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Leadership Reflections of the Pandemic: Perceptions from Aspiring Assistant Principals

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LEADERSHIP REFLECTIONS OF THE PANDEMIC- PERCEPTIONS FROM ASPIRING ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had an almost immediate detrimental effect on schools throughout the United States. With the rapid implementation of educational policies by school districts and states throughout the United States related to COVID-19, it was expected that along with successes would also come challenges for students, teachers, and school leaders. Given such an urgent and unprecedented matter, many state and school district leaders were left to consider the best course of action for continuing to maintain safety while also providing students the opportunity to learn and advance academically.

In the initial weeks of the pandemic, schools were faced with the difficult decision to cancel classes and transition to remote learning. This decision was based on the limited information available at the time regarding the coronavirus's spread and transmission. In the spring of 2020, Tennessee's Governor Bill Lee urged school districts to extend spring break (TDOE, 2020a). No in-person instruction was being held anywhere in the state until the late summer, during which some school districts began to experiment with hybrid classes and alternating in-person schedules (Aldrich, 2020). Many other school districts in Tennessee (86.4%) followed suit, incorporating either a completely in-person or some variation of a hybrid model in which students are instructed both in-person and online, with the rest of the school districts working completely remotely (TDOE, 2020b). In some cases, schools lacked the technological infrastructure to support online learning, which led to significant disruptions in the education system. The *Back-to-school statistics study*, by The National Center for Education

Statistics (NCES) (2021) declared that 56% of public schools reported challenges with providing technology devices and internet access to students during the pandemic.

As the pandemic continued, educational leaders began to adapt to the new reality. Schools implemented new models of teaching, including hybrid and blended learning, to balance the need for in-person instruction with public health concerns. Educational leaders worked to provide additional resources and support to teachers, including professional development opportunities and mental health resources (NCES, 2021). The transition to remote learning required educators to adapt to new technologies and teaching strategies. A study by Dolighan and Owen (2021), that examined secondary teachers' efficacy and satisfaction for teaching in a fully online teaching environment during the sudden transition to online teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic; declared that higher online teaching efficacy scores correlated mostly with educators having previously used a school districts online learning management system and with educators having taken online qualification courses and online professional development sessions.

Educational leaders also worked closely with local health authorities to implement effective safety protocols. This included regular testing and contact tracing, as well as the implementation of vaccine mandates for staff and students (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Educational leaders also faced the challenge of addressing the impact of the pandemic on students. Many students experienced significant disruptions to their education, which could have long-term consequences. Educational leaders worked to provide additional support and resources to help students catch up on missed learning (UNESCO, 2020).

There was also evidence that teacher workload was having a deleterious effect on school operations. Some educational policies enacted during the pandemic had unintended

consequences for educators. According to a mixed method study on the Perception of teachers' workload, burnout, and stress in COVID-19 pandemic period by Eren et al. (2021), policies that require in-person teaching during the pandemic can place educators at increased risk of contracting COVID-19. Educators identified the need for policies that prioritize their safety and well-being, including access to personal protective equipment and the ability to work remotely if necessary.

Literature Review

To provide context for this study, this literature review examines the challenges faced by educators during the pandemic. When COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) reached the United States, panic about maintaining safety encouraged many states and school districts to shut down in-person learning in schools. The consensus was that schools should be temporarily closed. This response is similar to the responses of the majority of the world, with the schools of more than 90% of enrolled students worldwide shutting down by May of 2020 (UNESCOa, 2020).

Research that examines the experiences of educators during the initial months of COVID-19 has already been conducted. Educators across the United States identified several things they learned during the shift to emergency remote teaching, ranging from knowledge about their profession to knowledge about themselves. The most commonly reported changes related to cognitive growth, including shifts in professional knowledge, skills, or perspectives (Trust & Whalen, 2021). Teacher stress and communication anxiety were significant predictors for increased anxiety. Teachers providing all-virtual instruction was a significant predictor for the highest anxiety levels compared to other teachers (Pressley et al., 2021). This higher level of anxiety could be attributed to a lack of experience teaching online, new approaches to planning and providing instruction (Honigsfeld & Nordmeyer, 2020).

The additional workload and stress placed on educators during the pandemic led to a significant risk of burnout for educators, as severe COVID-19 transmission waves, escalated social unrest, and exacerbated staffing shortages, forcing schools nationwide to reduce critical services (Hirshberg et al, 2023). School staff with a family income of less than \$40,000 per year reported significantly more stress and were more likely to report clinically meaningful depressive symptoms and were less likely to intend to return in their job relative to higher earning peers (Hirshberg et al, 2023).

