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Leading in Liminality: Implications on Individual and Collective Identity, and Knowledge Creation for School Leaders

David Sorkin¹, Melodie Wyttenbach¹, John Reyes¹, and Michael Warner¹

Abstract: In the spring of 2020, schools of all sectors across all nations were forced to close their doors as COVID-19 rippled through communities. Drawing upon the concept of liminality, which refers to a stage, state, or period of transition (Soderlund & Borg, 2017), this study investigated the intersections of the experience of liminality during the pandemic and functioning for Catholic school leaders. Interviews with urban school leaders were analyzed to understand key characteristics of liminality as experienced by school leaders within organizations. Findings indicate that school leaders responded to the liminal experience by sharpening the focus of work, which simultaneously complexified the traditional roles of individual and organization. These findings have significant potential in illuminating a path forward during liminal times for educators of all sectors. This paper provides an opportunity to interpret the impact of the pandemic across all sectors of education, with a primary analysis on Catholic schools.

Keywords: change management, decision-making, K–12 education, liminality, organizational priorities, school leadership

In the spring of 2020, schools of all sectors across all nations were forced to close their doors as COVID-19 rippled through communities. Schools, being key purveyors of culture and stability, were swept up into an environment ripe with disorder, contention, and fragmentation. Different sectors embraced opposing approaches to education where, in many public school

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districts across the United States, unions fought vehemently to protect teachers from returning to in-person instruction (Will, 2020). Conversely, a number of private Catholic schools fought to reopen for in-person learning a few months after the initial shut-down occurred (McGurn, 2021). The forced lock-downs most acutely affected marginalized families, those without access to technology hardware, stable internet access, or childcare (Aguilar et al., 2020). As school leaders scrambled to move learning into home environments, parents as the primary educators of their children took on new meaning. Students, teachers, leaders, and parents of both public and private school systems were thrust into liminal space; schools as organizations were also thrust into liminality.

In this paper, our research team sets out to answer the following research questions: (1) how was Catholic school leader identity, purpose, and professional practice shaped and reshaped by the experience of liminality through the pandemic, and (2) in what ways did pandemic-induced liminality impact organizational identity. To answer these questions, semi-structured interviews with principals of urban Catholic schools who led their schools prior to, during, and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic unearthed perceptions of individual and collective liminality within the contexts provided by the included schools. The key findings below address the results from these interviews. In the final section of the paper, we discuss implications for future phases of research within this study as well as areas of further inquiry.

Review of Relevant Literature

The following section includes a brief review of conceptual and empirical research on the concepts of liminality, crisis leadership, extreme leadership, and organizational transformation and disposition. These literatures guided the framework to understand leaders identity, purpose, and professional practice, along with organizational functioning relevant to the study.

Liminality

This study drew primarily on the concepts of liminality, which refers to a stage, state, or period of transition, and is derived from the Latin word *limen* which translates to threshold (Söderlund & Borg, 2017). These transitional spaces of the *betwixt and between* connect what was to what is. A concept with its roots in anthropology, liminality captures the essence and emergence of realities both for individuals and the collective. Scholars who have conducted research on the impact the liminal space has on individuals have noted that liminality often involves extreme disorientation, confusion, or pushing individuals to their limits (Beech, 2011; Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014); it can also be viewed as a time when one is able to shape a new path forward or refine their identity as they move from a stage of uncertainty to clarity (Meyer & Land, 2005; Zamudio et al., 2009). A handful of scholars have also examined liminality as a means to address collective-level processes, such as organizational change processes, “especially the transition from one relatively fixed set of

organizational repertoires to another or the creation of a new organization, and to explore how organizational members forge a collective identity during such formative processes” (Söderlund & Borg, 2017).

Crisis Leadership and Extreme Leadership

Literature on crisis leadership and extreme leadership provided a foundational understanding of competencies and dispositions given the extreme nature of the pandemic and resulting crisis. With the understanding that the experience of liminality varies based on the individual and collective, it is relevant to look at the specific implications of the “triggering events” that thrust organizations and leaders of such organizations into liminal spaces. Grissom and Condon’s (2021) review of research on crisis management details competencies essential to leadership across phases of crisis management. These competencies are distinct from “normal” leadership competencies insofar as they relate to the immediacy of the triggering event and the crisis conditions, and, as Smith and Riley (2012) suggest, depart from the general orientation of school leadership about positioning schools for the future and for the pursuit of excellence in teaching and learning.

