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Pivotal Leadership During a Pandemic: Impacts on Educational Administration and Educational Policy in Canada

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On March 11, 2020, The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the Coronavirus (COVID-19) to be a pandemic—a health crisis that would quickly impact every sector of both public and private enterprise. School systems around the globe began to shut down face-to-face instruction almost immediately, ushering in an intense period of remote emergency learning for billions of students and their teachers, both in the K–12 and post-secondary sectors (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Schleicher, 2020). The pandemic brought unprecedented changes and challenges for everyone and at every level of education. Our understandings of school leadership and educational administration have been in upheaval. As Harris and Jones (2020) noted, "School leadership practices have changed considerably and maybe, irreversibly because of COVID-19. As a result of the pandemic, school leadership has pivoted on its axis and is unlikely to return to 'normal' anytime soon, if ever at all" (p. 245). It is within this context that this special issue titled "Pivotal Leadership During a Pandemic: Impacts on Educational Administration and Educational Policy in Canada" of the *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy* sought to better understand how educational leaders responded to the impact of COVID-19 on Canadian schools as well as the related policy implications.

Prior to the pandemic, much had been written about the increasing complexity of educational leadership (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2019; Canadian Association of Principals, 2014; Pollock et al., 2014, 2015; Ruben et al., 2017; Xiao & Newton, 2018). In particular, the reconstruction of education within neoliberal ideologies of accountability, efficiency, and centralization (Hoben, 2016; Rigas & Kuchapski, 2016; Stein, 2002) has left educational leaders struggling to meet an ever-expanding list of workload demands, often resulting in high turnover rates and concerns for their wellness (Pollock & Hauseman, 2015; Usher et al., 2011). The COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified these pre-existing conditions, serving to further challenge the future of educational leadership. Although notions of crisis leadership and resilient leadership have already been explored (Gurr & Drysdale, 2020; Northouse, 2019), much of the empirical work in this area has been conducted around localized traumatic events. Never in the history of education has the entire global education system been shuttered full stop. The colossal impact the pandemic has had on the future of educational leadership cannot be underestimated and will not be fully understood for a long time.

Adding Canadian perspectives to the global literature on pandemic leadership is crucial. In this issue, we do not aim to provide generalizable themes or theories of how educational leadership has been changed by COVID-19; rather, the issue purposefully provides diverse and situated narratives to extend understanding of the unique approaches to leading that have emerged during the pandemic. In keeping with that breadth, the issue offers empirical research papers and cases, from K–12 and post-secondary contexts, that address both teaching and research. A summary of each submission is included below.

Empirical Research Articles

In ***School Leadership for Decolonization and Indigenization***, Joshua Hill writes about the efforts of school principals in Alberta who were involved in a district-wide Indigenization initiative. As Hill notes, although COVID-19 was a reality that required the attention of school leaders, "Justice for Indigenous People in Canada cannot wait any longer." Employing a design-based research approach, Hill partnered with the school division to collect a variety of data, including surveys, interviews, and observations, to better understand the professional learning needs of school leaders as they continued to work toward creating a district-wide school environment that "respects, includes, and promotes Indigenous ways of knowing, teaching, and learning." Although the pandemic limited the welcoming of Elders and Knowledge Keepers into schools, video conferencing was used to ensure teachers, students, and parents could benefit from building relationships. Indigenization work also gave school leaders a welcomed opportunity to shift focus and gain a much-needed reprieve from the challenges of COVID-19.

In ***Navigating Turbulent Waters: Leading a Manitoba School in a Time of Crisis***, Merli Tamtik and Susan Darazsi present an intertwined qualitative co-constructed autoethnographic account (Kempster & Iszatt-White, 2012) of the personal leadership adaptations of one school principal in Manitoba. They use the theoretical framing of environmental pressures: (a) coercive (e.g., from governmental or regulatory agencies), (b) mimetic (e.g., attempts to emulate best practices from other schools), and (c) normative pressures (e.g., professional standards endorsed by professional societies or unions). They eloquently argue that crisis leadership tests a leader's knowledge, skills, and overall leadership capacity. Although they found that environmental pressures differ depending on local contexts (i.e., government, infrastructure, personnel, and socioeconomic differences), they conclude that (a) coercive pressures are mostly associated with creativity and inventive leadership practices, (b) mimetic pressures may lead to copying behaviours, and (c) normative pressures are associated with enhanced foundational knowledge; however, all of these suggestions depend on context.

