my dissertation was disconnected from what I, and thousands of school

leaders, were experiencing with the pandemic in full swing. I came to the realization that I was refining my writing in a way that was becoming increasingly more academic and frankly, making it less and less accessible to my colleagues in the field. In an opinion piece for the Saskatchewan University, Dosch (2018) highlights the phenomenon noting, “Academics keep themselves disconnected by continuing to use this inaccessible language, and because of this, the world often does not listen to them” (paragraph 8).

And then, in addition to living and leading a school during the pandemic, another crisis hit: both of my parents became ill with cancer. My purpose and goals were forever changed. Understandably, my parents’ health took priority, and the need for my dissertation to be meaningful and impactful also increased. While I struggled with the changing purpose in my life and my studies, I decided to take a leave of absence from the doctoral program.

When it came time to rejoin the doctoral program, I couldn’t bear the thought of continuing with the traditional five-chapter dissertation. It made no sense to me, an experienced principal who had successfully served in numerous building and central office leadership roles and yet who was struggling with the dual crises of family health matters and leading a school during the global pandemic. When my dissertation chair talked with me and we discussed options for the dissertation, she offered to support me in the multi-paper dissertation.

I knew instantly it was the right match for me.

I continually read publications, blogs, and short articles to keep myself current in the field. The idea that I could write articles myself allows me to engage with the learning in the way I feel is beneficial for both myself and for others struggling to lead during

extremely challenging times. The articles I am writing for my multi-paper dissertation are direct, written in language that is easily relatable to the readers, and most important, helping practitioners with what they need at the moment. The three articles are closely related, although they don't have to be as per PSU policy. I am writing a rigorous introductory chapter that examines existing literature on leadership and exposes a gap in what we know the stressors of leading a school are and how we support – or ignore - those who are struggling with unprecedented family and community challenges.

I believe my strongest connection to the multi-paper dissertation is that my audience is comprised of my peers, other leaders looking for examples of what is working, what is not, and authentically identifying where we leaders are struggling. It is rare for leaders to admit that we are feeling ill equipped, tapped out, and exhausted. And yet, through my university courses, I enjoyed and learned from collaboration and authentic discourse with my fellow students and professors. I also appreciated the insights of my professors. What I didn't believe was relevant were the expectations of the traditional dissertation study and resulting five-chapter dissertation, the inability to connect with practitioners through my learning and writing, and the extremely narrow audience of the traditional dissertation: researchers. I wanted to impact practice, my own and that of other school and district leaders. Practitioners love to hear from other practitioners about “what worked for me when....” The multi-paper dissertation provides a forum for me to share my learning and for others to learn with me. In addition, the multi-paper dissertation allowed me to engage in continuous learning in my role as principal, continuous growth in the community where I lead, and continuous improvement as a leader. I'm consistently having rigorous conversations with other

practitioners. I am choosing journals that I and most of my colleagues read to become more effective leaders. My goal is to publish in those journals.

The other critical element of the multi-paper dissertation was the research framework of self-study. According to Hauge (2021), self-study should not only be of significance to the person who is conducting the examination, but also of importance for creating meaning and contribute to increased understanding and knowledge for other teacher educators (p.2). To be clear, I am not saying the multi-paper dissertation is better than a traditional five-chapter dissertation. Nor am I saying that self-study is better than more traditional qualitative or quantitative research methods. There is both a need for, and room for, all in the educational ecosystem. It's about your professional goals, how you want to impact the profession, and who your audience is: academics or practitioners and being the bridge between scholars and practitioners as a scholarly practitioner.

Advice to EdD Students

(The following sections was written by Doctoral Candidate Paul Marietta and Dr. Deborah S. Peterson).

Based on our experiences, we offer the following advice to EdD students who find the traditional five-chapter dissertation a mismatch for their professional goals as school and district leaders. Our guidance is especially directed to those who are first generation college graduates, those for whom higher education has created barriers either to access to the doctorate or barriers to successfully completing the doctorate based on your race, ethnicity, home language, work responsibilities, or your desire to learn and

grow as a practitioner, the documentation of which doesn't fit into a traditional five-chapter dissertation.

Lunenberg and Irby (2008) note that doctoral students should consider the potential chair's expertise, their accessibility, their ability to give feedback in a timely manner, success of their candidates' dissertation defenses, personality styles, and their research methodology preferences.

As Lunenberg and Irby (2008) note, feedback ability is critical. We've heard from students whose chairs don't respond to emails or won't set meeting times. The doctoral student finds themselves spending more time trying to connect with their chairs and trying to get input or feedback than on the critical inquiry and improvement process of their dissertation. We also have noticed that some chairs insist on a particular methodology or a particular topic for the dissertation. For example, Dr. Carpenter chose a dissertation modality that was a match for his focus and his role. Dr. Carpenter wrote one of his articles for the multi-paper dissertation about what worked for him when he served as a superintendent and his entire district was evacuated due to a wildfire – during a pandemic. We concur with the broad concepts of Lunenberg and Irby, while adding some additional considerations.

What Motivates Your Chair to be Your Chair?

We have heard too many stories of chairs who want to chair because of the release time from teaching that many universities give them. Sadly, this can result in the doctoral student having a chair who has no expertise in the topic or modality of dissertation. We know of several students who had initially been assigned to chairs who

had little expertise in the dissertation area, and who were passed along to another potential chair when the paid professor release time allotment per doctoral student had expired. Devastating to the doctoral students, they sought in vain to seek unpaid volunteer chairs and ultimately left the doctoral program, with an incomplete dissertation. Such practices result in derision of higher education and are extremely unfair to doctoral students.

The Culturally Responsive Chair

Your chair needs to respect your cultural background and norms. You should not have to change how you work best and thrive as a scholar-practitioner to complete your dissertation. Your chair needs to work effectively with you as a leader, as a learner, as a scholar-practitioner. Micro-aggressions based on a manifestation of diversity attack the very core of who you are and will negatively impact your ability to complete your dissertation. You need to feel a connection and have deep trust that the chair believes in you, supports you in the way you need to be supported, and won't let you fail. We recommend you check in with peers, get to know the potential chairs by going to their presentations, reading their work, and getting the confidential perspective of successful doctoral students as to who might be a good match for who you are and how you work best. We disagree with the advice of Lunenberg and Irby (2008) of choosing a chair based on age or gender of the potential chair. We believe that culturally responsive chairs are important.

