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# **TEACHING THROUGH THE MASK: TEACHER LEADERSHIP DURING THE PANDEMIC**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Covid-19 pandemic had contributed to school closures across the country. With such a significant impact, what once was routine became unknown from one minute to the next. Since March of 2020 to current, Covid-19 has placed a great deal of stress on educational institutions. Leadership was and continues to be essential during the fluid, frequently changing situation. With this need, how did COVID-19 impact the leaders of the classroom? With a strong need for guidance and leadership, this article provides insight as to some challenges and needs educators faced. This qualitative study enters the classroom and sheds light on the experiences of several educators (ranging PreK- 3rd grade) in a rural elementary school in West Virginia one year into the pandemic. The school of which the study was conducted serves 265 students, ranging from grade levels PK-5.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, leadership, characteristics

## **STATEMENT OF PURPOSE**

This study was designed to examine the supports and leadership that educators at a rural elementary school in West Virginia received one year into the Covid-19 pandemic. This study was inspired by a field study project in my EDL 574 Administration and Organizational Behavior II course within the Teaching Leadership and Professional Practice PhD program at University of North Dakota. Although there is research that focuses on the impact of the pandemic on students, there is limited research on educators and what they had to overcome during the early stages of this difficult period. Strong leadership was vital during the time known for educators as the time of “teaching through a mask.”

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Covid-19 pandemic covered radio stations, news channels, newspapers, social media, and household discussions for over a year. Closure of schools were prominent across the country as the focus remained on the safety of the students. Many questions were prevalent, one of which was how educators would meet the needs of students that are not engaging in face-to-face instruction. The establishment of the in-person educational setting that was so familiar to students and teachers alike, was unforeseeable. COVID-19 presented many obstacles for

educational systems around the world. There are economic, social, and psychological repercussions on the life of students while they are away from the normal schedule of schools (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). An additional concern was the lack of parental guidance, especially for young learners, which is another challenge as both parents are working (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021).

Regardless of if institutions were private or public, or of elementary, secondary, or higher education level, every educational system had been impacted by this devastating event. Educators had to adjust to the idea of teaching remotely through synchronous and asynchronous learning. Adjustments had to be made to the content being taught in order to deliver it in formats accessible to students. Assessments were conducted in unfamiliar ways. Teachers met new challenges with familiarizing themselves with new learning platforms, keeping students actively engaged online, as well as the new learning trajectories at the time and in the future. Different subjects and age groups require different approaches to online learning (Doucet et al., 2020).

A new direction came when the topic of our students re-entering the classroom at full capacity, five days a week was argued in some areas and encouraged in others. The students returned full capacity in some school districts in West Virginia in 2021. At this time, parents and students needed reassurance that it was safe to return to the classroom where social distancing may be a manageable task for some but not others. Educators made the needed modifications so that face-to-face instruction could resume. With limitations and guidelines to follow, leadership and guidance was needed to ensure a safe learning environment for the students.

This study focuses on identifying factors that can be implemented or improved upon that will benefit the teachers in the classroom, which in turn would also directly benefit the parents and students. The research questions that are focused on includes the following: 1) What professional developments have teachers received to support remote instruction and what areas are additional supports needed? 2) How are administrators, educators, and other school personnel communicating with parents during the Covid-19 pandemic and are these methods successful? 3) What teaching format is being utilized and how effective are these methods? And 4) What leadership characteristics do teachers feel are essential during the Covid pandemic. The findings of this study will redound the need for adequate professional developments that focus in on what educators feel they need the most, such as strategies to implement when dealing with students who have been significantly impacted by the pandemic. Additional professional developments

that could be employed would include trainings for online learning platforms, student learning with a focus on closing the achievement gap caused by the pandemic and school closures, as well as how to support parents during this time of need.

This qualitative research approach is used to gain an understanding of how the experiences of educators during initial stages of the pandemic can link to change and future preparation. The interviews were conducted in a natural setting with real world context. This allowed for meaningful insight on the participants' experiences. The open-ended responses enable current and future researchers to uncover novel problems or seize opportunities that they wouldn't have thought of otherwise due to lack of sufficient research data. Through structured interviews, the predetermined questions are stated in the same form. This increased reliability of the results. Based on the results obtained from this study, policymakers, stake holders, and district leaders can make more informed decisions about how to improve the educational system and increase adequate preparation of educators to work with children and parents who have experienced hardship and learning loss due to the pandemic.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

While adapting to the new changes, staff and student readiness needs to be gauged and supported accordingly (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic has provided us with an opportunity to pave the way for introducing digital learning (Dhawan, 2020). Online learning requires teachers to learn innovative and creative ways to teach, unlike the teaching and learning experiences that are existent in the traditional classroom. Some of the online platforms used so far include unified communication and collaboration platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, Canvas, and Blackboard, which allow the teachers to create educational courses, training and skill development programs (Petrie, 2020). In addition to learning online teaching platforms, educators had to learn how to provide authentic assessments and provide timely feedback. A very crucial part of online distance learning is the availability of helpful formative assessments and timely feedback to the online learners (Doucet et al., 2020).

