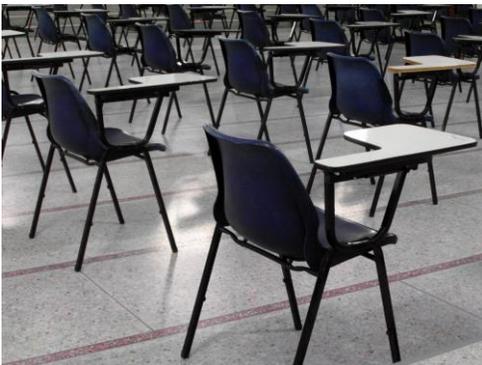


RESEARCH CONNECTION

Educational leadership during the COVID-19 outbreak

By Alysha Farrell, Ph.D.



Why this research is important

The study illuminated some of the affective dimensions of leading in precarious times. Although the participants focused on the pandemic's impact on students, teachers and families, when asked directly about the personal impact, 14 of the 15 participants reported that leading during the COVID-19 outbreak had negatively impacted their physical and emotional wellbeing. One participant said, "I can't sleep. I'm not sure about my impact anymore," and another reported, "I wake up thinking about the pandemic's impact on our students, and it's the last thing I think about before going to bed at night." Another participant said, "At first, it was extremely hard to concentrate at work because I was terrified I'd bring the virus home."

What you need to know

On March 23rd, 2020, face-to-face classes in Manitoba public schools were suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of the abrupt shift to distance learning, educational leaders in the K-12 public school system faced significant challenges. The purpose of the study was to learn more about some of the leadership challenges caused by the pandemic and to identify promising leadership practices in times of crisis.

How the research was conducted

Fifteen school and divisional leaders from the Southwestern region of Manitoba were interviewed for this study. The interviews took place over Zoom video conferencing between June 1st and June 29th, 2020.

What the researcher found

All of the participants reported the speed of change posed significant challenges, the most significant being that school leaders had one week to prepare teachers and families to shift from face-to-face classes to distance learning. To further complicate matters, the participants described instances when they would learn about high-impact decisions made by the provincial government only hours before the public. One of the participants expressed,

“It was frustrating not having important information before the media had it.” Another theme that emerged in the interviews was the level of uncertainty caused by the pandemic. One participant remarked, “It’s hard to tell people it’s going to be okay when so much is uncertain and out of our control.” Most notably, the participants identified four social inequities that shaped their leadership efforts during this difficult time. Food insecurity, student access to online classes, student safety, and gaps in mental health supports for families were areas of great concern.

How this research can be used

The participants shared a number of leadership strategies they used to mitigate the challenges they faced. For example, some of the school principals described how they set up small, agile and issue-based decision-making teams to target urgent areas of concern. They also offered wise counsel on how to create mentorship teams and how the teams were used to “provide right-on-time support in the areas of using online learning platforms, engaging students online and effective online pedagogies.” During the last part of each interview, the participants were asked to share a piece of advice with aspiring school leaders who might find themselves leading in challenging times. What follows is a snapshot of their advice:

1. Lead with an ethic of care.
2. Don’t assume that everyone deals with change in the same way as you do.
3. Anticipate which conversations are best had face-to-face.
4. Stay connected with your own emotions.
5. Let people know when you need help. It’s not possible for one person to have all the answers.

6. Don’t idealize self-sacrifice.
7. Set boundaries for online communication.
8. Slow down. Take time to make the right decision even if you’re being put under significant pressure to move faster than is reasonable.

About the researcher

Alysha Farrell is an Associate Professor and the Chair of the Department of Leadership and Educational Administration. She is currently writing a book that focuses on teaching, leading and learning in the face of the climate crisis.

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Publication based on research

The results of the study will be published in a chapter in Dr. Farrell’s forthcoming book, *Educational Theory Beyond the Anthropocene*.

Keywords

Leadership in times of crisis, COVID-19, the affective dimensions of leading; mentorship

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