

School Leadership During COVID-19: Implications for School Leadership Preparation Programs

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ABSTRACT

In one university-based school leadership preparation program, aspiring school principals were asked to intern virtually with principals during the COVID-19 school closures. During this internship experience, they interviewed principals about leading during a pandemic and wrote reflective responses explaining what they learned about leading during the pandemic. This case study examines the reflections and lessons learned of leading schools during COVID-19 from 27 aspiring principals in two cohorts of a university-based school leadership preparation program. The researchers employed an abductive qualitative analysis for each aspiring principals' reflection using both deductive and inductive coding methods. Findings revealed fourth themes: (1) the need for structure and organization, (2) attending humanistic needs, (3) struggling to respond to policy changes; and (4) finding meaning and uplifting morale. This study can be used to help inform and guide educational leadership preparation and development programs on how to redirect coursework and field-based experiences to better prepare aspiring school principals to lead during school closures.

Keywords: Leadership development, Leadership, Crisis Management, COVID-19

School systems across the world were deeply impacted by the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). To help curb the spread of COVID-19, over 190 countries implemented country-wide closures of schools and educational systems (The World Bank, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Such school closures affected approximately 90% of students around the world and resulted in over 60 million educators engaging in some form of online distance learning (UNESCO, 2020). This disruptive period in the history of education caused many teachers, parents, and students to look at school leadership more intensely for assistance navigating through the COVID-19 era of school.

School leadership is already a complex and ever-evolving profession, even more so now during a global pandemic. Harris (2020) observed, "COVID-19 has dramatically changed conceptions of leadership and leadership practices. While principals are still leading their schools . . . They are leading from their laptop. They are now remote leaders" (p. 1). As school administrators transitioned to remote schooling, their work hours went beyond the regular school schedule, and they struggled to keep up with the constant changes of health-related information and procedures for school safety. In spite of the constant chaos and increasing demands, school administrators were still required to ensure a successful school climate and distance learning experience. Such a predicament has compelled much introspection to reconceptualize schools and school leadership for a post-COVID-19 era of school (Zhao, 2020).

To reconceptualize school leadership in a post-COVID-19 era, research must describe experiences of school administrators leading during the pandemic and implications of it for current and future school administrators. Currently, minimal empirical data exist that examines the experiences of school administrators leading during this pandemic. Understanding the decisions made and the experiences of such principals would also be an invaluable resource to help

contribute to the field of educational leadership scholarship and to inform educational leadership preparation programs on how to redirect coursework for aspiring school principals.

Purpose of Study

In one university-based educational leadership program, the aspiring school principals were asked to intern with principals during the COVID-19 school closures. During this internship experience, aspiring school principals interviewed principals about leading during a pandemic and wrote reflective responses explaining what they learned from their internship experience. Thus, this study examines the reflections and lessons learned of leading schools during COVID-19 from aspiring school principals. The following question guided this study: What did aspiring school principal candidates in one university-based principal preparation program learn about school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic school closures?

By providing these aspiring school principal candidates the opportunity to observe and reflect on the practices of principals during COVID-19 school closures, faculty of the university-based program posit that they will gain a better understanding of effective school leadership and the skills necessary to develop a healthy school culture and leadership preparation in response to a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conceptual Framework

To understand the learning associated with leadership development for aspiring school principals during the COVID-19 school closures, the researchers used Bolman and Deal's (2017) Reframing Organizations Framework. This framework suggests four frames in which leaders perceive organizational situations and in turn shape how such situations are defined and how such situations can be effectively managed (Bolman & Deal, 2017). The four frames are *structural*, *human resource*, *political*, and *symbolic*.