Professional Experiences of the Chair

We also encourage you to consider the professional experiences of your chair.

Dissertation chairs who are or have been practitioners may have more understanding if the doctoral student texts that they'll be late for a meeting due to a parent or a safety issue that needs immediate attention. The last thing you want is to have a dissertation chair who is angry that you put student safety before a dissertation meeting. We know of a student whose job was to lead community engagement for 1,000 families who was told by her professor to not attend the first community engagement event in her new school leader role due to a conflict with a university class, ironically, a class on community engagement. The student navigated this impossible situation as a first-generation college graduate, bilingual, woman of color. Her cynicism regarding higher education was only mitigated by the support of professors who had also been in highly-visible, demanding leadership roles in schools and worked to address this impossible situation. Professor Peterson is confident that had she not had a rigorous, caring, competent chair such as Professor Carolyn Carr, who embodied all the characteristics described above, she would never have finished her dissertation, and never would have gone on to prepare thousands of school leaders, publish books on leadership for equity, or win awards for her equity leadership. Having the right chair is worth the search.

Choosing Your Topic

Ensure that your chair is supportive of a dissertation topic that speaks to your heart and contributes to your leadership for equity. Professor Peterson's experiences as a leader in elementary, middle and high schools where Latinx students were experiencing educational disparities, along with her extended family's experiences as Mexican-

American school children, caused her to want to understand what the schools with no educational disparities between white and Latinx students were doing. The dissertation topic consumed her practice and research throughout her dissertation work and beyond. The curiosity, inquiry, and implications for her academic work and consulting practice continue. We encourage you to choose a topic that has this same impact on you, not the topic that your chair has chosen for you. Doctoral students who choose a topic that speaks to their intellectual curiosity, relates to their work as practitioners, that are rigorous inquiries, and that result in personal and professional learning finish their dissertations.

Create and Follow a Reasonable Dissertation Work and Communication Plan

Professor Peterson has found that when her doctoral students and she co-create a dissertation work plan that reflects their extremely busy work lives and their responsibilities, the doctoral student is successful. She works side by side with students, sitting with them in a writing room, to help them focus. She texts, emails, or has phone calls at the times that work for the student, rather than just during proscribed office hours. She receives permission for her office hours to officially be designated as “before or after class or at a time mutually agreeable to the professor and student” to maximize her support of students. Professor Peterson checks in with her doctoral students once a week to be sure that every week she is supporting the student when they get stuck. She also works to ensure the students are able to authentically communicate when they are stuck. She is adamant that students not let a few weeks or a month or two or three go by if you get stuck. Your chair should have ideas for helping you get unstuck. Use the communication method that works best for you and your chair. Is it email? Text? Zoom?

A decade ago, Professor Peterson's doctoral students and she would meet every week in a quiet coffee house, restaurant, or café, and they worked side by side for hours. In the past several years, she and her students have replaced in-person meetings with an online meeting platform to save travel time and increase time focusing on writing and researching.

Policy Matters

We have shared a lot of information about procedures and policies in our department and university. As Lunenberg and Irby (2008) note, it is critical to know department, college, and university policy, especially if you experience a roadblock. With the chair by your side, you will find advocates who know policy and will advocate for you. When you hit a stumbling block, do not give up. Reach out to the advocates: your dean, associate dean, dept chair, doctoral program chair, graduate studies chair, other doctoral students. When one person puts a barrier in front of you, do not let them be the roadblock that makes you a doctoral candidate who has finished "all but the dissertation." Find a way around that barrier. Too often it's women, people of color, first generation college students, or those who are younger and newer to the field who are targets of roadblocks or lack a support system to address roadblocks. The education of the most precious part of every family's life, our children, is at stake. Through your work in schools, and your multi-paper dissertation, sharing your research, leadership successes, challenges, and learnings, you will change the lives of children and their families forever.

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Chapter Three: Scholarly Practitioner Paper 2

Paper 2: Stronger Leadership through Personal Crises: Invisible Backpack

Author(s): Paul Marietta, Deborah Peterson

Target Publication: Education Leadership

Central Theme: The global pandemic continues to shift our priorities at work and in our daily lives. Like thousands of others, I wondered if I could continue leading while helping my family through multiple family crises. This article will be submitted to a practitioner journal that publishes articles with personal stories that inform professional practice.

Stronger Leadership through Personal Crises: Invisible Backpack

Those People

I was drinking coffee at my sparkling stone countertop one recent, typically rainy morning, preparing like I had so many other mornings, to go to work. Work being a suburban school with 350 students, 9 languages, and moderately good test scores where I serve as principal. That particular morning the coffee cup became increasingly, unbearably heavy. I couldn't lift the cup any more than I could lift my eyes to face the truth: I had wronged others. I had judged. I had set my way of doing things as the only way, the right way. It was at that moment that I realized I was guilty of hearing what families were saying, but responding with a quick "*yeah, I get it*" and then moving on. The truth was, I *didn't* get it.

After trying to lift that small cup of coffee, failing miserably at even taking a sip, I realized I had failed the students and families I was working with. And the teachers. They

needed compassion, care, understanding--deep understanding--not just a quick “*yeah, I get it.*” They deserved an understanding that comes from paying attention to their gestures, the downturned eyes, the pursed lips, what they are saying and *not* saying. They deserved my full attention, my deep compassion, and when I paused and said, “*That must have been hard,*” *they deserved to feel my care.* I needed to pause to hear what they needed me to deeply understand, not just “hear” and perfunctorily move on. In their book *The Listening Leader*, authors Shane Safir and Michael Fullan (2017) note, “Listening with emotional intelligence is crucial in working with communities affected by trauma” (p.14).