In looking at the overall picture of the educational system and Covid, there are some articles that shed light on the various experiences encountered by students, parents, educators, principals, school districts, as well as other members which are a part of the education organization. With the situation being so fluid, it is important to be flexible and make

adjustments as directives are given. According to a new report from the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (2020), being able to successfully navigate challenging times like these requires adaptability and a toolkit of strategies. It is additionally stated (Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership, 2020), “Uncertainty requires leaders to adapt quickly to a rapidly changing situation, and to draw on different skills and types of leadership.” The expectations of content delivery was under scrutiny as the mode of teaching frequently changed.” Teachers and school leaders were engaging in deep job-embedded learning, trying, iterating, and refining practices as they go” (Netolicky, 2020). Teachers had to use the resources they had available and had to make adjustments based on individual needs and experiences. “There were no precedents or guides to leading schools in a pandemic for most leaders,” (Harris & Jones, 2020, p. 244).

There is a strong need for teachers and leaders to provide effective communication and establish similar visions/goals for the educational team. “Schools, their teachers and leaders require those in education leadership positions around them to provide clarity and vision in terms of learning and curriculum requirements, health and safety guidelines, training and resources to be able to define learning solutions that will allow their schools to flourish in times of uncertainty.” (Beatriz, 2020). Administrators and individuals in leadership positions had to rely heavily on their ability to lead. The need for strong relationships between the student, parent, and educator was essential more than ever during the uncertain Covid-19 pandemic. Administrators had to work on their communication with school staff to ensure they remained up to date with any changes or directives given. “Building strong, purposeful relationships with staff, students, and school communities is a trait of highly effective principals” (Masters, 2018). One essential element that paved way and shed a light in a dark room was the administrator’s ability to effectively communicate all changes taking place. This information allowed all organizational members to act according to the given situation.

Students lacked the daily access to school and the basic supports that the schools provided. They missed out on social opportunities through group activities, team sports, and recreational options such as the playground. Grade level standards could not be met because of limited time to cover the learning objectives. Access to technology is an additional issue that must be considered for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Some school districts can provide their students with devices; however, this is not a consistent case across the board. The

success of many students relies heavily on their ability to maintain close connections and relationships with their teachers. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds may lack parental support at home or lack the strategies or abilities to actively engage in online class instruction or at home learning activities.

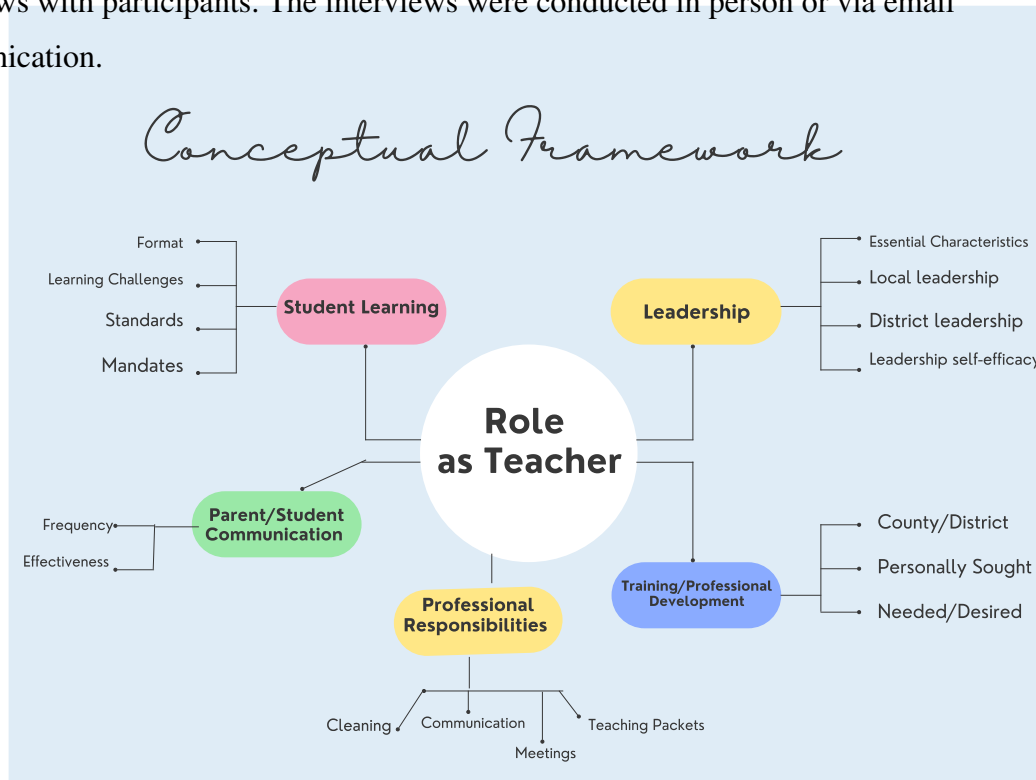
Teachers play an essential role in closing the gap formed by school closures. This gap is in addition to previous academic gaps for students who are already one grade level or more behind. It is once again critical to point out the need for effective educational leaders. Educational leaders, (which includes leaders within the board of education, state level, as well as immediate supervisors) play a powerful role in supporting their teachers. Research has shown that when teachers perceive their school leaders to be more autonomy-supportive, teachers report more positive relationships with students and colleagues and greater adaptability, greater work-related wellbeing and lower emotional exhaustion (Collie et al., 2016; Collie & Martin, 2017). In a more recent study, when teachers perceive their school leaders to be more autonomy-supportive, they report greater workplace buoyancy (Collie et al., 2019). Workplace buoyance consists of having the capacity to effectively direct common challenges that occur at work. This capacity would be especially important when directing through the challenges brought forth by the Covid-19 pandemic.

