



The Impact of Covid-19 on Educational Leadership and Student Academic Success in Puerto Rico

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KEYWORDS: adaptive leadership, situational leadership, teacher leadership, transformational leadership, authentic leadership, inclusive leadership, and social-emotional learning.

ABSTRACT: Educational leaders play a crucial role in ensuring that all students succeed academically and emotionally. However, educational leaders have been facing extreme educational challenges since the pandemic. In Puerto Rico, the situation was exacerbated because the archipelago had been devastated by two hurricanes and several earthquakes before the COVID-19 pandemic. Many schools were destroyed and damaged by the natural disasters. Educational leaders in Puerto Rico had to become the beacon of light for their school communities. This article aims to present some research-based leadership styles and behaviors that education leaders used to transform their post-pandemic school communities. In Puerto Rico, the pandemic exacerbated the academic gap after the natural disasters, which posed a great challenge for educational leaders. The goal of this article is to help educational leaders strengthen their leadership style to help them face the challenges of the 21st century. The ultimate objective is to empower the entire school community to address the academic and socio-emotional gap for all students through effective leadership practices.

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INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, educational leaders had to face many challenges during the pandemic. Educational leaders dealt with school closures, leading schools virtually, providing social emotional support to the entire school community, ensuring special education students were receiving support and accommodations, managing daily crisis, and trying to focus on instructional leadership in a virtual environment. For educational leaders in Puerto Rico (USA), these challenges were exacerbated by previous natural disasters that had devastated the entire archipelago. This writer suggests that educational leaders in Puerto Rico consciously or unconsciously developed and/or exerted different leadership styles and behaviors that made the recovery a possibility. The entire educational system in Puerto Rico was in a chaotic situation due to natural disasters, but when COVID-19 hit the world, the situation truly turned into more chaos in the island's educational system. Consequently, educational leaders had to rise to the situation by exerting effective leadership skills. Educational leaders understood that their leadership style was not going to help them be successful due to the unique scenarios that the natural disasters and COVID-19 created. Educational leaders purposefully or not, developed and/or exerted several leadership styles and behaviors that lifted the hopes and trust of their school communities. These educational leaders had to empower their entire school communities to address the academic and socio-emotional gap for all students through effective leadership practices and behaviors.

In addition, educational leaders had to face the many inequities in education that the children were facing. The shift from traditional delivery mode to online classes impacted on instructional delivery. Students around the world do not have reliable internet services and parents do not have teaching experience to help support their children's learning. Akbaba-Altun & Bulut (2021) suggested that the challenges of the pandemic have exacerbated the job-related stress that principals experience. In Puerto Rico, schools did not all have electricity or water. The entire archipelago did not have stable Internet. Most of the schools in the south of the island were destroyed or not safe to have students return to their schools. Most of the students who were affected the most were the most vulnerable students in the entire school system. Educational leaders in remote areas had to rely on non-for-profit organizations that provided solar and/or wind clean energy. During the hurricanes, many rural communities were moving towards no fossil fuel options. These non-for-profit agencies helped local communities to innovate in cooperative solar communities

to help the most vulnerable. Some educational leaders had the opportunity to work with several nonprofit organizations that provided nonrenewable energy options. Puerto Rico was fortunate to have sunlight all year round and high winds blowing from every corner of the archipelago.

Harris and Jones (2020) stated that the absence of interpersonal relationships, in their typical form, face-to-face contact between students, parents, school leadership, and the broader school community, are among the biggest problems that an educational leader is called upon to face during the pandemic. Also, according to Ravitch (2020), the pandemic exacerbated feelings of marginalization among students and the school community. Harris & Jones (2020) contended that the educational leader is forced to cope with all these challenges, without further explanatory direction from educational stakeholders. In Puerto Rico, the department of education was in a state of extreme distress and in addition it had changes in leadership which also caused more difficulties. The Department of Education of Puerto Rico and the local educational regions were clear that educational leaders were vital for schools to succeed. The Department of Education tried to provide different staff to help individual school needs in terms of technology, safety, mobile classrooms, and materials.