That day, when even lifting a cup of coffee was too much, my invisible backpack was so heavy, I couldn’t add another thing to it. The backpack already carried so much more than my teachers, families, students, or friends would ever see. It held deep regret of my hubris as a leader. Deep embarrassment of my judgment of other families. Fear of how others would now judge me and those I love. Sadness that I parented my children and expected specific results such as top grades in AP classes, honor society, or being in the top 1% of their class to affirm *my* strong parenting. I should have nurtured and supported my children’s uniqueness and their dreams, not mine. Now confronted with my own challenges as a parent, I became more aware of how I judged the parents of my students, students for whom our schools just aren’t working and never will. Students who have been asking us for alternative ways to show their learning, alternative ways to demonstrate their competency, and instead we placed the blame on their home life, their family circumstances—anywhere but on those of us in the school system. Instead of us responding to the students’ needs, I judged.

As I looked through my invisible backpack, I never thought I would be *that parent* or that leader. In my 25th year in education, 20 years as a leader at elementary and secondary schools as well as leadership roles in the central office, I thought I'd seen it all. I've met with wealthy parents, parents who just arrived from war-torn countries, families who demanded more for their children, and families who hoped for more for their children. I worked with brilliant, strong teachers and also with teachers who had lost hope, lost their vision, their focus on kids. Whether parenting or teaching, I knew how it *should* have been done, subconsciously framed as "*do it like me.*"

Then my world - and every family's world - shifted.

When the pandemic hit, like so many others in our country who thought that only *those people* struggle, my own family hit a wall. I was faced with supporting my school and family even as my own parents suffered through cancer diagnoses and tragically passed shortly after their retirement. I mourn their passing, and I also mourn that their dreams, many of which they put on hold for their retirement years, are gone forever. Unfulfilled.

The stressors of the pandemic, social uprising, and economic uncertainty don't even include the many personal tragedies my family and so many other families have faced: illnesses, loss of community, loss of family, loss of hope. I'm not sure we fully understand the short-term impact, let alone the long-term impact of these stressors. I just know that we have to start creating the conditions for the invisible load in each person's backpack to be acknowledged, to be deeply understood, and to be the foundation for supporting our teachers, families, and students. And ourselves.

It used to be important to me that the families in my school saw me exuding confidence, with exceptional organizational skills to meet deadlines, and technical evidence of my competence as an educational leader. This skill set is important, but my leadership priority has shifted.

We tell our teachers, “Kids don’t care what you know until they know you care.” Researchers Jaciam Ramberg, et al. (2018) sought to find if there was relationship between student’s perceptions of teachers caring and student achievement. The findings suggest that these features of school effectiveness constitute an important foundation for promoting the quality of teachers’ relationships with their students. Maybe one lesson I’ve learned is that teachers, students, and families need the same thing from me. And the way to do that is: be vulnerable, be empathetic, and be authentic. These three key strategies helped me face a crisis and helped me heal; the strategies might also help you as the leader everyone hopes will lead them through our crises. These strategies can serve to build the foundation to have a transformative relationship with the people we serve, a relationship that empowers, emboldens, and reflects the dignity of the person I’m working with. Thomas and Parker (2021) point out the need for leaders to truly know the constituents they serve. They state, “When school leaders have a deeper understanding of what is going on in the lives of their students, there is the potential to alter assumptions regarding their students’ realities inside and outside of school” (paragraph 4).

Be Vulnerable

There is a perceived risk in sharing your struggles. On one hand, some may interpret the sharing of personal information and specifically sharing challenges, as

spreading negativity across the organization. Others may note that it can be seen as egocentric. I have found that the opposite can be even more damaging to the organization. Masking your personal struggles can often create a culture of “toxic positivity” where people feel an abundance of inauthenticity. Referencing the work of Mark Brackett, the director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, Arianna Prothero (2021) notes, "Toxic positivity" as it's known—or the papering over of legitimate feelings of anxiety, stress, or despair with saccharine, out-of-the-box phrases like, ‘look at the good things you've got’—doesn't promote resilience in children or adults” (paragraph 3). Conversely, being overly guarded with your personal life creates a wall between you and the people you serve. Both will leave staff with a feeling of not being able to connect with you or feeling like something is off.

Sharing your story is a critical leadership skill. Paul Smith (2012) discusses the importance of story in his book, *Lead with a Story: A guide to Crafting Business Narratives that Captivate, Convince and Inspire*. He states that stories can be used to accomplish five key elements: “inspire the organization, set a vision, teach important lessons, define culture and values, and explain who you are and what you believe” (p.6) Author M. Lllewyen (2018) believes "New metaphors are needed to help share an understanding of schools as places where growing as a human being is of the utmost value and teaching is a human encounter rooted in relationships marked by faith, trust, care and love" (p. 154). We need to use story and metaphor to enhance the “human encounter.”

Being vulnerable with your own story heightens connection. With my staff, I was able to share stories of my child as they struggled in school. My staff all knew of my

struggles as a son caring for my dying parents while leading a school during a pandemic.

When you share what exists in your “invisible backpack,” you allow those who are burdened by the weight of their backpack to have less fear and shame associated with the contents that weigh them down. It is important to acknowledge the work of Peggy McIntosh (1989) who developed the concept of “invisible knapsack” to describe the burden of traditionally marginalized populations. I am using the term, “invisible backpack” to add components such as trauma or personal strife. Adding these components should not minimize the challenges communities of color face that may be different, or in addition to, the challenges we all carry in the use of this metaphor.

The Power of Empathy

When we start what might be in the invisible backpack and the burdens of others, we start with concern. We meet people where they are rather than where we are trying to bring them. Now I tend to focus more on how present I am. Do I slow down and hear the emotions as well as the words of the person talking with me? I need to truly listen and hear the voice of everyone who walks in the door of the schoolhouse—students, staff, and parents.

Imagine you were the teacher who spent the last few nights with your own child who is struggling with deep depression. You come in the next day and all you see are reminders of your child’s sense of hopelessness. Imagine being a parent who lost their job and you are not quite sure if you will make next month’s rent and the school is asking you for donations. Imagine being a child who spent the night looking after your younger sibling, and you couldn’t do any schoolwork.