A related concept that appears in management and organizational theory relates to extreme leadership—that is, leadership in a context where “actors face persistent existential threat” (Buchanan & Hällgren, 2019). In extreme contexts, factors that may “attenuate” or “intensify” the extremeness experienced by leaders include time, level of complexity, and psychological, social, and organizational resources (Hannah et al., 2009). Campbell et al. (2010) identified shared and compatible mental models, creativity, affect management, ability to create coherence and positive team climate, and successful performance as five factors that constitute leadership effectiveness in these contexts.

Organizational Identity

The creation and transformation of collective identity in liminal spaces resemble related research on the concept of organizational identity. Albert and Whetten (1985) defined organizational identity as consisting of features that are central to the organization’s self-image, make the organization distinct from other similar organizations, and have continuity over time. Despite endurance being a key element of organizational identity, it is commonly understood that individual professional identity and organizational identity can change over time (Empson, 2004). Certain conditions, such as major strategic change and perception of an “identity gap,” can contribute to the likelihood or intensity of such change (Gioia et al., 2013). Empson (2004) affirms that both individual, professional identity and organizational identity are non-static, and that individual, professional identity is subject to change as organizations themselves change.

Empirical studies of organizational identity reveal leadership behaviors and competencies that are essential to yielding positive outcomes when organizational identity changes. Aitken and

von Treuer (2021) found that effective communication, a focus on relationships, stewardship of the organization and related change processes, and management of staff were among the most effective leadership behaviors in change contexts. In asserting the reciprocity of individual and organizational identity in change contexts, Cattonar et al. (2007) emphasize that the relational focus—between the organization and the environment, between organizations and other similar organizations, and individual teachers and the organization—facilitates the emergence of a stronger organizational identity in a post-change environment. Regardless of how leadership is configured in organizational change contexts, it must be leveraged in some intentional way when organizational identity is at stake. This means fostering a positive environment for dialogue, open communication, and identifying shared values and orientation (Mills et al., 2005).

Organizational Resilience

Organizational crises not only reveal the capacity of leadership, but also the readiness of organizations to demonstrate resilience and learning (Kayes & Yoon, 2020). Here, organizational resilience carries dual meaning as both a situationally-bound attribute (i.e. an explanatory term for the ways organizations respond to challenges) and as a process that precedes crisis by introducing learning routines that translate individual activities into organizational phenomena (Kayes & Yoon, 2020). Preparedness, responsiveness, adaptability, and learning processes serve as drivers of resilience that potentially explain why some organizations survive and thrive when dealing with adverse events (Koronis & Ponis, 2018). Disruptions compel organizations to engage in decision-making far beyond the scope of crisis management plans and interpret the idiosyncrasies of the situation on a case-by-case basis (Burnard et al., 2018).

Based on this review of the literature, liminality and the liminal phase impose distinct effects on individuals and organizations that is unique within this broader understanding of organizational change. Although the body of research identifies factors that drive shifts in organizational identity and the elements needed for positive organizational shifts, there exists space for inquiry examining the full spectrum of effects, particularly when change factors or organizational dispositions are less optimal. The qualities of organizations in crisis-induced liminal spaces are distinct but potentially interrelated with the qualities of leaders of organizations in crisis-induced liminal spaces. Studying similarly grouped phenomena across contexts are useful in differentiating between leader and organizational dispositions.

Methods

The theoretical framework that guided this research study was hermeneutics (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). Originating in Biblical studies, hermeneutics investigates texts and acts to understand an individual's lived experience by moving between the part and the whole. In this study, it was the movement between the individual leader experience to the collective leadership

experience of all participants that yielded the deepest understanding of the pandemic-induced liminal experience. However, it should be noted that this understanding is ultimately never finished as leaders are in a constant state of becoming (Heidegger, 1996).

Participants

This qualitative research focused on one sector of education: the private, Catholic school. Since this study included an examination of the individuals and the collective, we purposefully selected school communities characteristic of a loosely coupled system (Weick, 1976). Loosely coupled systems exist when “local groups can adapt to their part of the environment without changing the entire system,” where less standardization exists, and fewer resources are available (Weick, 1976, p. 8). Whereas public schools operate as a collective through the district, Catholic schools exist within diocesan structures and are distinctly different from their public school counterparts in terms of local operational freedoms. Given the principle of subsidiarity that many Catholic schools operate under with fewer resources, such characteristics of a loosely coupled system aligned well to Catholic schools.