## **OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **METHODS**

As an elementary educator during the pandemic, I understand and am aware of the importance of having effective administration to give advice and direction. I can personally identify with the demand for professional developments that address learning needs for online learning platforms, addressing the academic gap resulting from school closure, adequately meeting current grade level standards, as well as prior grade level standards, and how to increase family engagement at home. The significance of this study is to place emphasis on professional development needs of educators which ultimately impacts the success of students in the classroom. The voice of individuals in the classroom should be taken into consideration rather than assuming the trainings that are needed. The process of obtaining data from firsthand experiences, questionnaires, and interviews allowed for flexibility during the data gathering process. The questions on the interview are open-ended and enables the attitudes and beliefs of

the participants to be shared. The data obtained from this resource can be employed as a secondary source. Although an IRB was not completed as this was a class project, one can be obtained. The participants voluntarily engaged in this research and was informed that there will be no identifying factors included within the article. Data is obtained through structured interviews with participants. The interviews were conducted in person or via email communication.



The conceptual framework of this study focuses on the role of teacher during the pandemic. As a teacher, concentration was placed on student learning, parent/student communication, professional responsibilities, and professional development to gain relevant knowledge for navigating through the pandemic. Student learning had to be evaluated for the current learning trajectories, as well as the future. Standards had to be met, mandates had to be complied with, and the challenges that students faced because the lack of face-to-face instruction, had to be contended with. The teacher had to keep an open line of communication to inform the parents and students of when TEAMS meetings would be held and assignments that were due. Ultimately, the teacher has been and will continue to be the leader for the students and

parents. The building administration is the leadership that the teacher looks to for advice and guidance. Leadership consists of individuals at the local, district, and state level.

The theoretical framework of this study is derived from two perspectives. These perspectives include transformational leadership and the Contingency theory. School improvement and education leadership are important aspects within the disciplines. Transformational leadership focuses on creating bonds which influences and encourages students and teachers to reach for higher levels of achievement. A leader that utilizes the transformational theory employs motivational strategies to inspire their team members to be better. During the time of the pandemic, educators are in strong need for a leader who can instill passion and create an environment that is positive and safe for everyone in the school setting. Transformational leaders who develop and communicate a vision and a sense of strategy are those who “find clear and workable ways to overcome obstacles, are concerned about the qualities of the services their organization provide and inspire other members to do likewise” (Swail, 2003, p. 14).

The Contingency Theory of Leadership model that is focused on within this study is Fiedler’s Contingency Model. Specifically, the contingency model is concerned with the aspect that a leader is effective when the leadership style fits the situation. A leader is most effective when his or her attributes and style of leadership is matched with the situation and environment around them (Gupta, 2009). According to Gupta (2009), a situation is defined by three factors in the contingency theory: 1) Leader-Member Relation – how the leader interacts with employees, 2) Task Structure – how tasks are set up by the leader, and 3) Positional power – the amount of power a leader has over followers. If the three factors match up to the style of the leader, success is projected (Gupta, 2009).