If we approached these situations in a traditional way and started conversations with prompts such as: “I noticed your lesson plans didn’t address ...” to the teacher; or a reminder of the parent “It’s so important to come to school on time” or the “schoolwork is important- shape up” conversation with a student, we’re missing an opportunity to connect, to understand and to serve our community from where they are.

Many of us start conversations with “how are you?” and then we quickly delve into business without caring what the answer is. In his book, *Chief Empathy Officer*, Thomas Hoerr (2022) cites, “Exceptional principals create an environment in which everyone grows. They reach out and use empathy to understand and appreciate others’ feelings and perspectives. The COVID-19 epidemic of 2020-221 exacerbated the need for a Chief Empathy Officer—a CEO principal. The pervasive angst, loneliness, and fears we all experience made even greater calls for principles to lead through understanding others” (p.3).

I remember the day after my family experienced a health crisis and a colleague said, “Hey, Paul! How are you? Did you get that report in last night?” while he walked away. I felt invisible. Like a cog in the machine. Imagine if he had asked that question, and then paused and truly listened. Or if he had looked at my burdened facial expressions and slumped body language to notice something might be amiss. That is what I try to do now, to notice what is not being said, but what is being shown, and then respond in a more caring, empathetic way. I know we each have burdens that are sometimes heavy and sometimes lighter and often invisible to others.

Be Authentic

To explore the notion of authenticity, we must explore the opposite. The opposite of authenticity is driven by ego and ambition. It is transactional in nature. I believe early in my career I was not as authentic as I should have been. I was driven by concepts of what a leader should be. I was hired in multiple schools to “fix” issues that were there. My ideas around this concept are rooted in perceived concepts of what a leader is—strong, not personal, and authoritarian. These assumptions may have been gendered as well. Working in an elementary school as one of the only male elementary teachers along with societal pressures of being a male teacher may have contributed to my desire to become a principal in the first place. I was misguided, and society is misguided, when it’s honorable for women to teach elementary school and embarrassingly unambitious for men.

In his work around “authentic leadership,” Paul Begley states it is, “a sincere type of leadership and a hopeful, open, visionary and creative response to social situations. The prerequisites for such authentic leadership in school principals are self-knowledge, a capacity for moral reasoning, and sensitivity to others’ intentions (Begley, 2006, p. 570).” We need a renewed focus on the people in the organization to collectively move forward together. As Brene Brown says, “We desperately need more leaders who are committed to courageous, wholehearted leadership and who are self-aware enough to lead from their hearts, rather than unevolved leaders who lead from hurt and fear” (p.4)

The tragedies my family endured during the pandemic and the response of others to these stressors help me become aware of how my leadership style may have caused pain to others. I know I’ll make mistakes again, but if I lead from my heart, as Parker Palmer says (2000) “Go past ego to your true self—bearing more gracefully the

responsibilities that come with being human” (p.73). That’s just what I did when I started focusing on true connection before moving towards collective actions.

Conclusion

I have realized that I, as an administrator, have agency in how I lead. I need to model the importance of empathy, vulnerability, and authenticity to others, while also ensuring how I make decisions, what the decisions are, and that the outcome of the decisions reflect these values. My leadership style has shifted. My ego used to be at the center of my work. Now my focus on understanding “who” and “how” we can reach our goals together. Leading with a concerted effort to support all members of the organization to see and understand each other's backpacks and help both themselves and others carry their loads will help us heal. My leadership in this area is impacting the path my school community collectively is creating and exploring. Leadership is more about caring deeply for and about the people in our efforts. Knowing what is in those invisible backpacks everyone carries and leading with vulnerability, empathy, and authenticity has sustained me through these incredibly hard times. And my own family, our teachers, students and families appreciate having a real person leading them, and not some person hiding behind a mask of what leaders “should” be like. Once you are grounded, once you know who you are, once you are clear on your primary goal you can authentically serve your community. The hardest decision, the most conflict-ridden decision, becomes easier. When the items in our backpacks are seen and acknowledged by other, sharing the invisible weight gives me hope.

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Chapter Four: Scholarly Practitioner Paper 3

Paper 3: Sustainable Leadership During Turbulent Times

Working Title: Who are you, where are you going, and.... *Why?*

Author(s): Paul Marietta

Target Publication: Principal Magazine

Central Theme: How to find authentic self in the current work as a means to find contentment and higher levels of job satisfaction.

Who Are You, Where Are You Going, and.... *Why?*

I remember walking through the halls of my first day as a teacher at a high school in Wisconsin. I was 21 years old and just graduated from college. My role on this day was a high school band teacher substitute. I got stopped in the hallway during my second period “prep time” on my way to the teachers’ lounge by the hallway monitor and asked, “Who are you? Where are you going? Why are you going there?” It is likely he thought I was a student, but now twenty-five years later, I believe those questions are just as important to ask myself as that very first day. Maybe these are the questions we each should be asking, no matter our role or where we are in our career. These three questions are similar to the questions posed by Leo Tolstoy (1885), translated (1928) and stated by John Kelly (2017) where a king asks for guidance for the questions, “What was the right time for every action, and who were the most necessary people, and how he might know what was the most important thing to do” (p.99). When we are leading schools, crises often spur us into action, and Tolstoy’s questions are helpful. However, when leading a school, quiet contemplation and reflection on “Who are you? Where are you going? Why

are you going there?” might ground you in the moment, helping you find contentment in turbulent and chaotic times. Wild fires. Floods. Hurricanes. Political unrest. Or just a timely and reflective exploration of one’s sense of purpose in life.

Who am I (are we)?

Starting with the question, “who am I” is critical at every stage of your career. There is a growing body of research around the concept of “teacher professional identity.” Jane Danielewicz (2001) defines identity as, “understanding of who we are and who we think other people are” (p. 10). I have found over many years of coaching, consulting, and evaluating teachers the strong link to teacher identity. Brad Olson (2010) further unpacks the notion of teacher identity by stating, “who we are as teachers is hitched to who we are as humans, which itself is hitched to our own lived experiences. As a result, we need to consider teacher education, professional development, and the personal-professional changes and needs of teachers as integrated and interconnected parts of who we are and what we can become” (p.26).