Alhouthi (2020) argued that educational leadership is a dependent mechanism that must adapt to social, economic, and cultural factors. Cogaltay & Karadag (2016) stated that the educational leader is one of the most critical factors in building successful schools. Charalampous & Papademetriou (2019) stated that an educational leader is the school's chief who serves as the leader of a social community and he or she is also a designated employee of the educational authorities. However, educational leaders must confront unprecedented challenges, which he or she must address immediately.

Northouse (2022) states that school leaders across the United States of America (USA) scrambled to come up with solutions, including working with local government agencies and nonprofits to find ways to establish internet hotspots in neighborhoods and to secure and distribute devices to students so they could access online learning. In addition, because most teachers had never actually engaged in online teaching, they were untrained and struggled and underperformed. School leaders nationwide had to respond to the incredibly unique challenges posed by an external force completely beyond their control and did so with varying degrees of success.

In Puerto Rico, the pandemic happened right after the destruction effects of hurricanes Irma and Maria. In addition, Puerto Rico was also impacted by several earthquakes. The entire educational system was paralyzed. Schools were destroyed and the island's electrical grid had collapsed. When the island was recovering, COVID 19 hit the world. Again, school closings impacted the educational process. The educational system was hit hard by natural disasters and now they were facing an unknown challenge. Schools were closed for months after the natural disasters, but with COVID 19, schools were forced to provide educational services virtually.

The schools in the archipelago of Puerto Rico did not have reliable electricity or water. The school's infrastructure and technological equipment were damaged. This exacerbated the post-pandemic crisis. Educational leaders had to plan the instructional delivery virtually for all their students, but most of the teachers did not receive adequate training on how to effectively teach online. Another challenge was that teachers did not have reliable Internet service in their homes. This meant for teachers to use their cellphones as a hot spot to connect to the school's online platform. Teachers had to invest from their own money to help maintain the internet connections or travel to places around the island where the internet signal was strong. It was clear that educational leaders needed to use different leadership styles to effectively address these challenges. The success of online learning depended on the educational leaders' skills and willingness to adapt their leadership style.

This writer contends that different leadership styles can impact the educational leader's performance. Most importantly, exercising different leadership styles can help improve student academic performance, specifically in the post-pandemic era. Educational leaders can use his/her leadership style to reestablish the school climate and culture. The educational leader must try to establish a culture of collaboration and inquiry to impact the online teaching and learning process. The main question was, how can educational leaders succeed when facing these multiple dire strait situations? This writer suggests that educational leaders can address these dire straits situations that impact the online teaching and learning process by adapting their leadership styles and behaviors to help improve student academic achievement and socioemotional needs. The following leadership styles and behaviors may help educational leaders transform their post-pandemic school communities successfully like several schools in archipelago did during the post-pandemic era.

ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

Since Heifertz's publication "Leadership without easy answers" (1994), adaptive leadership has occupied a unique place in leadership literature. Northouse (2022) explained that adaptive leadership focuses on the adaptation that people need to respond to changes in scenarios. Simply, adaptive leadership prepares and empowers people to face difficult changes. Northouse also stated that the adaptive leader does not exercise his power or authority, but through communication helps them adapt to new realities. The leader provides a space called a holding environment for followers. This waiting environment offers you a safe space to face the

inevitable changes that affect your already established emotions, values, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors. The goal of adaptive leadership is to motivate people to change and learn new behaviors so that they can succeed and meet challenges while also growing along the way.

Adaptive leadership is a unique style since it focuses on the dynamics of mobilizing people to face change. Puerto Rican educational leaders were truly facing difficult changes in the teaching and learning process. Adaptive leadership was going to help them empower teachers in the delivery of online instruction. In addition, these leaders had to stay visible and offer safe environments where teachers felt comfortable sharing their fears and weaknesses during the delivery of online instruction. Educational leaders had the opportunity to use adaptive leadership to help teachers feel self-confident in delivering online instruction and assessment.

