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Equity, engagement, and health: school organisational issues and priorities during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has disrupted and posed great challenges for kindergarten-grade12 education systems. Initial studies on education and COVID-19 often focus on technology use, student learning, and school reopening plans. However, debates on the form of instruction become futile when stakeholders are unclear about what the competing values, issues, and priorities are. Using exploratory data analysis of a representative sample of US teachers and school leaders, this paper highlights key organisational issues and priorities in terms of addressing academic achievement gaps, students' online engagement, and teachers' and students' health. More fundamentally, deeper issues are uncovered like equity for those doubly disadvantaged by the pandemic, student engagement in the face of more pressing concerns, and health both physical and mental. More theoretically, the research contributes to understanding schools' responses to societal crises and the need to clarify competing values during decision-making in the face of such crises.

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COVID-19; school organisation; K-12 education; achievement gaps; student engagement

Introduction

In many parts of the world, the effects of the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) have been acutely felt in different aspects of society and people's lives: physical and mental health, economic activity, technological use, political action, and social interaction (Baker et al. 2020; Bartik et al. 2020; Bol et al. 2020; Pfefferbaum and North 2020; Rajkumar 2020). Initial studies in the educational sector have focused on how school closures and the transition to remote learning have led to issues and concerns regarding digital disparities due to differential access to technologies (Beaunoyer, Dupéré, and Guitton 2020), learning inequalities that can lead to increased rates of drop-outs, child labour, violence against children, and teen pregnancies (Armitage and Nellums 2020), and student engagement and mental health problems due to social isolation and disrupted school services (Golberstein, Wen, and Miller 2020). In many of these studies, the focus is on the individual outcomes and experiences that are slowly unfolding because of the pandemic.

In terms of school organisations, debates abound on when to open schools, whether to have in person or online instruction, what resources districts and schools should provide students and teachers, who should be prioritised with these resources, and how to prevent the spread of the disease while promoting education's crucial role in society (Burgess and Sievertsen 2020). Many school and district leaders are faced with the challenge of making decisions that will have repercussions not only for students but also for the communities their schools are in (Malkus, Christensen, and West 2020).

Although no easy answers are available, it is nonetheless important to understand what underlying values and issues are at play, and at times, are in competition with each other. By understanding how stakeholders make sense not only of competing options, but more fundamentally of *competing values*, educational organisations may clarify what issues need to be prioritised, given the predicament of a global health crisis. More broadly, the present research contributes to an understanding of the values, priorities, and needs as experienced by teachers and school leaders on the ground, and how such values are consequential for decision-making during times of crises.

Crisis, school organisations, and educators' experiences

The COVID-19 pandemic presents an interesting historical moment, something scholars now understand as a consequential societal crisis, especially for education (Lancker and Parolin 2020; Wodon 2020). Schools have time and again responded to different forms of crises: pandemics like the 2009 A(H1N1) influenza and the 2020 COVID-19 viruses (Wu et al. 2010; Cauchemez et al. 2014; Azevedo et al. 2020), economic recessions like the 2008 Great Recession and the Greek economic crisis (Goldhaber et al. 2016; Hatzichristou, Lianos, and Lampropoulou 2017), and wars like those in South Sudan, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and Syria, and the consequences for refugees and children (Sommers 2002; Tooley and Longfield 2017; McCarthy 2018). Often, the concern is for how schools can continue to serve its purpose of educating children, given the constraints forced upon by different crises.

The present research is situated in the literature on school organisational change and adaptation during a societal crisis. On the one hand, school organisational adaptations during crises are influenced by national and local policies and politics. For example, political dynamics and milieu were a constitutive part of how Turkish education authorities transacted the crisis with Syrian refugees (McCarthy 2018). Similarly, research has argued that political and school administrative actors capitalise on different crises in order to further their own political agendas, like neoliberal school reforms (Slater 2015). On the other hand, school changes in times of crises are also understood, made sense of, and transacted by teachers, school leaders, and other staff on the ground. For example, the seeming hegemony of the Hong Kong central government on education during the hand-over from the British to the Chinese government – which can itself be identified as a time of crisis – is met with complex political realities on the ground (Lau 2018). Similarly, during the Greek economic crisis, teachers were able to create a sense of stability for their schools through resilience and positive school climates (Botou et al. 2017; Hatzichristou, Lianos, and Lampropoulou 2017). In this view, therefore, school adaptations during times of crises are not limited to top-down policy mandates but are transacted, challenged, and ultimately implemented by agents on the ground.