When we better understand how our histories and personal experiences impact the way we interact with each individual student, our sense of purpose increases, and students feel our connection to them. We can build upon our strengths and draw upon them when needed. We can know our vulnerabilities and mitigate them when they are adversely impacting our efforts with students and colleagues. Who you are, individually, helps you focus and hone your energy more deliberately with the students who are hoping you’ll truly see them, and not just a number. For example, making sure a person is in the

right position based on their virtuosity that can allow their strengths to flourish changes the whole dynamic for a person, and in turn, his/her students.

Examining, who *we* are has the potential to heighten a sense of collective efficacy. Following the work of Roger Goddard (2004) and Albert Bandura (2000), Rachel Elles (2011) conducted a meta-analytic research study noting that a teacher's sense of collective efficacy, or sense or belief in the others within the school, "strongly and positively associated with student achievement across subject areas and in multiple locations" (p. 110). Teacher identity and teacher collective efficacy are directly related. A teacher's identity plays a pivotal role in influencing their confidence and sense of competence within the classroom. Teachers who are more secure in their personal identities are more likely to collaborate, share insights, and work together for improved student outcomes. This level of collaboration is one tool to heighten the collective efficacy of the organization and build the collective identity of the school. The link between teacher identity and teacher collective efficacy underscores the importance of nurturing a strong, positive teacher identity as a foundation for fostering a culture of collaboration, innovation, and efficacy in education. A leader's work is to help both individuals, and as a collective, spend time narrating and celebrating success. When groups of people can develop and nurture positive identities together, powerful commitment follows.

Who am I? I used to be the guy who couldn't dare walk into work without the authority credential: white shirt and tie. I used to be the guy who didn't dare admit I didn't know the answer. Now I find myself listening to a concern, making sure I understand it right, and then admitting, I don't know what the solution is, but how about

if I ask more people and get back to you. Or I first respond, “what do you think?” in a sincere desire to hear their perspective before inserting my own. I used to make sure my hallways were quiet and clean during passing time. Now I am more likely to find me singing to my students, strumming my guitar with kids hopping, skipping, jumping as they go to class.

Where am I(we) going?

I was a teacher for only four years when it was first suggested to me that I think about the principalship. A few years later, at age 27, I was in my first assistant principalship. Fast forward another ten years and I was serving as an assistant superintendent of a large urban school district. I never paused to stop and think about “where am I going?” To me it became a series of steps towards what I thought would be an eventual superintendency. I went where others thought I should go.

In retrospect, I believe I may have been driven by ego and ambition and what has been historically expected of a man in education. Perhaps there are rooted subconscious insecurities about “what I am supposed to do.” Maybe a bit delusional angst around the financial benefits of pursuing positions and the role a man should take in the educational system. The truth of it all, I found myself moving into positions of what I perceived as *less and less* relevant and further away from my initial purpose. I know that not all men move into leadership because it’s expected of them, rather it’s their mission. Quoting from Tyack (1974), Joanna Chatlos referenced this phenomenon in her dissertation (2018) referring to the original framework of the American public school system as a “pedagogical harem,” in which cisgender male administrators typically managed a

cisgender female faculty (p. 45). As an increasing number of women became teachers at the turn of the 20th century, men's ability to validate their masculinity in the role of teacher diminished, with administration becoming a more viable option with regard to status, authority, and income (Blount, 1999). But for me, the less day-to-day contact I had with students, the more disconnected I was to my work. It became a job rather than a career.

I had the opportunity to work with many exemplary teachers over my career. I remember vividly asking a teacher who was truly exceptional if he considered leadership to help spread his practices further. In that conversation, I believe I said something along the lines of "more than you can do as *just* a teacher'." During that part of the conversation, he paused and you could see a shift in his affect. He stated, appropriately, that he felt the greatest impact and connection with his core values even though he was "just a teacher." I have never felt more disappointed in myself when I said "just." For me to diminish his professional and personal identity was reprehensible. His identity as a teacher, and his work with students is cause for celebration.

Why am I (are we) going there?

It is likely we have all been in a situation where we knew internally, we were not in the right position or with the right organization. I was asked to serve as a consultant as part of a "restructuring" plan during the NCLB era where schools who were deemed "chronically underperforming" had to select from a list of interventions. Working with a nationally recognized consulting firm was one of the options schools could choose.

The school I was to consult was located on the Navajo reservation in Arizona. As a white man from Minnesota, there were so many things wrong with this assignment. I flew in once a month and spent one day with the staff going through research from my organization on key practices that according to a broad meta-analysis “works.” I was in my eighth visit where I was sharing more about the virtues of data-driven decision making when a teacher came up to me and stated, “You have shared a lot about the research and ideas for what we can do better. I am curious, in your time here, what have you learned about the Navajo?” It was a true epiphany moment for me. I could not answer his question because I believed my role was to share the research as “transferrable” and frankly, “indisputable.” The truth was, I was a charlatan. I said what I thought was needed, then I turned around and flew back to my home, not truly knowing the people I was there to serve and not trusting that they had expertise in what solutions would work in their community. I got into education mostly for the deep relationships I could make with the community, yet, here I was talking to the participants and imposing a colonial perspective on indigenous peoples, rather than working with them. I believed I had little agency in redesigning the format of the professional development or the delivery of the packaged format. What I failed to recognize was the even a sliver of contextual understanding would have benefited the collective learning. Citing, Joseph Spring, Cornel Pewewardy (2001) notes, “The Indigenous peoples of what is now the United States have long been subjects of a complex history of colonization, attempted genocide, and deculturalization through education (p.101). If I were able to do it all again, and what has influenced me moving forward, is to always remember the context

and the people you are there to serve and to serve in the way, time, and pace *they* need you to serve.

At the end of this contract, I decided my work, and my potential for positive impact, was at the schoolhouse where I felt I could truly make lasting meaningful relationships and change. Staying with an organization that is misaligned with your sense of purpose may be the right path. However, leaving the organization when there is a mismatch might be the right path. Both actions take courage. But your sense of purpose will guide you in your decision.