We further narrowed the selection of Catholic school leaders to be those working in urban school communities, dedicated to serving marginalized communities, and upholding the Catholic social teaching tenet of uplifting the preferential option for the poor. This group was selected because of the disparity in human, financial, and technical resources compared with other settings.

Using publicly available data on Catholic schools on the websites of Catholic (arch)dioceses and the school locator function on the website of the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA), we identified administrator contacts at schools that fit the selection criteria. Potential participants were solicited via email. Ten female administrators from across the United States agreed to participate from the solicitation emails and were interviewed as a part of this study. [Table 1](#) identifies the participants by location.

Table 1

Participant demographics

Participant	Location
1	Dallas, TX
2	New York, NY
3	South Bend, IN
4	North Charleston, SC
5	Hartford, CT
6	Indianapolis, IN
7	Stockton, CA
8	Lawrence, MA
9	Minneapolis, MN
10	Seattle, WA

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with leaders who met the established criteria and consented to participation in this study. Interviews were conducted in person or via Zoom video conferencing and lasted approximately one hour. The interview protocol included three sections. The first section focused on the response by administrators to the moment when they realized the pandemic fundamentally changed their life. Examples of questions from this section include: “What was your unique role as a leader in this moment,” and “How did your role as a leader change or shift as a result of this moment?” The second section of the interview focused on being in the liminal moment of the pandemic. Administrators were asked questions such as: “What about your past professional experience may have impacted your effectiveness in leading during the pandemic,” and “In what way did the pandemic surface or exacerbate other organizational crises?” The final section of the interview was focused on innovation that resulted from the pandemic. Questions included: “How did the pandemic compare to other times when your school has faced significant changes, transformation, or instability,” and “How would you describe how the school as an organization is forever changed by the pandemic?”

Audio recordings from the interviews were transcribed using a third-party transcription service. Thematic analysis (Creswell, 2014) was used to identify qualitative codes (Saldaña, 2013) from the transcribed interviews. After coding was complete, analytic memos were created to describe and reflect the findings from the qualitative codes. The codes were then analyzed again resulting in themes that surfaced from the collective analysis of the data.

Findings

In the following section, findings are organized into three dimensions: (a) leader identity and purpose; (b) leader practice; and (c) organizational identity.

Leader Identity and Purpose

Moving into this liminal space meant school leaders quickly had to change operations and creatively rethink how to educate and support all stakeholders in the school community during this time of uncertainty. Findings reveal leaders in this liminal space focused on how four primary qualities shaped their identity during this time of instability. The qualities include resilience, adaptability, attentiveness, and fluidity.

Resilience Brings Hope

Resilience is the “accumulated cultural capacity of an organization to make sense of risks and negative events, to absorb the pressure and ultimately protect the organization’s social capital and reputation” (Koronis & Ponis, 2018). Evidence of resilience was repeatedly found in the

data, and reflect [Witmer and Mellinger's \(2016\)](#) description of ways leaders exercise resilience in organizations including: having a deep commitment to mission, an ability to improvise, showing community reciprocity, servant and transformational leadership, hope and optimism, and fiscal transparency. One leader noted that her resilience gave others the ability to move forward during this time of uncertainty. "Every single day you have to wake up and make the choice that we're going to have hope, and we're going to do this together. And [this meant] having to be that cheerleader, spiritual cheerleader, for everybody, too."

Maintaining this positive, resilient disposition meant being decisive for parents, students, teachers, and staff who looked to the leader for guidance and direction during this time of uncertainty. "I had to be . . . a guiding light. When everybody else was confused, I felt like I had to kind of be the cheerleader, and that was hard at times. But, it was something that I was able to do." As leaders described the liminal space as feeling "like we have entered this sort of twilight zone," resilience and a non-consideration of failure were prevalent dispositions that brought great hope to the community.

Adaptability Yields Essentialism

Given the quickly changing circumstances for many school leaders during this time, there was a need for urgent decision-making and little time for contemplation. "Working at a school, I know that things can change, and I have learned not to rely on continuity when you're in a school. And so, because of that . . . I'm always prepared for anything—and you have to be." To weather the storm of liminality, leaders had to focus on what was most important and prioritize what needed to be done in order to move their school forward.

Adapting to the change in operations expeditiously resulted in essentialism, where leaders had to eliminate the non-essential tasks and focus on what mattered most regardless of how they may have personally felt.