Educators faced the challenge of adapting to new models of teaching, including remote and hybrid learning. Educators also faced the challenge of providing effective instruction for both in-person and remote students simultaneously, which required significant time and resources (Pressley et al., 2021). Educators identified the need for additional support and guidance from educational leaders to manage the stress of teaching during the pandemic. The stressors most proximal to burnout, include COVID-19–related anxiety, anxiety about teaching demands, parent communication, and administrative support (Pressley et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic presented significant challenges to the education system worldwide, and educators had to adapt quickly to new models of teaching and navigate the challenges of teaching during a crisis. In the United States, schools faced the challenge of adapting to the new reality, including implementing safety protocols and transitioning to remote learning. Tennessee educators were not an exception and faced similar challenges in managing the pandemic. The transition to remote learning during the pandemic placed additional burdens on educators. Teachers in the United States reported working an average of 11 hours per day during the pandemic, which was significantly higher than before the pandemic. The additional

workload placed significant stress on educators, leading to burnout and mental health concerns (Robb et al. 2021).

In a study entitled “How did Michigan educators respond to the suspension of face-to-face instruction due to COVID-19?, an analysis of educator’s responses to the 2020 EPIC COVID-19 survey” (completed by 8,565 teachers and 316 principals, a response rate of 16% and 12% respectively) educators in Michigan stated that they were worried about how districts with lower achievement, student socioeconomic status, and broadband access would be affected by COVID-19 (Cummings, et al., 2020). These educators believed that better access to internet and devices would improve distance learning for their students. Educators also stated that the greatest challenges of remote learning were student engagement and access to technology. Teachers also reported either seeking their own resources or using their networks for resources more often than they would use official channels (Cummings, et al., 2020).

While there have been several research studies conducted on the impact of COVID-19 on educators across the country, there is limited research conducted on educators in Tennessee. Furthermore, there has been limited focus on investigating challenges that educators have experienced as a result of changes to educational protocols made as a result of COVID-19. This study sought to fill the gap in the lack of research on the impact of changes to educational protocols made as a result of COVID-19 and the lack of research conducted on educators in Tennessee as it relates to COVID-19.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of Tennessee educators regarding the challenges they encountered as a result of changes in educational protocols implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic in the state of Tennessee.

The study was purposed to assist the researchers in gaining deeper insights into the specific challenges faced by educators due to these protocols and examine the impact of these challenges on their professional experiences and overall well-being.

Research Questions:

1. What are the perceptions of Tennessee educators regarding the challenges they faced as a result of changes in educational protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How did the changes in educational protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic impact the professional experiences and well-being of Tennessee educators?

By addressing these research questions, this study provided valuable insights into the experiences of Tennessee educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study specifically focused on the challenges arising from changes in educational protocols. The findings contributed to our understanding of the unique difficulties faced by educators in adapting to these protocols and the potential implications for their professional lives and well-being.

Methodology

This study utilized a phenomenological qualitative research approach to examine the lived experiences of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Groenewald, 2004).

Phenomenological research is defined as “research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it” (Neubauer et al., 2019, p.91). Teachers were asked open-ended interview questions to express their experience with the educational protocols enacted by leadership in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal of the study was to identify challenges as a result of changes to educational protocols in the state of Tennessee.

Target Population and Sample

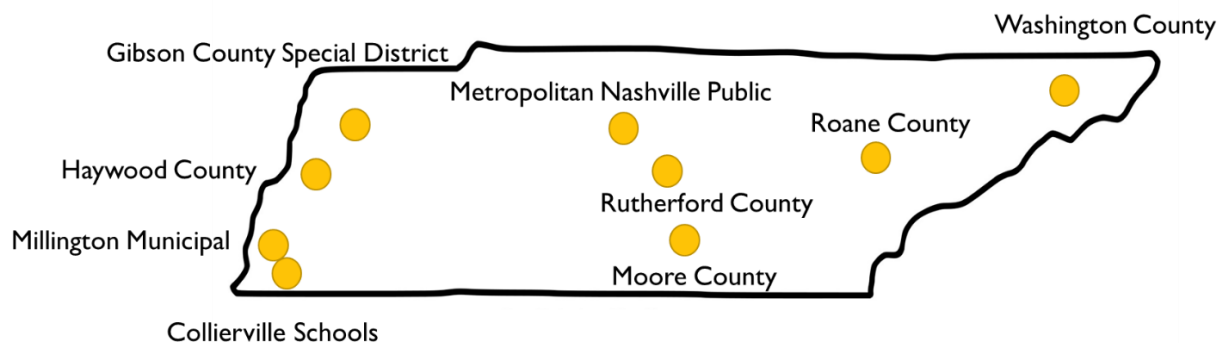
The target population consisted of educators in the Tennessee Department of Education's (TDOE) Aspiring Assistant Principal Network (AAPN). These educators were selected by TDOE to become the next cadre of assistant principals in the state and funded for a licensure program to obtain a Master of Instructional Leadership degree. The targeted population are currently educators within local school districts and have a diverse range of teaching experiences. The districts represented include Collierville Schools, Gibson County Special District, Haywood Country School District, Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, Millington Municipal Schools, Moore County School District, Roane County School District, Rutherford County School District, and Washington County School District.