Measuring impact

I was asked recently about data informed decision making. I was once a disciple of the summative data-driven decision-making movement, I found myself reflecting back on the events of that particular day. On that day, I helped a crying child focus on soothing strategies to help them identify emotions and re-regulate to enjoy the rest of their day. I observed a teacher who was struggling with getting the children on task, hoping to coach her to improve. I assured a parent that we could support their child as she shared about her tumultuous home environment.

What I realized, was we need to ensure every student can read and compute, but perhaps the pathway to academic success has its foundation in the student's sense of belonging and well-being in school. Citing Maurice Elias (1997), Durlak, Dymnicki, et. al (2011) point out, "Emotions can facilitate or impede children's academic engagement, work ethic, commitment, and ultimate school success" (p.405). What if we focused on these items? How many smiles did we see today? How confident did our students feel

that they have the tools to solve a conflict on their own? We are in the education business, and so it's appropriate to note data such as "last quarter we saw a reduction of student referrals by __%," or, "we saw reading gains by __%, but we should not stop there. Did students' sense of safety increase? Did bullying decrease? Did their engagement in risky behaviors decrease? Did their sense of belonging and trust in adults increase?

We do not have to choose between being data driven or attending to the social and emotional needs of your community. A well-designed organizational system is one that takes both personal core values with the organizational values into consideration to help define common efforts. Within the "invisible backpack" are a set of values. When the values guiding the culture of the organization cannot help support the weight of this backpack, exhaustion ensues.

Now as I sit back and reflect both on the past, present, and anticipated future, I am clearer than ever of the three core questions posed to me on that very first year. Who I am: I am striving to be an authentic leader who builds strong relationships with all members of my school community. Where am I going: serving in the school is the right place to enact my efforts. Why: I know I am making an impact through continually being attuned to both anecdotal and data driven metrics that include perceptual feedback. Today I am content. I feel I am having a positive impact. I will keep asking myself these critical questions to make sure I never again am simply going where others point me to go.

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Chapter Five: Conclusion and Scholarly Practitioner Paper 4

Paper 4: Sustaining the Spirit as a Social Justice School Leader

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Target Publication: Ed Week

Central Themes: Educator burnout is happening at an alarming rate. This concluding chapter will explore key strategies principals and leaders can take to help stop the mass exodus, specifically, how we can internalize and systematize the notions of “self-care” and be fully present on behalf of the important work of education. In my earlier articles for submission, I focused on three core elements. First, engaging in scholarly work that is meaningful. The second, how to acknowledge and allow space for the struggles in life to help create space for relationships that will ultimately heighten collaboration. Lastly, how to explore contentment in your efforts. In this final chapter, I hope to bring these themes together and link the concepts to alleviating the flight of leaders and staff in schools from education.

Sustaining the Spirit as a Social Justice School Leader

We Are Exhausted

Too often in schools we celebrate the wrong thing. Take for example a recent dialogue at a principal meeting. Together I was at a table with five principals from my district. With a relatively benign start of connection with the prompt, “how are you doing?” One principal began to talk about how “busy” they were—sharing how long they feel they are working citing specifics of working until 10:00 last night and missing their kid’s basketball game. The other principals in this case started sharing their busy

schedules as well. Perhaps the intention in this line of dialogue was to build camaraderie around this common theme. Inadvertently this leads to a “rat race” culture where we are valuing and celebrating overworking ourselves-and normalizing ignoring our own families and our own children’s needs.

What we know is educators are leaving the profession in droves. According to data from the Ed Week Research Center (2022):

- 44% of public-school teachers report they plan to leave in the next two years (compared to 29% in 2010) (EdWeek Research Center (Ed.) (2022)
- 72% of public schools report more teachers are taking time off (IES Institute of Education Sciences (Ed.). (2022, August 4).
- 61% of schools report fewer available substitutes to cover classrooms when teachers are absent (EdWeek Research Center (Ed.). (2022).
- 12% of teachers report they are very satisfied with their job (Compared to 62% in 2008) (EdWeek Research Center (Ed.). (2022).

The principal exodus is similar to the teacher exodus. The high rates of principal question and attrition have significant impacts on teacher longevity and ultimately student outcomes. Nearly 50% of principals who completed a National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) survey indicated “their stress level is so high, they are considering a career change or retirement” (US News and World, 2022). NASSP president Gregg Wieczorek responded to this crisis by noting the following:

The principal pipeline is becoming increasingly fractured at all levels, in every region of the country and in all school types. Recruiting and retaining school leaders will become

even more difficult, if more is not done to support educators in our schools (Wieczorek, 2021).

Marie-Nathalie Beudoin and Maureen Taylor (2004) note, “Pressures have the effect of rendering a principal’s life highly stressful, [that] can create a sense of inadequacy in the face of unrealistic demands, can be isolating, and may lead to burnout” (p.12).

We need to shift this paradigm.

We need to celebrate balance.

It is not to say that we need to “quiet-quit” or take a more passive aggressive approach to our profession. As principals, we can set the tone of the building. I once heard another principal say, “the principal controls the weather in the school.” They were inferring that we do in fact have control over the mood of a building. In this way we can either model how to engage in self-care strategies, or we overwork ourselves while the teachers infer that as the expectation for all.

We have more agency in the tone we set as leaders than we know. We need to create conditions where we model taking care of ourselves to help others not get caught in the traps of “commiseration collaboration.” The onus for “self-care” cannot fully be placed on the individual. Organizations must create a culture where it is acceptable and expected to focus on your own mental health. Leaders must have robust tools to support the well-being of the entire system. This includes strategies to take care of themselves.

Self-care is a term that is widely used to support the notion that you must “take care of yourself.” The old adage, you first must put on your own oxygen mask before you can help others” is somewhat trite, but pertinent. In a recent article Rice and Williams

(2022) point out, “Principals who engage in self-care strategies may be able to enhance their work success by improving their ability to care for themselves physically, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually” (p. 568) Self-care can best be defined by Tygielski (2022), who states that self-care “means doing what is good for us—increasing our emotional and physical stamina, improving our self-esteem, and building resilience. Maintaining good self-care ensures that we stay compassionate, impassioned, and engaged ((paragraph 6).