Due to the tragic events that Puerto Rico faced, educational leaders had the perfect opportunity to display behaviors associated with authentic leadership. Authentic leadership develops in people throughout life and can be initiated because of a tragic event such as suffering from an illness or even a job change. Avolio, Walumbwa, and Weber (2009) suggested that authentic leadership is composed of four distinct components: (1) self-awareness; (2) an internalized moral perspective; (3) balanced processing and (4) transparent relationships. The authentic leader can develop these four components during his or her life trajectory. Critical events are events that impact people's lives; therefore, they impact the development of authentic leadership. Critical life events act as a catalyst for change. Also, these critical events stimulate growth and make the leader stronger and more resilient. This leadership development was happening as educational leaders were supporting the entire school community. The school leaders needed to be aware of this leadership development and how impacted the school community.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Robert Greenleaf developed a model of paradoxical approach called the Servant Leadership. Greenleaf (1970) states that a servant leader has a social responsibility to be concerned about those who are marginalized and those less privileged. Servant leadership emphasizes your commitment to serving the needs of followers through empathy, nurturing, and strengthening them. Servant leaders are ethical and exercise their leadership for the common good of the organization and the community they serve. The servant leader first serves the interests of followers before his own and his emphasis is on developing his followers. The servant leader's priorities are to listen to their followers and develop strong, long-term relationships with them. Servant leadership is successful when leaders are humanistic and altruistic with a genuine vocation to help and serve others.

More than ever, educational leaders in Puerto Rico needed to serve the interests of the teachers and students. This task had to be embraced with great humility and commitment from the educational leaders. The educational leaders understood what teachers and students were feeling and knew how to guide them through these grim times. The educational leaders during these tough times focused on the common good of the entire school community.

SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP

In 1969, Blanchard and Hersey developed the theory of situational leadership in their classic book "Management of Organizational Behavior." At first, the theory was called Life Cycle Leadership, but in the 70s it was changed to a situational leadership theory. This leadership style tends to be chosen between managerial behaviors or supportive behaviors. The premise of this leadership theory is that different situations will require different leadership styles. Effective leadership requires people to adapt their leadership style to address different situations. According to Northouse (2022) leadership is flexible and adapts to existing work situations and the needs of the organization. Situational leadership does not focus on the specific skills that the leader has, but on how the leader can modify his or her style to address the situations faced by the organization.

The situation in Puerto Rico was devastating. It truly made leaders flexible and ready to exercise different styles of leadership depending on the situation. Educational leaders were facing district, parent, teacher, and student demands on a daily basis. It was a chaotic situation where leaders had the opportunity to display behaviors aligned with situational leadership. Educational leaders all around the archipelago had to mobilize nonprofit organizations and local government offices to help support the specific needs of the families.

Transformative Leadership

Transformational leadership emerges based on the classic work of political sociologist James MacGregor Burns entitled Leadership (1978). Transformational leadership is a process that changes and transforms people. This style takes into consideration emotions, values, standards, and long-term goals. It also includes diagnosing the motives, needs of followers, and treating followers as human beings. Transformational leadership includes elements of charismatic leadership and visionary leadership. A charismatic leader in essence is a great communicator who is very articulate and knows how to communicate very deeply and on a very emotional level. These leaders can articulate a very captivating vision that creates extraordinarily strong emotions in their followers. A visionary leader mobilizes his followers towards a common goal.

Northouse (2022) argued that this style is distinguished by its persuasion, charisma and has extremely high emotional intelligence. These visionary leaders also articulate a vision of the future and build the path so that others can achieve it. For example, depending on the situation presented by the organization, a transformational leader can come to an organization to motivate followers and develop them as leaders. A charismatic leader can go to an organization to inspire and create a lot of excitement around the organization's vision and mission. The visionary leader can reach out to the organization to promote innovation and cultivate a new direction for the organization.

This leadership style could be the most challenging style to use in these chaotic situations. The educational leader in Puerto Rico needed to truly exert a high emotional intelligence. The school leader needed to communicate effectively and be charismatic. Most important, the school leader must be a visionary to help the entire community travel along the path to stability and success. This school leader had to become a beacon of light during these challenging times.

The goal of every school leader in Puerto Rico in the post-pandemic era was to educate and address the academic lag and socio-emotional health of all students. The educational leaders that succeeded empowered and motivated the entire school community. These educational leaders implemented multilevel support systems to address the academic and socio-emotional lag of all students. Most importantly, the leaders understood the importance of the teachers' role in addressing the academic and social-emotional needs of all students on the archipelago. More than ever, educational leaders had to demonstrate they were truly charismatic and visionary in order to transform the situation and innovate.

AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP

Authentic leadership develops in people throughout life and can be initiated because of a tragic event such as suffering from an illness or even a job change. Avolio, Walumbwa, and Weber (2009) suggest that authentic leadership is composed of four distinct components: (1) self-awareness; (2) an internalized moral perspective; (3) balanced processing and (4) transparent relationships. The authentic leader can develop these four components during his or her life trajectory. Critical events are events that impact people's lives; therefore, they impact the development of authentic leadership. Critical life events act as a catalyst for change. Also, these critical events stimulate growth and make the leader stronger and more resilient.

In Puerto Rico, educational leaders have been impacted by natural disasters. These tragic events helped leaders develop authentic leadership behaviors during the recovery from the natural disasters and the post-pandemic era. Educational leaders developed a keen sense of purpose because they understood what their entire school community was facing. Empathy and compassion were demonstrated in every action these leaders made to help students and teachers succeed in the new virtual learning environment.

Furthermore, George (2003) presented a model for authentic leadership. In the model, authentic leaders demonstrate five basic behaviors: (1) they have a strong sense of purpose; (2) they do the right thing based on their values; (3) they establish strong relationships with others; (4) they demonstrate a lot of discipline and act in accordance with their values; (5) they are sensitive and empathetic to the situations of others. Also, George identified five dimensions of authentic leadership: (1) purpose, (2) values, (3) relationships, (4) self-discipline, and (5) heart. These five dimensions of leadership are associated with five related characteristics: (1) passion (purpose), (2) behavior (values), (3) connection (human relationships), (4) consistency (self-discipline), and (5) compassion (heart). This model can be used to help educational leaders exert authentic leadership behaviors during the post natural disasters and post pandemic era.

Inclusive Leadership

Although the term inclusive leadership is relatively new, educational leaders must be prepared to exercise this leadership to address the challenges brought by workplace diversity in different school communities in the 21st century. Cox and Blake (1991) argued that diversity can create a competitive advantage if it is managed effectively, so that all employees contribute to the best of their abilities and potential. Ferdman (2014) argues that a focus on inclusion not only promotes the reduction of negative and problematic processes based on discrimination and oppression but also fosters a positive view of what might replace unwanted behaviors, policies, and systems.

After the natural disasters, educational leaders understood that the achievement gap had grown exponentially. Specifically, students in special education were at great risk. Educational leaders had to innovate with the delivery of instruction and providing the required instructional accommodations for all students with an IEP. In addition, these leaders had to effectively create action plans to deliver the related services that all the students with special needs required by law.

Brewer (1991) linked inclusion to optimal distinctiveness theory. According to this theory, individuals strive to balance their basic human needs to be part of larger social groups without losing their distinctive self-concept. Northouse (2022) explains that people want to belong, feel accepted, and be connected to others, but not to the extent that they lose their sense of themselves as unique individuals. Inclusion means feeling like a full member of a group, but at the same time maintaining your own sense of self.

The educational leader has the obligation to create a healthy environment where people feel that they belong to the school community. According to Ferdman (2014), the values, processes, and decisions of leaders influence the experiences that members have within groups in organizations, and studies show that leaders are essential to facilitate inclusion. Educational leaders in Puerto Rico needed to create a climate that helped all teachers feel part of the new online community during the school closings. These leaders needed to be inclusive and promote inclusion at the same time. It was vital that educational leaders provided this inclusive space for teachers in their school communities. Educational leaders needed to create a supported environment that promoted unity and fair treatment among the entire staff.

It is crucial to understand that diversity researchers see inclusive leadership as behaviors that create a psychological experience of feeling included within a team in an organization. Randel et al. (2018) proposed that a leader in favor of inclusion sees diversity in groups as beneficial to the organization and this leader can recognize the differences of each person. Randel describes a set of behaviors that facilitate individual perceptions of belonging to a group and being valued for their uniqueness that can generate positive group results. For example, inclusive leadership behaviors are considered to be able to: ensure fair treatment of all members of a group; make everyone feel comfortable and supported; and share decision-making with groups to create perceptions of belonging.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The educational leader is one of the most critical factors in building successful schools. Unfortunately, like we learned in Puerto Rico after several natural disasters and COVID-19, educational leaders had to confront unprecedented challenges, which educational leaders had to address immediately. I contend that the greatest challenge for all educational leaders was to demonstrate effective leadership during the chaotic situation.