The structural frame is grounded on the theory that organizations increase efficiency through specialization and appropriate division of labor. In order for organizations to accomplish such efficiency, structures must be designed to fit an organization's current circumstances and rationality must prevail over personal agendas and extraneous pressures (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

The human resource frame is based on human needs and organizations that meet the basic needs of humans to function more effectively. Organizations exist to serve human needs. People need organizations to obtain careers, income, and growth opportunities while organizations need people for ideas, talent, and progress. Organizational leaders who work out of the human resource frame value relationships, feelings, and connection. They seek to empower individuals by looking for ways to adjust organizations to fit people or to adjust people to fit within the organization.

The political frame views organizations as a coalition of interest groups with enduring differences in values, interests and beliefs, and perceptions of reality. Competition for scarce resources puts conflict at the center of decision making and makes power the most important asset. Leaders who work out of the political frame are pragmatists who create coalitions, network, and build a foundation for negotiation and advocacy.

The symbolic frame emphasizes meaning and predictability as social construction through stories, myths, and ceremonies. It distills from five assumptions: (a) what is most important is not what happens but what it means; (b) events or activities have multiple meanings; (c) to combat uncertainty or ambiguity, people create symbols to give meaning, and find direction and hope; (d) events or activities are more important for what is expressed than what is produced; and (e) organizational culture unites people and helps accomplish goals (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The current COVID-19 health crisis has exposed the educational system's lack of formal plans to address normalized teaching and learning during extended periods of school closures. Globally, all levels of the education sector were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The realization that our educational leadership preparation programs lack curriculum to intentionally address crisis events is an uncomfortable truth resulting from the pandemic. Harris and Jones (2020) acknowledge that at this moment, "School leaders are walking a tightrope without a safety net. There are no precedents and no guides to leading schools in a pandemic" (p. 244). The Pew Research Center adds, "While there have been several less widespread pandemics over the past century (e.g., SARS 2004), COVID-19 created panic all over the world impacting every aspect of our lives" (March 30, 2020). In searching the literature for crisis management, specifically for educational leadership preparation programs, the results are lacking. What is available refers to the context of business leaders (Kerrissey & Edmonson, 2020) and academia (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020), while other literature pertains to school leadership insights

(Harris & Jones, 2020; Rogers & Ishimoto, 2020). Much literature does exist on issues encountered in natural disasters such as earthquakes, fires, tornadoes, and hurricanes (Foster & Lipka, 2007; Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2008; Halpern & Tramontin, 2007; Shaluf, 2007). There is also literature on school violence in the form of shootings due to recent national occurrences (Pepper et al., 2010; Ryals, 2014). School leaders already learn about safety practices such as lockdowns to mitigate bomb threats (Conn, 2004) or planned fire drills to practice for an actual fire. In addition, school leaders have learned about acts of school violence in the form of bomb threats, power failures, shootings, and weather-related catastrophes that may occur on school grounds while students and staff are on campus (Webb, 2000). However, research suggests that school administrators have not been formally trained to handle school crises when schools must be closed for extensive periods of time with the expectation that teaching and learning will continue (Webb, 2000).

Even past U.S. presidents have attempted to prepare the nation for a pandemic, but without a plan for schools. John Barry's (2004) book, *The Great Influenza*, inspired President George W. Bush to launch a national pandemic preparation plan in 2005. In a letter dated November 1, 2005, directed to the public, President Bush outlined a plan to minimize the effects of the H5N1 flu virus. However, the entire plan only referred to containing the spread of the virus and its effects on the economy and health status of the country. There was no reference to its impact on schools, although the plan did mention the possible need to ask citizens to be homebound for the sake of containing the spread of the virus.

Despite the nation's lack of preparation for a pandemic the magnitude of COVID-19, one school leadership team in a small privately funded school had the foresight and will to prepare for a pandemic such as this 12 years ago. Christensen and Alexander (2020) tell the implementation story of how teachers, students, and families in the community wanted to ensure that schooling could continue in the event of a pandemic. While difficult to imagine the reality of 2020, the school leadership team designed a plan to prepare all stakeholders for a Distance Learning Day (DLD) in which all instruction would take place from home for one full day. The learning community piloted a DLD in the fall of 2007 and refined the one-day event each year till 2012. Plans to follow up with participants in the DLD are being developed to assess the impact on their teaching and learning practices during the 2020 pandemic. This school is the exception to the rule but is a harbinger of what successful virtual teaching and learning during a pandemic can look like if properly planned.