Citing research from MacNiel, Townsley, et al. (2021) note, “School administrators' health-related behaviors can affect the entire culture of a school” (p.858). Further, the teachers surveyed regarding the health of their school’s report, “school administrators' characteristics, such as their ability to tolerate stress and develop and maintain goals, had a significant effect on school culture and student achievement” (p.858). How we model and engage in well-being and self-care will determine both the sustainability of ourselves, and those you serve.

Recommendations

Develop Deep Relationships First

In the school in which I work, we have developed a system of “wellness partners.” The role of the wellness partner is to check in on the well-being of each other. We begin most meetings with their wellness partner taking a walk around our school grounds. The topics can go where ever they need them to go. Sometimes a prompt is provided, other times the partners just have a connection point. Last week, we used the prompt, “what are your headwinds and tailwinds” in life right now? Staff had an

opportunity to share their struggles and the things that keep them moving forward. I shared my own with the staff as an example so they could bear witness that I was not asking them to do something I was unwilling to do myself. My headwinds at the time were the grief process with my parents, and my tailwind was a recent visit with a friend. Others were then able to share their concerns more freely with their partner and the whole group as needed. One staff member noted their family in the Middle East and the toll it is taking on her not knowing what is happening with loved ones half way across the globe.

Though this process, we normalized the notion that we all have struggle in our lives. This process opens the door to see each other as humans full of complex emotions and struggles instead of just colleagues. Too often in schools, and in life, we are dehumanizing each other. This is never more evident than the struggles facing the world in war torn countries. In an article about the relationship between Israel and Palestine, author Patricia Moynah (2017) states, “violence cannot generate power, only destroy it. This understanding of power as creative is defined by building relations, not tearing them apart” (p.296).

Empathy is a precursor of relationships and a critical element of the humanizing efforts. For empathy to take place, the individual must have the intention of having a significant ongoing relationship with the other person. When speaking about the challenges in the Middle East, Moynagh (2017) further states, “If they are raised to deny the humanity of others, then it becomes more arduous to connect them later” (p.300). Further, Moynagh states, “Schools need to be a place where we heal from the past and nurture a healthy future (p.100).

In an article for business leaders, Somos (2014) noted, “Ultimately, humanizing employees’ lived experiences in the workplace and creating a sense of connection is about building a community where people feel more energized and motivated to do their best work. As a result, improving the employee experience will pay big dividends to your organization (p.13). Citing research from Amabile, Schatzel, Moneta, & Kramer (2004) and Mayfield (2011), Nock, et al. (2018) note, “Empathetic leadership should increase a follower’s attempts at innovation because the follower feels safer in taking risks and has less stress—two major factors in someone’s creativity and innovation” (p.220). Our role is to develop relationships through the humanizing of each other. Always. Especially when it is the most conflict-ridden situation or the hardest.

Focus on What Nourishes You

Achieving holistic wellness as a school principal can prove to be quite difficult given the high level of leadership responsibilities and stress factors leaders may endure. Therefore, it is essential that principals engage in self-care strategies as an effort to better tend to their emotional, physical, social, and mental well-being, thus helping to improve their ability to successfully lead their school community.

For me, I feel most grounded when I am in nature. The work leading schools can be challenging, and we need to be able to have interpersonal and intrapersonal methods to sustain ourselves during this effort. In her research around executive functions (EF), Adele Diamond (20214) asserts:

Executive functions are critical for success in school, on the job, and in life. EFs suffer if you are lonely, sad, stressed, or not physically fit. Therefore, if we care

about academic outcomes, we should care that student [and staff] feel they are in a supportive community they can count on, that they are happy (even joyful), and that their bodies are strong and healthy (p. 205).

Diamond asserts that when we do not focus on our “spirit,” our executive functions impede on our ability to effectively work. Diamon further declares:

Nowhere is the importance of social, emotional, and physical health for cognitive health more evident than with EFs, and nowhere is the importance of social, emotional, and physical health for brain health more evident than with prefrontal cortex. Prefrontal cortex and EFs are the first to suffer, and suffer disproportionately, if you are lonely, sad, stressed, or not physically fit. (p.214).

In order to tend to our executive functions and the need of our prefrontal cortex, we need to have opportunity to engage in true self care to find joy and solace, and ultimately productivity.

Implications for Practice

Implications for practice vary based on the various roles in K-12 educational systems. Much of this dissertation, and specifically this chapter, has been focused on leadership, and specifically the role of the principal. However, others have a role to play. Below are some potential ramifications and suggestions for other positions.

University Preparation Programs

University preparation programs need their coursework, whether it be in undergraduate or graduate study, to focus on leadership dispositions and actions that will

translate to success in schools. This should include skill development in emotional intelligence and how to manage stress as much as theories of leadership. In addition, they must model how to create a community of learners and focus more on the job-embedded professional development rather than on technical writing.

Teachers and leaders need to have a community to construct knowledge together and develop deep, lasting relationships. Teacher and principal training programs have a responsibility to create what authors Lambert and Felton (2020) call “relationship rich” environments: “All students learn best in an environment characterized by high expectation and high support, and all faculty and staff can learn to teach and work in ways that enable relationship-based education” (p.98).

Goldman (2016) defines emotional intelligence as, “the ability to mobilize oneself, to control impulses, to regulate mood, not to let troubles interfere with thinking, to put oneself in someone else’s shoes, and to hope” (p.3). Citing the work of Wisinger (1998) and Danilov and Mihailova (2020), researchers Semih Çayak and Menekşe Eskici (2021) note

Emotional intelligence has a special place in schools as educational organizations, as in other organizations. Because school principals, who know themselves well and can direct their emotions, give more positive reactions to the behaviors of teachers and students. They know what they feel and what emotions they experience, and they can direct the emotions and thoughts of school members in this direction in order to create a better school environment (p.1).