A situation that closely resembles the 2020 pandemic is the 2009 influenza A(H1N1) pandemic that had also led to school closures around the world, with consequences on reducing human-to-human virus transmission (Wu et al. 2010); cancelling classes and school activities altogether (Uscher-Pines et al. 2018); incurring economic costs in terms of lost productivity, work absenteeism, and childcare costs (Sadique, Adams, and Edmunds 2008; Brown et al. 2011); and exacerbating academic and social inequalities for children from vulnerable populations (Berkman 2008; Cauchemez et al. 2009). In terms of organisational studies on school closures during the 2009 A(H1N1) pandemic, the focus was mainly on national and local actors that decide on the policy to close schools (Cauchemez et al. 2014). Similarly, recent research during the COVID-19 pandemic focus on national and state policies to close schools (Donohue and Miller 2020), and their impact on parents' experiences and struggles (Garbe et al. 2020), teachers' adaptation to online teaching (Kaden 2020; König, Jäger-Biela, and Glutsch 2020), and students' schooling and wellbeing outcomes (Azevedo et al. 2020; Hoffman and Miller 2020).

However, more than the centralised dynamics of policy and decision-making regarding school closures, it is equally important to understand how school staff enact such policies and how these 'street-level bureaucrats' are active agents whose priorities and concerns must be heard and addressed (Taylor 2007; Trinidad 2019). Although research on teachers' interaction with and within organisations has been extensive (Ingersoll 2001; Conley and Glasman 2008; Ball 2012), specific research on teachers during times of societal crises – such as recessions – tend to focus on financial, bargaining, and employment outcomes (Simpkins, Roza, and Simburg 2012; Goldhaber et al. 2016; Strunk and Marianno 2019). However, teaching does continue during times of crises, and the experience and priorities of educators on the ground need to be documented and theorised to understand how they make sense and function during a time of societal crisis. Learning about such grounded experience of school staff during a time of crisis will have *practical implications* for promoting dialogue between political/administrative decision-makers and educational implementers, and *theoretical implications* for understanding school organisational dynamics during a societal crisis.

Current research

In this paper, I highlight how kindergarten-grade12 (K-12) teachers and school leaders in the United States experienced COVID-19's impact and how they understood aspects of school organisations that need to be prioritised. Harnessing a representative sample of US educators who were surveyed as they transitioned to remote learning, this paper argues that three values have become most salient during this health crisis: equitable academic instruction, student engagement in a remote setting, and the health of students and staff. More fundamentally, these issues include *equity* for those who are doubly disadvantaged by the pandemic, not only those who lack access to technologies; *student engagement* that has been challenging because of the many other more pressing priorities, and not only because of the difficulty in the new mode of instruction; and *health* that takes into account a balance between people's physical and mental health.

The present research does not aim to explain the variations in these issues nor does it endeavour to show the outcomes of such issues; rather, this research is a descriptive study

that contributes to a general understanding of how the pandemic has been experienced across the population of US teachers and school leaders. It emphasises the need not only for causal or correlational studies but also for accurate descriptive exploratory analyses that help education stakeholders diagnose the problem and identify salient issues (Loeb et al. 2017). It uses survey results to understand educators' common concerns, and finds interconnections between data and research literature to suggest the deeper values at work during this time of crisis.

Although it may seem that the values are of almost equal importance with each other, certain policies will sometimes have two values competing with each other (e.g. How can we ensure student's mental health – often helped by social interactions – when students are not physically together so as to protect their physical health?). Given that these values can at times be in competition, the present paper emphasises the need for the careful consideration of all three values and other values that may come into play in K-12 schools. Thus, I suggest a perspective of how education stakeholders on the ground clarify these values and priorities, and how central administrative actors can be sensitive to these values – all in the context of a societal crisis such as a global health pandemic. From a broader theoretical perspective, this paper contributes to an understanding of values in the context of decision-making dynamics during a crisis of social import.

Methods

Data

Data came from the 2020 COVID-19 Response Survey 1 of the American Teacher Panel and American School Leader Panel, available through the data portal of the American Educator Panel (RAND American Educator Panel 2020). The RAND Corporation collected the data from April 27 to May 11, 2020 as many US school districts and schools transitioned to remote learning (Hamilton, Kaufman, and Diliberti 2020; Reich et al. 2020).

The 1,000 teachers and 957 school leaders included in the sample provided a nationally representative panel of K-12 teachers and school leaders. In the 2020 survey, they were asked about practices, needs, concerns, and priorities that arose because of COVID-19. Thus, the two surveys gave a snapshot of the practices and sentiments of US K-12 educators.

In certain items of the survey, some teachers and school leaders opted not to answer, which led to missing data of no more than 3 percent per item. Thus, I performed Little's test to ascertain if the variables were missing completely at random (MCAR). For the teachers' panel the test gave a χ^2 distance of 123.26 with d.f. 121 and a p -value of 0.30 while the school leaders' panel the test gave a χ^2 distance of 151.94 with d.f. 178 and a p -value of 0.92, indicating that the data for both panels were MCAR. In this case, no imputations were necessary to be performed.