After the chaos and unprecedented learning loss most schools experienced due to lack of preparation from educational leaders at all levels of school organizations, principal preparation programs may need to re-conceptualize curriculum in light of this moment of "radical uncertainty" (Harris & Jones, 2020; Kay & King, 2020). Current programs, even when based on national standards, may not be preparing leaders for situations that cause such disruption to face-to-face instruction. In a dissertation study by Scott McDowell (2012) entitled, *Expecting the Unexpected: A Study of New Principal Experiences*, McDowell addresses principals' reactions to experiencing an unexpected event and highlights the void in preparation programming for future leaders. McDowell states, "While principal preparation programs do address logistical problem solving, there is no curriculum for incoming principals that address the phenomenon of the unexpected event" (p. 1). School leaders must act to optimize outcomes for students, teachers, and communities. Based on the mandatory social distancing requirements to prevent the spread of the virus, field experience, normally situated in school-based contexts, pivoted to virtual reality technology (Sasaki, et al., 2020). Without a well-defined model of practices to follow as schools remain closed in 2020 due to COVID-19, optimal learning for all students will remain delayed as a result of lack of a relevant plan of action.

One logical step in reaction to what has transpired with the COVID-19 crisis is that principal preparation programs begin to study and incorporate preparation for similar crises into their curriculum. In addition, Kathleen Conn (2004) comments that there is a need to prepare future leaders for pandemic crises considering the legal liability perspective for educators, as she explains that educators "have a legal duty of care" (p. 139)" for their students and staff. A crisis event requires a crisis management mindset and a set of skills that take precedent over instruction for the safety and security of the school community.

METHOD

The data sources for this study were the reflections of 27 aspiring principals in two cohorts of a university-based school leadership preparation program. Except for two aspiring principals in the program, all were employed by Grande School District (pseudonym, GSD), and interviews were conducted virtually. The reports of 27 aspiring principals, over two cohorts, were examined (See Table 1 for demographics).

Participants were asked to submit their interview notes and reflections explaining what they learned from their interaction with both the mentors and site-based principals. Researchers culled the documents from the complete submissions of the 27 participants and employed qualitative content analysis to analyze the reflections. Hsieh and Shannon

(2005) define content analysis as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (p. 1278). Each aspiring principal’s interview asked questions regarding how management priorities had changed as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, specifically from before to after implementation of virtual delivery of instruction.

Table 1
Aspiring Principal Demographics (N = 27)

Gender		Race/Ethnicity			School Level		
Male	Female	African American/Black	Hispanic/Latino	White	Elementary School	Middle School	High School
9	18	2	4	21	16	5	6

The research team used an abductive analysis process to analyze each aspiring leaders’ reflection, combining both deductive and inductive coding methods (Denzin, 1978). Initially the team developed a set of deductive codes that mirrored the four components of the Reframing Organizations Framework. These four categories created a coding framework. Deductive coding can be less flexible than other qualitative coding methods because it requires researchers to use units of analysis intrinsic to the predetermined categories (LeCompte et al., 1993).

Once the categories were established, the team inductively coded, identifying specific instances within the four code categories. As an example, coding one interview reflection, the initial framework code *political* was further defined with an additional second level code, *ensured his interpretation of the superintendent’s message*. This second level coding was further refined to form a chain of codes specific to each aspiring principals’ interview in each category. In each code category, there were code chains that ranged from one additional descriptive code to four additional codes. One example of a long descriptive chain within the *human resources* category was coded: *families’ needs – lack of food and shelter, lack of transportation, lack of internet and technology*.