Finally, as noted a previous chapter of this dissertation, university preparation programs need to focus on supporting practitioners rather than solely preparing

academics in higher education. Most educators will never pursue a doctoral degree or become academics. . In her work in “Decentering the Ivory Tower of Academia,” (2013), Ramdeholl draws attention to the fact that, “For some time universities have been regarded as the legitimate holders of knowledge, and that academic knowledge is, by definition, removed from the ‘real world’” (p.5). Practitioners want to apply knowledge to practice.

In her research around the discrepancy of educators attaining a Master’s Degree and not a Doctoral, or terminal degree, Burton (2020), citing previous research from Pilbeam, Lloyd-Jones, & Denyer, (2013) found primary reasons educators seek higher education were, “collegial discussions that occur in educational doctoral programs increase the likelihood that educators will find value in their programs when given opportunities for collaboration through peer support with like-minded individuals” (p.83). Higher education programs can support sustainability efforts by focusing on real world challenges in meaningful ways.

Teacher in a School Setting

Teachers have the tremendous burden and opportunity to work directly with our youngest, most impressionable citizens. How they go about creating community, supporting the students in learning life and academic skills. My researcher positionality and vantage point throughout this practitioner-focused dissertation has been primarily focused on leadership and my role as a principal. It is important to consider that many of the skills and suggestions may likely apply to other positions in education. Connors

(2013) once said, "The best teacher is the one who never forgets what it is like to be a student" (p.1).

Teachers can create environments where students can be truly seen and the things that are in their “backpack” that weigh them down be understood and processed in safe space. Citing the work of Poplin and Weeres (1993), Beth Bernstein-Yamashiro and Gial Noam (2013) assert, “that the relationships students desire are ‘authentic’ ones, wherein they are “trusted, given responsibility, spoken to honestly and warmly, and treated with dignity and respect” (p.19). There are numerous clear links between positive student to teacher relationship and academic outcomes. Valerie Lee and Susanna Loeb (2000) found that social support from teachers is strongly related to one-year gains in both reading and math in Chicago schools. Just as leaders need to develop relationships with the teachers, teachers must develop authentic relationships with students.

Yet there is also a struggle that emerges through the work of creating a space where a child’s psychological well-being is the focus within school settings. Benham (1995), citing the work of Barry Farber (1983) explains: “The constant emotional stress of human service work leads to burnout, a condition in which workers lose all concern, all emotional feeling, for the persons they work with and come to treat them in detached or even dehumanized ways” (p.5). Thomas Kkovholt and Michell Traotter-Mathison (2016) note, “To be successful in the helping professions, we must continually maintain professional vitality and avoid depleted caring” (p.5). Teachers and their leaders must avoid burnout and both engage in, and model self-care strategies to sustain the effort.

Central Office Administrators

Just as principals have the opportunity to influence the climate of a building, central office staff, including the superintendent, have power to influence the tone and tenor of the district. One of the challenges for central office staff, observed after serving as an assistant superintendent myself, is that they are no longer the end user of key innovations. By this, I mean that they are often limited in time to be in the school required to supporting initiatives. This may lead to the potential to push innovations that may or may not match the unique needs of the building. In addition, there is the potential for multiple people and departments all attempting to push forward their innovations simultaneously without coordination to the school site. Killion and Harrison (2016) note this phenomenon stating, “Multiple competing initiatives that work in isolation rather than in a coordinated way create strain on resources and cause a lack of focus and purpose” (p.46). The potential of innovation fatigue can be felt at the school site. Behavior and organizational theorists Chung, et. al state, (2017), “Employees may experience personal exhaustion when dealing with innovation if they must implement numerous innovations over a prolonged period of time” (p.1136).

Research by Honig (2012) resulted in the identification of five practices when reviewing high-functioning central office leadership: (a) joint work, (b) modeling, (c) tools, (d) acting as a broker, and (e) creating and sustaining social engagement (p.746) Of the five, modeling and social engagement are the most pertinent. Modeling, was described as demonstrating the very practices desired within their own work as central office leaders has the potential to heighten awareness and efficacy of the innovations. And social engagement, characterized by central office members engaging with staff,

through conversations for example to help them make sense of new information or tools, and to assist with aspects of implementation.

All told, central office staff must invest in developing real authentic relationships with principals and teachers. They need to be considerate of how the initiatives are put forward, where initiatives may compete for attention from initiatives in various departments, and in support of the specific needs of the school community. Ultimately, all this can only be done if relationships are established to heighten awareness and continuous support in a reciprocal relationship.

Conclusion

Throughout this multi-paper dissertation, I explored mechanisms to support principal (and teacher) retention. The first is how to engage in meaningful learning to deepen skills through doctoral coursework, namely, becoming a practitioner scholar and choosing topics, formats, and writing that can be beneficial for yourself and others. Secondly, I chose to unpack how empathy and understanding has the potential to provide a fertile space for yourself and staff to deepen relationship and ultimately increase efficiency and effectiveness—especially through challenging times. The third exploration was around finding meaning in your position to lead to thriving in your role in education.

These explorations provide a resource to practicing leaders on navigating the challenges of the principal position, and other leadership roles, with the intention of heightening effectiveness in a sustainable way. For us to turn the tide on the exodus in education, we must nourish our human spirit. Author, M. Llewellyn (2018) notes, "The spiritual offers a language, a way of knowing and a way of being to draw on in imagining

schools as places where education is for life and for the enhancement of one's life journey...that helps express a way of being in the world and to share the transformative possibilities of being and learning together" (p. 153). There needs to be a sense of urgency in this effort. The exodus of educators leaving the field and the lack of candidates entering the field is reaching a critical threshold that will adversely impact our country's ability to meet our highest ideals.

Teachers and leaders are leaving the profession at alarming rates. Through this scholarly review of literature and writing a practitioner-focused dissertation with multiple publishable papers, I am confident that it will adhere to the ideals put forward by Portland State University to, "expand the capacity of formal and informal educational leaders for providing leadership that makes a positive and significant difference in the lives of the members of the communities and professional fields they serve" (PSU, 2023).

Education is challenging and rewarding work. For us as leaders to thrive, and for our teachers and communities to thrive, the core concepts in this dissertation provide ideas to sustain ourselves and others as we teach and lead during turbulent times.

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