It is of utmost importance that the educational leader knows the strengths and weaknesses of his or her leadership style. Hence, educational leaders must know what type of behaviors he/she needs to display to demonstrate effective leadership. The educational leader must know different leadership styles and behaviors to exercise diverse leadership skills to positively impact their school community. Different leadership styles have their purpose depending on the situation. The educational leader must be astute and intelligent to know what leadership to exercise to be successful in different educational scenarios.

Every educational leader must recognize that the key to success is empowering their teachers. Especially the teacher leaders in their school communities. Collective efficacy promotes high school performance. According to Bandura (1993), teacher leaders who believe in their "self-effective" teaching capacity contribute significantly to increasing students' academic achievement. Bandura (1977) defines self-efficacy as one's belief and ability to organize and execute the actions necessary to produce the desired results. In another study conducted by Ross and Bruce (2007), they found that teachers with high efficacy persisted and demonstrated more commitment to addressing academic lags. This study determined that teachers with a high sense of efficacy have positive attitudes toward students who are lagging and develop effective human relationships while creating high-performance goals with their students.

Teacher leadership is essential for the educational leader to succeed in strategically addressing students' academic and social-emotional needs. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) defined teacher leadership in terms of influence, while Le Blanc and Shelton (1997) discussed it under the construct of teacher behaviors. According to Derrington & Angelle (2013), teacher leaders use influence rather than control to promote a healthy and collaborative school culture to impact the academic achievement of all students. Barth (2001) observed that teacher leaders are role models for their students. According to Moller, Childs-Bowen, and Scrivner (2001), teacher leaders are self-directed, take risks, and feel respected and recognized. Also, these teacher leaders demonstrate knowledge of the regulations and political processes within the educational system and demonstrate a commitment to the teaching-learning process through the planning and creation of lessons that impact the academic achievement of all students.

Educational leaders play a critical role in developing and supporting teacher leaders. In Puerto Rico, educational leaders needed to understand that teachers were the main character in this story. The educational leaders were to inspire teachers to find new ways of delivering the lessons as well as finding new ways of assessing knowledge. The entire teaching and learning process was climax of this story. Educational leaders depended on the success of their leadership and teachers teaching and assessing students effectively in a virtual learning environment with limited resources and support. According to Acker-Hocevar and Touchton (1999) they found that schools with greater involvement of teacher leaders were led by educational leaders who were willing to share their authority and delegate their control. These researchers also posited that educational leaders respected and trusted their teachers to create a culture of collaboration. Moller, Childs-Bowen, and Scrivner (2001), stated that these cultures of trust and respect empower teacher leaders to continue developing and creating objectives together with the educational leader to transform the school community. Thoughtfully, all educational leaders in Puerto Rico needed to reflect deeply on their leadership practices and move towards sharing authority and delegating control to better serve the students during the chaotic challenges the educational system was facing post natural disaster and post pandemic era.

In conclusion, the 21st century began with complex challenges for educational leaders in Puerto Rico and around the world. This resulted in increased demands for educational leaders. There is no doubt that COVID-19 caused many setbacks in the educational system. The shift from traditional delivery mode to online classes impacted teachers greatly and educational leaders had the responsibility to provide a safe and nurturing environment. It redefined the teaching and learning process. For educational leaders in Puerto Rico, it was the opportunity to demonstrate an effective leadership style that addressed the post natural disasters and post pandemic challenges their school communities were facing. Educational leaders needed to exercise a leadership style that was flexible and were able to adapt to the different situations that their school communities were facing.

For leaders to be successful during the post-pandemic era, they must demonstrate their ability to exercise different leadership styles to motivate and inspire the entire school community. Also, these leaders needed to identify and develop those teacher leaders in their school communities. Educational and teacher leaders needed to exert their influence for the benefit of the school community. At this historical juncture, the leader also must help teachers make continuous critical reflections and continue developing teachers' emotional and academic skills. Teachers must receive meaningful staff development that addresses their specific interests and areas of need, so it will help teachers improve their teaching and learning process in the classroom. Finally, educational leaders of the 21st century must aspire to offer a liberating cosmopolitan critical education; a transformative education that empowers students to become global citizens through local and global activism to build a better world.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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