I was scared. But at the same time, as principals, you don't have time to have feelings and thoughts. You know, I hate to say that. But really there are things that come up like this is where you need to spring into action. And whatever feelings and thoughts you have, whether personal or not, you have to put them aside and start moving forward immediately.

In this way, leaders defined that adapting through essentialism was one way to negotiate the liminal moment.

When unknowns prevail in a liminal space, the idea of creating focus through essentialism becomes a coping mechanism to deal with the enormity of change. Embracing essentialism for school leaders meant examining what could be done to best meet the needs of the school

community. The pursuit of what was best for the community had to be disciplined because there just wasn't enough time in the day to meet all needs. Leaders had to quickly filter through all the options and focus on getting things done that would have the highest impact, and make the wisest investment possible of their time.

Attentiveness Means Accompaniment

By being adaptive, leaders realized much of their time was spent tending to the needs of their community. To be able to provide directions, leaders were challenged to listen carefully to others which resulted in a heightened awareness of needs and a new level of accompaniment during this time of uncertainty. Leaders were forced to pay attention to emotions, health needs, physical needs, and spiritual needs differently, rather than simply on academic learning needs. Given the heightened attentiveness, the role of the leader began to shift as leaders realized how their expertise was focused on building, maintaining, and supporting relationships with those in their school community. As [Kalkman \(2020\)](#) noted, development of heightened awareness allows for leaders to respond where some may increase interactions with others, and another may drive forward a collective sense of shared purpose. For many leaders, the crisis of COVID-19 brought focus, as focusing on the needs of people was of highest priority.

This meant deploying team members differently to increase the number of people who could meaningfully connect with students, parents, and teachers who were all experiencing heightened anxieties during a time of great uncertainty. One leader commented, “. . . your job is shifting. You're not going to do the things you've always done. So, you're going to fill your time with things that are going to support education versus provide it.” As one leader noted, “I actually completely took all the pressure off academics this year and said, that's not our job. Our job is not to push academics right now. Our job is to love and support these kids.”

Through this meaningful accompaniment, leaders began to more acutely minister to basic needs of those in their community and required their faculty and staff to do the same. Journeying through liminal space together, leaders were able to more effectively meet individual needs and understand how being attentive allowed for deeper accompaniment of those in their community.

Fluidity in Leadership Enhances Community

Leadership configurations in liminal times are fluid and untidy. To maintain group cohesion in times of uncertainty—and to optimize the well-being of individuals and community as a whole—a range of distributed, rotating, shared, network, and self-organizing leadership configurations may have to emerge ([Buchanan & Hällgren, 2019](#)). The ability to distribute authority and move beyond traditionally centralized ways of organizing was necessary for leaders during this time of navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. As one leader noted, she needed “boots on the ground” and in allowing others to lead initiatives, these teacher-leaders found “voice and courage” during this challenging time.

To make effective decisions, leaders need to be able to think holistically, recognize connections and linkages, anticipate the second and third order effects of decisions, question assumptions, visualize how situations might evolve into the future, and convey their understanding to others (Army Publishing Directorate, 2015). For school leaders, having more individuals support leading efforts gave a more comprehensive understanding of what the problems were that needed to be solved. It was not just about providing quality learning experiences for students, it also meant dealing with socio-emotional fallout from the pandemic, making sure strong lines of communication existed including soliciting feedback, listening carefully and meaningfully engaging all stakeholders, and boosting morale for faculty and students.

Given the urgency of what needed to be done and the immense needs for individuals, strategic movement was sacrificed for organizational agility. As one leader noted,

We just tried to be there for people. And if we couldn't figure out something right away, we documented it and brought it to the next 2 o'clock meeting to say, does anyone have any ideas for this? So that became a lot of what we did.

As leaders allowed for fluidity in who made decisions and supported meeting the great demand for needs, the community responded with generosity.

There was a lot of gratitude. I think that goes a long way to do hard things, is that people feel like, oh, you're really trying to do this great thing. And yeah, that makes you push you harder, I guess, just to do it. And like I said, that gratitude or just, like, we're all in it. We're all here and supporting.

By collectively navigating this liminal space, the leaders began to realize it was less about the group's survival, and more about the group's ability to thrive because they were moved forward as a community.

Thus, the identity, purpose, and professional practice of school leaders shifted significantly during this time of COVID-19, and navigating a space of uncertainty with and for a school community. Leaders realized how resilience brings hope, adaptability brings essentialism, attentiveness brings about accompaniment, and fluidity in leadership enhances community.