Trustworthiness in data analysis was addressed through several processes (Creswell, 2013). The coding process engaged three researchers in an iterative coding process in which multiple readings and levels of coding occurred. In each coding process, researchers either independently read the reflections and came to consensus, as was the case with the initial code categories, or coded side-by-side as occurred in developing the code chains.

The researchers employed several procedures to address credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell, 2013) in analyzing the data. There was prolonged engagement with case data: two sets of individual case data over a year. Further, within the analysis the researchers developed a systematic process of coding and categorizing to create themes. Through discussion of these themes, the researchers were able to provide a rich description of what aspiring principals learned from their experiences engaging in school leadership.

FINDINGS

The data analysis revealed four significant themes aspiring school principals learned: (1) the need for structure and organization, (2) attending humanistic needs, (3) struggling to respond to policy changes, and (4) finding meaning and uplifting morale.

The Need for Structure and Organization

Aspiring school principal candidates noted how hard it was for principals to take in all the information given about distance learning and provide some type of structured model for teachers, parents, and students. One candidate wrote, “Information is either unclear or filled with so many holes and unanswered. Yet, everyone has questions and are looking to the leaders for guidance.” As such, reflections expressed the importance of establishing procedures and structure in preparing for distance learning. A candidate noted, “Systems and structures need to be in place for parent communication, and there needs to be a procedure for teachers when parents cannot be reached.” Another candidate expressed that the sudden dispersion of staff and students from school disrupted an entire system of schooling and routines. This candidate continued,

“I learned that systems matter. Systems have to change rapidly to ensure that students remain engaged. The district did not have a solid plan. Principals had to create their own.” One candidate learned that without any type of structure, schools would not be able to effectively function, adding, “Systems and structures need to be in place for parent communication, and there needs to be a procedure for teachers when parents cannot be reached.” One candidate observed establishing structured systems and procedures should take top priority for all school administrators. This student continued, “As a future administrator, it has become clearer because of this pandemic structures or systems are of the highest priority . . . the principal is responsible for making sure the correct systems, structures, and school shared vision guide the teacher(s) in the building to increase all students' achievement.”

Candidates noted that principals who had a previous structured form of communication with technology were better able to adapt to the changes. As one candidate compared, “I learned that structures and systems are very important to get right as a principal. One school was more ready for the digital world compared to the other because of systems and structures.” Another candidate explained that the principal who had in place already *Class Dojo* did not need to make any changes to her communication while the principal “did not have this structure in place so most of this principal's problems were spent trying to create a structure like this.”

Attending Humanistic Needs

The chaos ushered in during the school closure also brought with it new priorities that would impact the teacher morale and school culture. One of the main priorities learned was to attend to the overall well-being and safety of teachers, students, and school community. Such priority took precedence immediately over instruction and assessments. One candidate explained, “I learned that during a time of crisis, it is more important to focus on human needs rather than continuing with typical instruction. [The Principal] focused deeply on her connections with our school community instead of academic goals.” Another candidate noted that administrators now “are in a business that is all about humans first, instruction and policy second.” A candidate applauded principals for immediately changing “their mindset from ensuring quality learning was happening to thinking about a humanitarian focus. Taking care of their teachers and staff. Thinking of their well-being. Thinking about the welfare of their students and families.”

Attending to the humanistic needs of teachers and the school community appeared to be the highest priority regardless of the situation. One candidate affirmed, “Our leaders are making decisions based on a situation that no one has experienced. As a leader of a building, you should always have the well-being of that building and the people in it as your number one priority.” A candidate expressed, “I realized the importance of being connected to the community. This has made a big difference on how many families we are able to reach.” Another candidate reflected that “the importance of maintaining a sense of community resonated with me. It took some out of the box thinking, but I loved the ideas his team came up with to reinforce they are a “community of learners working together.”