In ***Exploring School Principals' Experiences During the First Four Months of the Pandemic as a Way to Reimagine Inclusive Education***, Daniel John Anderson, Jeffrey MacCormack, and Steve Sider address how Canadian principals responded to students with special education needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using Yamamoto et al.'s (2014) concept of critical incidents and Heine et al.'s (2006) meaning maintenance model, they identify four critical incidents that informed principals' responses: (a) family support concerns and partnering with parents virtually, (b) meeting students' individual needs, (c) virtual learning impacts, and (d) logical and technological challenges. They argue that the interpersonal school-based incidents that emerged in response to the pandemic left principals in disequilibrium, challenging them to negotiate their leadership responses and reconsider traditional aspects of schooling. Through these incidents, they propose a theoretical framework that can be employed to consider how microlevel (interpersonal interactions) meaning-making interfaces with—and leads to—microlevel (systemic) changes. They offer guidance to principals in developing novel and impactful strategies to support students with special education needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In ***Ontario Teachers' Policy Leadership During the COVID-19 Pandemic***, Beyhan Farhadi and Sue Winton draw on Lipsky's (2010) theory of the street-level bureaucrat and the notion of policy enactment (Ball et al., 2012) to inform their conceptualization of teachers' policy leadership. Employing a case study approach, they conducted focus groups with participants from 10 English-language public district school boards, serving students in Southern, Central, and Northern Ontario, to better understand the contexts in which teachers interpret and translate policy directives. Farhadi and Winton argue that the impact of and response to the COVID-19 pandemic has positioned teachers as policy leaders whose practices are largely informed by the shifting dynamics of external, situated, and spatial contexts of schools. Additionally, they highlight the challenges of maintaining colleague relationships that inform

their decision-making in a virtual setting. Given these findings, they propose the need to consider the spatial context as a component of policy enactment frameworks and call for a deeper examination of how online learning during COVID-19 has shaped school transformations during and post-pandemic.

In *Post-Secondary Educational Leadership Working Remotely During a COVID-19 Pandemic in Saskatchewan, Canada: Exploring Best Practices, Experiences, and the New Normal Post-Pandemic*, Theresa Papp and Michael Cottrell discuss the challenges and benefits of leading during COVID-19 for post-secondary administrators in Saskatchewan. They analyze post-pandemic expectations, which they refer to as the "new normal workplace." Using a mixed-methods design, employees (including administrators) from two institutions participated in both a survey and individual interviews. Findings were varied, with some employees reporting increased productivity and satisfaction with remote work arrangements and others reporting increased stress and workload. They noted that women had been impacted more than their male counterparts with respect to workloads that extended beyond the workday (e.g., childcare, elder care, and housework). Overall, the study offers insights into the careful balance of flexibility and expectations that post-secondary leaders must attend to with respect to employee experience and wellbeing as they transition from pandemic to endemic continues.

In *More Pivots than a Centipede on Ice Skates: Reflections on Shared Leadership in a Post-secondary Institution During COVID-19,* Dan Smith describes and analyzes a college's response to COVID-19 by outlining pandemic planning and management processes at the college from the onset of the pandemic (March 2020) to the end of September 2021. He concludes there was much evidence of greater shared leadership among senior leaders, middle management, faculty, and staff who worked together to address the immediate crisis and engaged in post-pandemic planning. The lessons learned from this case may help post-secondary institutions gain greater resiliency and sustainability as the post-COVID environment emerges.

Cases

In *Still Thriving: A Case Illustrating How COVID-19 Affected Indigenous Health and Wellness,* Jermone Cranston and Rita Whitford present a narrative of how the COVID-19 pandemic had exacerbated effects on Indigenous communities. They argue the response to the pandemic highlighted a Westernized approach to health care and wellness during the pandemic as well as exclusionary practices toward Indigenous peoples. They offer an alternative framework to develop a practical solution that encompasses an individual's life by connecting them relationally to their families and communities, nations, and the land.

In *Turning Leadership Upside-Down and Outside-In During The COVID-19 Pandemic,* Patricia Briscoe & Nyasha Nyereyemhuka describe the experiences of a fictional elementary school principal, Mariam, and the twists and turns she endured while leading during the pandemic. The case chronicles the manner in which Mariam attempted to deal with and adapt to the ever-changing administrative landscape and pays particular attention to the impact of crisis leadership on Mariam's wellbeing. In the teaching notes and two activities, the authors offer an opportunity for reflection on how the pandemic has encouraged school leaders to rethink educational leadership and provide concrete strategies to help future leaders focus on self-care.

In *Practicing Care-Centered Leadership in a Pandemic: Narratives and Notes on Care Ethics Experiences and Practices in Extraordinary Times*, Christine Shultz discusses the challenges she faced while exercising her leadership in a post-secondary institution in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a central unit of analysis in both her dissertation and practice, she argues for the understanding of "care" as an action that is contingent on relationality and reciprocity between individuals. Given this understanding, she proposes two activities that highlight novel strategies that post-secondary facilitators/instructors and participants can exercise while leading in both virtual and in-person formats.

Conclusion

This special issue presents a mosaic of narratives and studies that examined how educational leaders have responded to the impact of COVID-19 on Canadian schools. By using a combination of empirical research papers and cases, the findings in this issue address Indigenization and decolonization, leadership capacity while leading for crisis, organizational supports and management processes, care ethics

and wellness, inclusive education, and policy enactment. We hope that the breadth of school dilemmas, problematizations, solutions, teaching notes, and frameworks presented can (a) contribute to a knowledge base in both K–12 and post-secondary contexts, (b) guide researchers in educational administration and leadership who are interested in leadership and COVID-19 related policy implications, and (c) present novel strategies that may enrich the work of practitioners in the field.

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