## **PARTICIPANTS**

The participants of this study work in a rural school district. The elementary school of which the participants work serves 265 students, grades PK – 5. The participants were selected based on their current teaching position at the time the study was conducted. These individuals have titles ranging from Pre-Kindergarten through Second grade, as well as behavior disorder



and Title teacher. Six of the participants completing the interviews are females in the following grade levels: Pre-Kindergarten, Kindergarten, First, and Second. One female educator is a Title 1 teacher, and the other is a behavior disorder teacher. One participant is male. He is currently a kindergarten aide however holds a certification as an assistant teacher.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBTAINING OF DATA**

The participants were asked a series of ten questions, one of which was open to additional comments that the participant may contribute his or her thoughts and ideas regarding the research topic. Participants were asked to respond with their opinion on the matter of leadership during the pandemic. The questions for the interview were developed through the collaboration of educators who shared an interest in the topic being researched. A list was generated through cooperative efforts during collaborative planning opportunities. Interview data was obtained through in-person interviews and email/typed responses. One of the interviews was recorded utilizing otter.ai. One of the participants completed the interview questions through email and engaged in a one-on-one discussion to provide more in-depth responses.

## **RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS**

With the nature of the pandemic being fluid and always changing, this research was conducted based on the participants' experiences from March 2020 – March 2021. The time frame of data collection is limited, and research is conducted in a small rural school in the southern part of West Virginia. The findings of this research is important as we continue to move forward through the pandemic. As of now, it is not certain what the remaining 2021-2022 school year will look like for students, parents, teachers, administrators, as well as other members within the public and private education sectors. The data obtained during this research can assist with decision making as we continue to move forward in this unsolidified situation. The results of this study can be beneficial for subsequent research. Teacher collaboration is crucial while addressing the many academic, social, and emotional needs of the students. Educational reforms must take on a new direction to accommodate what appears to be the new normal for students, parents, teachers, administrators, as well as other stakeholders involved. In looking at the data obtained, *Spotlight (2020)*, identifies some key aspects that effective leaders draw on during a time of crisis includes reactive and proactive skills/approaches, prioritizes open communication,

works collaboratively to transform and build back better, and supports the wellbeing of their school community. These aspects align with the results obtained from the participants. The identified characteristics which are deemed important from the participants' perspectives includes communication, decision-making, relationships, organization, flexibility, and supportive.

## **DATA/RESULTS**

### **Questions Focused on During Interview**

1. What do you identify to be important characteristics in an effective leader?
2. Do you feel as though you have been given effective professional development regarding how to teach during a pandemic?
3. What resources have you been given to support social and emotional Covid related needs?
4. What inequities do you think have been brought to the forefront as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic? Do you feel the school district/leadership have been able to address these inequities?
5. How did you, as well as the leadership within your school, communicate with the students and parents during the pandemic? Did you find these methods of communication effective?
6. What has been your experiences with both parents and students during the pandemic?
7. What is a realistic learning model for teaching during Covid?
8. What is the hardest part of teaching during a pandemic?
9. Since social distancing is nearly impossible in the classroom, what are you doing to help students stay safe?
10. Do you have anything else that you would like to add?

In looking at the data obtained for the first question, "What do you identify to be important characteristics in an effective leader?", the following characteristics were identified: 1) clear communication, 2) execution of tasks, 3) influential, 4) decision-making/can delegate, 5) build relationships and know team members, 6) possess organizational skills and have time management, 7) flexibility, 8) understanding but firm, 9) supportive of staff, is positive, and

encouraging, and 10) good listener. In looking at the results, keep in mind that some participants identified more than one important characteristic.

Participants	7									
	6									
	5									
	4									
	3									
	2									
	1									
	Characteristics	Communicate clearly	Execute Tasks	Influential	Decision – Making/ Delegate	Relationships Know your team	Organizational Skills/ Time Management	Flexibility	Understanding but Firm	Supportive of Staff/ Positive/Encouraging

CHARACTERISTICS COMMUNICATES CLEARLY: 2 IDENTIFIED AS IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS EXECUTE TASKS: 1 IDENTIFIED AS AN IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTIC INFLUENTIAL: 1 IDENTIFIED AS AN IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTIC DECISION-MAKING/DELEGATE: 2 IDENTIFIED AS IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS BUILD RELATIONSHIPS/KNOW YOUR TEAM MEMBERS: 2 IDENTIFIED AS IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS/TIME MANAGEMENT: 2 IDENTIFIED AS IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS FLEXIBILITY: 2 IDENTIFIED AS IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS UNDERSTANDING BUT FIRM: 1 IDENTIFIED AS AN IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTIC SUPPORTIVE OF STAFF/POSITIVE/ENCOURAGING: 2 IDENTIFIED AS IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS GOOD LISTENER: 2 IDENTIFIED AS IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS

**Main Leadership Themes**

In looking thoroughly at some of the participants’ responses, there is consistency in the need for clear communication, decision-making, and supportive relationships. One participant mentioned the technology resources that were provided by the local board office. The students were granted permission to take home the classroom iPads so that they had the virtual resources that they would need. There were hotspots established within the small rural community for those students who did not have the internet access at home. This opened communication for the students, parents, teachers, and administrators. This contributed to the supportive relationships between the students, parents, and teachers. It also provided a way for the administrator to ensure that students’ needs were being met in the best possible manner given the situation.

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