In an online meeting of the Aspiring Assistant Principal Network, an announcement was made to recruit participants for the study. Subsequently, an email was sent to solicit participation. Ten individuals answered the email resulting in their recruitment for the study. Once identified, the participants were emailed a Qualtrics survey to obtain demographic information. Through the survey, the researchers obtained data on participant's teaching experience, gender, school type, roles and assigned districts. Half of the participants identified as women (n=5) and half as men (n=5). Sixty percent of participants identified as Black or African American (n=6) and forty percent identified as White (n=4). Three participants had been educators for 3-5 years (30%), four had been educators for 6-12 years (40%), one had been an educator for 13-20 years (10%), and two had been educators for more than 20 years (20%). (Eight participants stated that their school had each teachers instructing both in-person and online portions of the class, while two participants reported that their school has teachers divided into in-person and online learning groups) The districts represented by participants include Collierville Schools, Gibson County Special District, Haywood Country School District,

Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, Millington Municipal Schools, Moore County School District, Roane County School District, Rutherford County School District, and Washington County School District There was one educator from each district with the exception of Rutherford County with two participants.

Figure 1

Participants by Tennessee School District



Data Collection Procedures

Demographic information about each participant was collected prior to the beginning of this study through a Qualtrics survey provided to all AAPN students during an orientation over the summer. Participants were solicited via email. Once a participant agreed to participate, they were scheduled for interviews either individually or in pairs. An informed consent form was emailed to participants to fill out via Google Forms. Interviews were conducted digitally via Zoom and recorded. The interviewer asked probing structured questions (appendix) and follow-up inquiries as needed. Questions were designed to address various aspects of teaching and administration that were impacted by the pandemic including student engagement, safety protocols, online instruction, and broader implications of educational leadership. Interviews

lasted between 15-25 minutes each. Once the interviews were complete, each recording was transcribed digitally and read over to correct any mistakes made by the transcribing software.

Data Analysis

The data for this study were analyzed utilizing the content analysis method utilizing Excel. Content analysis is effective in the classification, edition, and comparison of texts to make theoretical inferences (Cohen 2007). Each researcher coded the data by grouping testimonies into different themes and categories within those themes. To ensure the credibility of the results, data was examined by more than one researcher to increase the validity of the qualitative research. The researchers met and discussed the consistencies and inconsistencies of their individual coding until a consensus was reached.

Discussion

This study aimed to delve into the perceptions of Tennessee educators, examining the challenges they encountered as a result of changes to educational protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic. By exploring the lived experiences of educators during significant public health crises and understanding the impacts of such events on the educational system, the findings of this research contribute to the existing body of knowledge in this area.

Interpretation of Findings

The identified sub-themes—Communication from Leadership, Educator Workload, Support, Guidance, and Burnout, Technology, and Impractical Policies—reveal the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by educators during the COVID-19 pandemic in Tennessee.

Communication from Leadership

The lack of effective communication from educational leadership, as reported by some participants, highlights the critical importance of transparent, timely, and clear communication during crises (Michelle et al, 2021). In this study, while some participants expressed satisfaction with the level of communication from their school or district, others reported dissatisfaction, aligning with previous research that emphasizes the significance of leadership communication in times of significant change (Marshall et al, 2020). These findings underscore the need for educational leaders to prioritize effective communication strategies to ensure that information reaches educators in a timely and transparent manner.

Educator Workload

The increased workload emerged as another significant challenge reported by educators, a finding that is consistent with previous studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Crawford et al, 2021). Educators faced the daunting task of managing both online and in-person classes, handling a large volume of virtual communications, and ensuring the confidentiality of students in special education. Such increased workload and stress, coupled with the sudden shift to remote learning, could potentially lead to early career burnout among teachers, which has been linked to high turnover rates (Trinidad, 2021). Therefore, it is crucial for educational institutions to recognize and address the workload concerns of educators, providing adequate support and resources to prevent burnout and attrition.