Candidates realized that the principals were now required to go beyond just leading their schools in uncharted territory but also to stand as a succor for teachers. One candidate candidly noted the vital role the principal played at the school to comfort teachers, especially that “many teachers were crying because of the circumstances and stress they are under.” One candidate learned that if principals do not attend to the emotional needs of teachers, the school will not succeed. Another candidate expressed, “I learned that leadership at times simply means being there and present, ensuring others' socio-emotional needs are being met, even in times of chaos.”

Candidates also learned school closures exponentially increased inequities for students and the school community. One candidate noted that because of the school closures, “food insecurity matters now.” Since many K-12 students relied on their schools for meals, candidates quickly learned that some of the food distribution centers were too far for parents and that the principals were doing all in their power to either find means to help parents receive food or convert their school site into a food distribution center. One candidate noted the principal had developed resources “by grade level and they were distributed to students electronically and families could pick up work and food at distribution sites.” Another candidate learned that “[the principal] also touched on working with her school counselors and a wraparound team to find ways to support resource pairing and food distribution.” Other candidates also noted some of the principals working with the school community to ensure students had access to food.

Responding to Policies

Candidates expressed one of the most pertinent yet frustrating aspects of the school closures was the constant changes of policies, guidelines, and available resources to help educators transition to distance learning education. As one candidate observed, “The hardest part of all of this has been waiting for the district to give updates and directives.” Candidates learned

that the principals struggled to receive clear and prompt directives regarding policies changes for attendance, grading, and technology instruction. One candidate noted that the mentor principal “always had the ability to make decisions and implement policies that benefit his school, at his discretion. However, at this time he is having to wait for directives and decisions from the district, which can be frustrating.” Another candidate revealed, “Days on the whole seem longer for both principals as home has become the office and as the policies and procedures for school closure change rapidly and constantly.”

Candidates also shared concerns of the lack of resources to distribute Chromebooks for all students. One candidate explained that in preparation for the event of not having enough Chromebooks, the principal directed her staff “to provide weekly lessons for her students that they could complete with or without Chromebooks and the internet.” Another candidate learned that in one school, over 300 students lacked Chromebooks to complete work at home even though distributing them “doesn’t address the need to ensure internet services at home, which is another issue that the district needs to manage.” A candidate recognized that the district’s lack of clarity regarding policies for technology distribution would cause serious learning impediments. This candidate explained,

I was able to see some major differences on how policies affected each principal. If the district does not correct this policy or acknowledge the difficult position it places on schools, the ramifications could impact the first quarter of learning for the students.

Candidates expressed that many principals were “making quick decisions without any policy to guide them.” Not all policies established seemed equitable or rational. As a result, many candidates questioned if school administrators should follow policies that did not to meet their immediate needs. One candidate affirmed, “When is ok to ‘bend the rules? Currently, [the school district] is distributing Chromebooks from high school down to middle school. Our school has the capability to distribute Chromebooks and we are not.” Another candidate questioned, “What do you do as a principal if you don’t agree with a certain policy? Does every policy fit all?” Candidates recognized that disagreement and inconsistent policies created more questions than answers for principals to address with teachers and parents.

Finding Meaning

While facing uncertainty and complexity, candidates recognized the important role school principals played in bringing in hope, direction, and meaning to teachers. Candidates acknowledged teachers gave more importance to the meaning behind whatever action, speech, or disposition the school principals portrayed during initial school closures. One candidate noted, “Being the leader of the building, everyone will look in your direction on what needs to be done. I am a true believer that your employees will match your demeanor.” Another candidate wrote, “What I have learned so far is that you have to stay calm and collected during panic times. Everyone is watching you and is waiting for you to make the move.” A candidate observed the need for principals to trust their teachers and that “as a school leader, you are the person that everyone is going to be looking toward for answers and guidance.”