Leader Practice

The COVID-19 pandemic forced school leaders to reassess how problems were identified, and how solutions were proposed and analyzed. As previously discussed, leaders were forced to narrow their focus to the essentials, and the same is true of the problems they faced.

Immediacy of Problems and Solutions

The first concern was the frequency and way in which leaders identified problems. Participants responded that school staff and professional colleagues met with increased frequency with several leaders reporting daily meetings with administrative teams or faculty. Other leaders reported daily meetings with other school principals which served as opportunities to identify and discuss various stakeholder problems. When asked how innovation was shared among faculty, one participant noted in meetings, she “would say, [teacher], can you talk for a minute about, or can you share how you did this?. . . . So [a teacher] would talk about that, and then teachers would begin using that.” This shows how leaders re-framed their thinking surrounding problem identification and solution.

Leaders shared that the majority of problems focused more on issues of student or staff need, and less on problems of larger academic achievement. When talking about recapturing an academic focus, one leader responded that she told her teachers that “we’re not going to worry about the test scores at all. I don’t care if they continue to fall. All I care about is the health of these kids in front of us.” It was evident that leaders felt compelled to respond to the mental health issues preventing student and faculty success.

Bush Fixes

As the pandemic unfolded, leaders and teachers faced less time for extensive research on solutions. In order to respond to challenges, leaders turned to “bush fixes”. Bush fixes are so called because they involve using anything readily available to fix, address, or solve a problem because of the immediacy of the need and not necessarily having the time to obtain or research alternatives. Leaders turned to their teachers and other leaders to identify and implement solutions. One leader recalled that “relationships with other principals became really important. . . . It helped to start working together and saying, OK, what’s working for you? How are you handling this kind of situation? That became really important.” Consequently, there was a greater reliance on the lived experience of leaders and teachers to confirm or refute problem and solution identification.

Understood from the perspective of Communities of Practice ([Wenger, 1998](#)), school leaders relied on their community of principals to process the problems being faced as well as possible solutions. Similarly, leaders noted that teachers relied on their own Communities of Practice for the same support and processing. When discussing how teachers initially responded to the pandemic, one leader said that “I had . . . many [teachers] rally together . . . Teachers really rallied together and created systems that would work for themselves.” Relying on these networks provided the support to continue responding to the challenges presented by the liminality of the moment.

Impact on Leadership

For school leaders, there were three impacts to their leadership. First, the liminal experience of the COVID-19 pandemic brought forth a somewhat paradoxical leadership identity in order to negotiate the dysfunctions of movement from order to disorder to reorder (Rohr, 2020). In this moment, leaders were both leader and follower, expert and novice, and professional and personal. It was in embracing this paradoxical identity that leaders were able to continue serving.

Second, the liminal phase provided direction and purpose, and a sense of the common past (Söderlund & Borg, 2017). All participants recognized that regardless of the circumstances, there was a job to do and that they needed to figure it out. As one participant noted:

The regular workflow and to-do list is out the window. So, it's kind of looking at—all right—well, what are we going to do today . . . And realizing that some of the things just aren't going to happen, because really the most important thing is kind of being the glue that keeps everybody together. We can't lose it here. We've got to keep moving forward.

Leaders also discussed the common past that prepared their school communities to deal with the challenges at hand. One leader remarked that “because our faculty had started collaborating so much together over the years, we were in a better place to problem solve together and dialogue about things.” It was the community's history that sustained it in the liminal moment.

Finally, there was a flattening of the leadership hierarchy, a transition that occurred out of necessity and a recognition of others' expertise. Talking about how they started with distance learning, one leader shared the process she went through that once she had a plan she “threw [the plan] out to a few lead teachers for their input. We tweaked together. And then we met over Zoom and—as a faculty—said, OK, we're going to meet every day to assess.” Leaders also recognized the abilities faculty had to lead and support one another. One leader shared it was critical to lean in on their in-house experts when figuring out distance learning. She said that “one of [her] third grade teachers is simply amazing. . . . And so, we had a couple of professional development sessions where she led it. . . . So, really relying on in-house experts became something that we did.” This recognition and reliance on experts in the community worked to flatten the hierarchy of leadership.