Support, Guidance, and Burnout

Participants' reports of feeling unsupported and experiencing burnout resonate with previous research indicating that emotional support for teachers is crucial, particularly during crises (Etchells et al, 2021). The reported lack of guidance and support from leadership,

combined with the increased workload, could exacerbate feelings of burnout, and contribute to teacher attrition. These findings emphasize the need for educational leaders to prioritize the provision of emotional support and guidance to teachers, recognizing the immense challenges they face and ensuring their well-being.

Technology

The technological difficulties reported by participants reflect the broader challenges associated with the sudden shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (An Et al, 2021). These challenges encompassed technological reliability and the difficulty of providing personalized instruction and feedback in an online format. The findings highlight the necessity for educational institutions to invest in reliable technology infrastructure and provide appropriate training and support to educators to effectively navigate online teaching and learning environments.

Impractical Policies

The perceived impracticality of certain policies, such as those around safety and sanitation, underscores the complex decisions that school districts faced in balancing educational needs with public health concerns. The criticisms raised by participants suggest a perceived tension between political motivations and practical safety considerations, an issue that has been contentious in public discourse throughout the pandemic (Sutton, 2021). These findings emphasize the importance of policymakers considering the practical implications of their decisions and ensuring that policies prioritize the safety and well-being of students and staff.

Implications

The findings of this research offer significant insights for educational leadership and policymakers. They highlight the need for clear and effective communication from leadership, manageable workloads for teachers, emotional support and guidance, reliable technology, and practical policies that prioritize the safety and well-being of students and staff. These implications underscore the importance of addressing these key areas to mitigate the challenges identified by educators. Future research is necessary to further explore these themes and to develop strategies and interventions designed to effectively address the challenges faced by educators. Additionally, understanding the experiences of educators in other states and countries could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the perceptions of educators regarding the challenges they faced as a result of changes in educational protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic and how those changes impacted professional experiences and well-being?

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The sample size was relatively small, and the participants were limited to Tennessee educators in the Tennessee Department of Education's Aspiring Assistant Principal Network. Future research should consider larger, more diverse samples to ensure a wider representation of educators' experiences. Additionally, the format and questions of the interviews could be further refined to ensure a more comprehensive exploration of the lived experiences of educators during the pandemic. By addressing these limitations, future research can build upon this study and provide a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by educators during public health crises.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has illuminated the lived experiences of Tennessee educators during the COVID-19 pandemic, adding to the body of knowledge necessary for navigating educational challenges in times of crisis. The findings underscore the importance of effective communication from leadership, manageable workloads, sufficient support and guidance, reliable technology, and practical policies. With these insights, educational leaders, policymakers, and researchers can work towards developing more effective strategies for managing crises in the future. By prioritizing clear communication, addressing workload concerns, providing support and guidance, investing in reliable technology, and developing practical policies, educational institutions can better support educators and ensure the continuity of quality education during challenging times. Further research is needed to build upon these findings and explore the experiences of educators in other contexts, ultimately contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the total impact of the pandemic on education.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. Thank you for your participation, your insights are invaluable. Could you reflect on the successes and failures that transpired in the last year as you navigated the challenges brought about by the pandemic? What were your observations on the quality of education, the role of technology, and the impact on teachers and students during that time?
2. Considering the unique dynamics of your school and district, how did broadband access and computer availability affect students' participation during the spring? Were these issues pervasive, and have they continued into this semester?
3. As we transition to discussing the fall, can you share your thoughts on how your district handled the challenges posed by the pandemic in terms of safety protocols, learning models, and educational leadership? How did these measures impact both students and teachers?
4. With your aspirations to become an educational leader, I'd like to gain insights through your perspective. Could you discuss the pressures and challenges teachers face in online and hybrid teaching scenarios, and what recommendations you might have for both educational leaders and faculty in terms of support and professional development?
5. Safety and well-being have been paramount during the pandemic. Could you elaborate on how your district has addressed safety concerns, whether they be related to health protocols or other aspects of student and staff well-being?
6. Based on your experiences, are there any critical aspects or considerations related to the pandemic that we might not have touched upon? What insights could you offer to the broader educational community, including policymakers, superintendents, school principals, teachers, parents, and students?
7. Lastly, given your expertise and insights, what professional development needs do you believe are necessary to equip educators and leaders for the challenges posed by ongoing and potential future disruptions in education, particularly in the context of the pandemic?

Your feedback and input are greatly appreciated, thank you for sharing your perspectives on these critical topics.