Several candidates were inspired by the leadership and courage the school principals portrayed in the midst of the chaos. One candidate explained that the pandemic gave way for heroic school leadership. This candidate continued, “I believe that out of these challenging times came forth one of the most heroic aspects of leadership, as school principals assumed the responsibilities, the professional demeanor and calm their staff needed to successfully navigate the unthinkable.” Another candidate related that “these principals I have had the honor of shadowing and working for are my heroes. They don’t flinch when something has to be changed they roll with the punches and say what can we do to make our students successful.” With much admiration, one candidate wrote about her mentor principal, “I love that she is brave. She always does what is best for her community and can always justify the why behind it.”

Many teachers felt depressed and disheartened by their current circumstances. Candidates were impressed with how the school principals anchored hope to teachers and students. A candidate wrote her mentor principal found ways to “send them (teachers) little messages of strength and inspiration”. Another candidate noted the one principal attempted to uplift the low morale and “has been sending inspirational quotes to her staff and plans on having a luncheon upon returning to school.” Several candidates learned that one mentor principal provided time during Zoom meetings for teachers to share stories, offered “online spirit days,” and instituted a *rainbows of hope challenge* for “students to post pictures of rainbows to offer hope to everyone.” Some principals asked students for their input about how to celebrate their end of the year. Various principals provided opportunities for virtual graduations or drive-by celebrations for students and teachers. One candidate explained that teachers at the mentor principal school felt “really feel down about themselves and some feel that technology

is replacing them” and that “she was trying to keep up staff morale by sending out quotes that talk about the importance of teachers.”

Establishing unity and a sense of community was also key. One candidate learned from this experience “the importance of developing adaptability quotient . . . even if done from afar, through a computer screen or a phone call. It is up to [principals] to provide the staff, student body, and community a sense of stability and hope.” Another candidate observed that his mentor principal “spoke about the fact that this is a time of crisis and the importance of maintaining a sense of community.” Establishing a sense of community was seen as a way to strengthen school culture upon return. As such, one candidate wrote, “School communities may come back strengthened with valuable lessons in collaboration, leadership and a renewed vision for the future.”

DISCUSSION

In this case study of one principal preparation program, engaging with and reflecting on how school principals navigated through the school closures appeared to support the development of aspiring school principal candidates’ knowledge and understanding as outlined by Bolman and Deal (2017). Candidates were able to enhance their understanding of the structural frame as they learned how difficult it was for school principals to establish order and new systems for distance learning. Candidates also acknowledged that establishing structure during school closures should be one of the highest priorities. They recognized that school principals that already had systems in place for communication and online learning prior to the pandemic were more successful. The human resource frame of candidates were evident because the overall well-being and basic necessities for the students and teachers took precedence over instruction. Bolman and Deal (2017) noted that organizational leaders working out of the human resource frame maintain a balance between human needs and their formal roles as well as provide a platform to address the feelings, needs, and information of constituents.

Unsurprisingly, the lack of equity played a tremendous role during school closures. Candidates witnessed and expressed how many schools did not receive nor provide adequate support to meet both organizational and humanistic needs of teachers, students, and the community. Many of the schools struggled to deliver equitable instruction remotely as well as provide free breakfast and lunch to their school community. Research has indicated that although school leaders across the United States were able to provide basic student needs for food during school closures, mental health support, digital accessibility, and equitable instruction were inadequate (Harris & Jones, 2020; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021).

Evidently, school closures further exposed and exacerbated a school system that was not equitable towards schools with high needs. Candidates expressed that school leaders, especially district administrators, appeared to struggle to find equitable resolutions to allocate funds and scarce resources to meet the needs of all schools. One of the major assumptions of the political frame is that the most important decisions involve allocating scarce resources while simultaneously dealing with enduring differences in information, values, and perceptions of reality (Bolman & Deal, 2017). The perceived inaccurate information from the school district caused candidates to recognize how the self-interest for each school became a political terrain for principals to defend and to build coalitions to meet their needs (e.g., principals recruiting outside agencies for internet connectivity). Such action from principals further exposes the notion that no clear equitable system was established from the school district or state to meet their needs. In this case study, the lack of equity and support clearly impacted the morale of students and teachers. However, candidates recognized the efforts made by principals to inspire and uplift down-trodden teachers. Such acts were symbolically portrayed as heroic and courageous. Principals became a symbol of stability and hope for teachers as they navigated through uncertainty.