Leaders adapted how they engaged their leadership throughout the pandemic. Problem identification and validation, refocused more directly on student or staff need, was modified for expediency and based on lived experience. Solutions were based on the immediate ability to solve the problem. Finally, leadership became a paradoxical leadership of opposites including being the leader and follower. Together, these findings illuminate the ways leadership in schools, specifically those in the urban Catholic school, negotiated the liminal space of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Organizational Identity

Results indicated the pandemic forced schools to become focused on key priorities. Through the initial phases of the pandemic, the immediate needs for urban Catholic schools became focused on the academic priorities for students, and the socio-emotional needs of students and teachers.

Crisis Brings Focus

Leaders became focused on critical academic dimensions of student learning while foregoing some of the extras. One leader noted the pandemic “highlighted the importance of efficient instruction. . . . We have limited time, we have limited access, we have to make every learning experience matter.” Consequently, instruction was focused on ensuring key standards were addressed. However, leaders did not always view this as a negative since it ultimately yielded greater clarity on the curriculum.

The socio-emotional needs of students also became one of the central priorities, and school leaders became an avenue by which these needs were met. When talking about a struggling kindergarten student, one leader recounted how when “his birthday came up, [they] made him a homemade cake, and brought it to his doorstep with a balloon bouquet, and we all did a Go Noodle dance together on Zoom from all the different places.” Needs for students extended beyond social connection as another participant discussed how the school began providing food support for families. “We were providing snacks, we were providing lunches. We ended up doing grocery boxes. . . . Every two weeks, we were trying to make sure that our families got food.” The need to provide food assistance was identified as a specific concern to act upon given the poor and low-income families served. These examples highlight how leaders’ responsibilities shifted to respond to this priority need.

Finally, the socio-emotional needs of teachers also became a focus as teachers had to adapt their practice while negotiating their own emotions and families. Discussing the toll of these responsibilities and challenges, one leader recalled how their “first grade teacher just didn’t come [to class]. . . . And I called the teacher and she answered and said, ‘I just, I like, cannot get out of bed.’ And so I went on [Zoom] and she joined in an hour.” Leaders responded to this challenge by finding ways to celebrate and support faculty. One leader supported their faculty through “lov[ing] them up [by] spoil[ing] teachers rotten.” Ultimately though, that same leader came to the conclusion that two rewards were most meaningful to support teachers; time and money.

Neither Exiled Nor Completely Secure

The liminality of the COVID-19 pandemic caused leaders to feel they were neither exiled nor completely secure (Söderlund & Borg, 2017) from their normal operations. One way this manifested itself was in the sense of connection with colleagues and students, and in how they adapted structures and processes to the unknown. Leaders discussed how they would see staff

in virtual meetings, but the lack of physical presence made those virtual meetings disconnected. Similarly, leaders discussed the challenges of distance learning and not being physically present with students. The primary solution was to adapt traditional methods to a digital space. For instance, several leaders talked about how they would have weekly distributions where packets were photocopied, and families would come pick them up to work on at home. Another discussed how one of the teachers “brought equipment home so the kids could see her face . . . and she was truly teaching her kids as if they were there in the classroom. She was talking to them. They could see the material, interact, [and] respond.” This shows how leaders tended to operate in a way that took the old process and adapted it to a digital format.

Similarly, relationships changed in the liminal space of the pandemic. Leaders noted how videoconferencing brought teachers and students together virtually into each other’s homes. This new degree of intimacy was not anticipated, but brought a closeness between individuals. One leader noted the questions of privacy this raised remarking “your privacy was going away, too, because here’s everyone welcomed into . . . my husband’s office. You know what I mean? Like, here is this piece of myself that’s not even private anymore.” Regardless, it did allow a new degree of connection between students and teachers, which was ultimately viewed positively as a means of supporting one another.

A final way that relationships changed was how leaders supported students and families in extraordinary ways. From supporting families with food or technology needs due to the lack of resources at home, leaders found themselves walking with their school families throughout the pandemic. Drive up food distribution events and drive up technology assistance highlighted some of the ways school leaders supported school families. When discussing how well equipped their school was to support this, one leader said “every student was on our caseload and we were hitting all the social, emotional, the basic needs, the physiological, hitting all of those and then figuring out ways in terms of fixes of how we would approach it.” This type of across the board help brought new meaning to the role of principal, and shifted the type of support that principals typically provided.