CONCLUSION

No one anticipated that COVID-19 would ultimately force schools to shut down for the remainder of the school year and beyond. Because there is no guarantee that schools will not close again because of COVID-19 or otherwise, it is imperative that school leadership preparation programs make the needed adjustments to better develop and prepare aspiring school principals for such events.

To better prepare aspiring school principals to lead during a pandemic or school closures, the authors believe this study can help inform educational leadership preparation programs to consider how to redirect coursework and field-based experiences that focuses on the following: (1) developing equitable school leadership practices, (2) leading remotely, (3) strengthening school and community partnerships, (4) leading and meeting the mental wellness of teachers and students, and (5) leading with soul.

The realities that candidates from this case study experienced revealed the urgent need to develop equitable school leaders. Educational leadership preparation programs play an essential role in developing and carrying out equity related

initiatives to aspiring school administrators. However, many educational leadership frameworks and preparation programs lack a central focus on equity (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015; Green, 2018). Thus, it is imperative educational leadership preparation programs re-conceptualize leadership frameworks and practices that focus on establishing and executing a vision for equitable school leadership. Such vision should include obtaining knowledge and skills for allocating and distributing resources equitably, collaborating effectively with the school community, and establishing a pipeline of administrators of color. Aspiring school leaders should be encouraged to complete action research projects with high-need schools that involve activities such as developing an equitable school culture, increasing parent engagement, and evaluating equitable classroom instruction. In addition, learning how to distribute and equitably teach with technology should be at the forefront of all educational leadership preparation and professional development programs.

As Harris (2020) pointed out, principals during the pandemic became “remote leaders.” Candidates from this study learned that principals struggled to set up remote systems and structures for distance learning. Those who had some form of structured technology system were better prepared to lead. Thus, school technology leadership should be at the forefront of educational leadership preparation coursework. Unfortunately, research has indicated that educational leadership preparation programs give minimal focus and training in preparing candidates for their role as technology leaders (Redish & Chan, 2007; Yu & Prince, 2016). With the current experience of remote learning and influx of technology in our schools, educational leadership preparation programs should embed all instruction and curriculum that is geared towards understanding the dynamics of leading remotely. Field-based experiences should include candidates interning at heavy-laden technology schools (e.g., one-to-one laptop schools) to understand best practices and systems for remote instruction and learning experiences.

Candidates also recognized that when principals did not receive adequate support or resources from the district, they relied heavily on the school community. Learning how to navigate and engage the school community is an essential component of 21st school leadership (Henderson, 2007). Providing aspiring school principals with experiences that requires them to collaborate with their school community, particularly businesses, is highly recommended. Educational leadership preparation programs should consider how the community can assist in meeting the mental wellness of students and teachers. Learning how to better utilize community health resources as well as school personnel (e.g., school counselors) can improve the quality and comprehensiveness of services that can be provided for both students and teachers.

Educational leadership preparation programs should also embrace the philosophy of *leading with soul*. Leading with soul does not entail promoting religion or any theology; rather, it signifies “bringing a genuine concern for the human spirit” and “a resolute sense of character, a deep confidence about who we are, what we care about, and what we deeply believe in” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 407). Such leadership will help teachers and students find purpose and meaning to the work that they do in schools, especially during a pandemic or crisis. Candidates recognized principals were heroes and that their values regarding leadership emanated even more during the pandemic. Educational leadership preparation programs can assist aspiring school principals to lead with soul by helping them develop their own leadership philosophy, promote discourse on spirituality and leadership, and create a learning environment of introspection about their own leadership legacy.

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