Collectively, the pandemic forced urban Catholic school leaders into a space in which traditional roles and responsibilities were abandoned with a clearer focus on meeting the immediate needs of students, staff, and families. It became evident that in order to manage the unknowns induced by liminality, a direct and clear focus provided a way to manage the multiple challenges faced by stakeholders.

Discussion

The three findings in the section above contain the results from our study of liminality’s impact on Catholic school leaders’ identity, purpose and practice, and organizational functioning. Together, these findings have surfaced two relevant themes for future inquiry.

Leader Identity/Purpose Shifts

The literature on liminality, crisis leadership, and organizational change suggests that individual identity, purpose, and professional practice are subject to substantial change and transformation when organizations face crisis and change. Ultimately, shifts in identity, purpose, and professional practice were not perceived as drastic, and any of those shifts were reductive rather than additive. The language used by leaders focused less on what was lost, and more on what was elevated or made of primary importance. Many references were made to the fact that problems that arose while schools navigated liminal spaces could be addressed by utilizing existing structures within schools, even if those structures were imperfect. These structures created a focus on strategic transformation for the work to be done and mitigated the drift into existential reflection of purpose. Furthermore, the strength and persistence of those structures helped leaders to externalize the problems that demanded responses. In particular, the coexistence of inter-school and intra-school collaboration and relational bonds became the sense-making spaces needed for leaders and teachers to frame and contextualize the issues that characterized the liminal space. Ultimately, it was the organizational network that buffered the leader against the chaos of the liminal moment.

One area for future inquiry surrounds the ways in which leaders can be supported by external entities such as diocesan leadership in crisis contexts. This study focused on the leaders' perceptions, but future research on diocesan support of leaders in crisis contexts would be helpful. Results from such inquiry could offer a better understanding of the ways that local leaders can be proactively supported through crisis events. Although it is hoped severe liminal moments such as the COVID-19 pandemic will not be seen again, various crises occur each year. Having a conscious, intentional, and stronger foundation to support leaders throughout such events would help leaders buffer such events.

Liminality and Organizational Complexity

For the Catholic school leaders in this study, the character and intensity of the pressures exerted by the pandemic shifted the focus of the work. The spirit of essentialism that marked the framing of problems, operating priorities, and strategic responses in the midst of the pandemic facilitated the existence of a paradox relating to organizational complexity: essentialism simultaneously simplified the focus of a school's operation on providing care for the person while creating new kinds of complexities because of the burden of assuming more socio-emotional care for children and adults. The paradox of simultaneous simplification and complexification was not limited to just the socio-emotional dimension. Leaders suggested this paradox extended to other aspects of the organization including curriculum and teachers.

It remains to be seen whether shifts in organizational operations as a result of the pandemic will persist in a post-crisis context, but future research on the implications of the simplification-complexification paradox would be warranted. Particularly, how do leaders bring forward

decision-making in such instances. We observed that leadership responses to framing the challenges and considerations of the crisis imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic consisted of simultaneously flattening the organizational hierarchy while a level of leadership agency and decisiveness became increasingly concentrated on the school leader. These leadership responses suggest that addressing organizational ambiguity in a crisis context is distinct from doing so in a non-crisis context. However, understanding the commonalities between crisis and non-crisis contexts could help with future leader preparation.

Limitations

The findings and themes presented in this paper provide notable insight as to how the concept of liminality manifests in schools, and how liminality and its related conceptual frames aid in interpreting and making sense of how extreme crises can shape and transform organizations. While the particular context and criteria for inclusion in this study afforded the opportunity to examine and analyze these issues in novel and compelling organizational environments, findings are limited in generalizability across all Catholic schools, non-public schools, or k-12 schools in the United States. Here, the variance in human and fiscal capital as well as the variance of policy environments that schools and school leaders are subject to may influence the extremity of individual shifts in identity, purpose, and professional practice and parallel shifts in organizational functioning and learning. Second, our interviews with school leaders generated rich descriptive data on the experience of Catholic school teachers, but the insights gained from this data did not directly include the voices and perspectives of Catholic school teachers. Further, participants only included female voices. Though not intentional in the research design, male perspectives could offer additional insights and perspectives to the understanding of the experience of liminality.

Concluding Thoughts

School leaders across the country faced an uncertain future as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded. No one could have foreseen that the complete upending of schools as we had come to know them would occur so rapidly. We hope that such a crisis does not befall the global community again, but the knowledge gleaned of not only how leaders responded in such environments, but the fact that they did so gives hope and certainty for future leadership that is resilient and adaptable.

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