Measures

For this research regarding school organisational issues and priorities during the 2020 global pandemic, I compared and contrasted teachers' and school leaders' responses to

questions concerning school priorities, access issues, and different forms of support needed.

From both the teachers' and school leaders' surveys, I obtained data regarding *school priorities* and *additional supports* from district and/or school leaders.

Regarding school priorities, the survey asked teachers and school leaders to identify the level of priority of different goals such as student health, academic and social-emotional curricula, and planning for future closures (1 = much lower priority, 5 = much higher priority). For simplicity, the original data were recoded to have three categories: Lower priority, Same level of priority, and Higher priority.

Regarding additional supports, the survey asked the participants to identify the amount of need for different resources from the district and/or school leaders regarding technology access for students and teachers, training, curriculum adaptation, and other forms of educator support (0 = no need, 5 = very major need). Similar to the previous variable, the data were recoded to have three categories: Minor to no need, Moderate need, and Major need.

In addition to these items asked for both teachers and school leaders, I also used an item asked only in the school leader panel regarding factors that limited the amount or type of distance learning materials provided to students. School leaders were asked to rate factors such as equitable instruction, with 1 as being not a limitation to 3 being a major limitation during the pandemic. The school leaders' responses were then recoded as dichotomous variables that take on the value of 1 if the school leader answered that the particular factor was a major limitation in providing distance learning materials to students.

Analysis

Exploratory data analyses were performed to show the distribution of teachers' and school leaders' answers on the level of priority, issue, and need of the factors identified. First, I investigated the distributions of teachers and school leaders' priorities and ranked them according to the percentage of teachers who thought the factor had become a higher priority because of COVID-19. Second, I explored school leaders' answers to the issues that limited remote instruction by ranking these factors and disaggregating the results by school types: minority-serving institutions (i.e. more than 50 percent of student population are Black and/or Hispanic), and large, medium, and small schools. Lastly, I compared and ranked the various resources that teachers and school leaders felt was a major need during this pandemic. All exploratory data analyses were done through the STATA/MP 14 software.

Results

Teachers and school leaders similarly ranked school organisational priorities with the top priorities being (1) planning for future school closure, (2) addressing academic achievement gaps, and (3) prioritising student health. [Table 1](#) shows that more than 60 percent of teachers and school leaders highlighted that these issues of planning, achievement gaps and health have become higher priorities because of the COVID-19 situation.

Similarly, more than 50 percent of teachers and school leaders shared the higher priority accorded to social-emotional learning interventions and practices that fostered student engagement. Related to this was the assertion that most teachers were prioritising or thinking about how they can create a sense of community among their students. Unfortunately, this variable was unavailable in the school leader survey.

Although fostering academic skills and having assessments for learning were lower on the list, many teachers and school leaders found that these were still of a similar priority as before the pandemic. However, close to 30 percent of school leaders felt that enacting new academic curricula and initiatives had become a lower priority during these times.

To understand how teachers and school leaders have arrived at these priorities, I investigated factors that limited remote instruction, and the largest issues were regarding equitable instruction and student access needs. [Table 2](#) highlights that close to 30 percent of school leaders found that providing equitable instruction for all students was a major limitation during the pandemic. When limited to schools that serve minority students, 35 percent of school leaders found that equitable instruction was a major limitation.

Second to issues of equity, another major issue that school leaders had to consider was students' access to internet and technology. More than 20 percent mentioned that this was a major concern and when disaggregated by the racial-ethnic population in their schools, 30 percent of school leaders in minority-serving institutions report these being major limitations.

Similarly, financial constraints and communication with families were seen as limitations more predominant in minority-serving institutions.

Given the limitations experienced when doing remote instruction, teachers and school leaders were asked about the additional supports they needed. [Table 3](#) illustrates that almost half of the teachers surveyed had a major need for tools, strategies and resources that helped facilitate student engagement and learning motivation remotely. In relation to this, around 30 percent of teachers and school leaders also found that they needed resources to address the loss of students' opportunities to engage in hands-on learning, such as laboratories, internships and other hands-on experiences inside the classroom (as mentioned in the surveys).

Table 1. Teachers' and School Leaders' Priorities During COVID-19.

	Teachers (n = 990)			School leaders (n = 932)		
	Lower priority	Same priority	Higher priority	Lower priority	Same priority	Higher priority
Planning for future school closure	3.54	10.81	85.66	2.25	12.98	84.76
Academic achievement gaps	4.04	26.39	69.57	4.51	27.68	67.81
Student health	1.62	29.70	68.69	1.50	34.44	64.06
Enacting social-emotional learning interventions	1.41	30.81	67.78	6.76	36.80	56.44
Student engagement	2.32	40.71	56.97	2.25	46.57	51.18
Supporting students' academic skills/ Enacting new academic curricula or initiatives	2.22	52.53	45.25	27.04	40.67	32.30
Interventions for student behaviour	9.70	56.67	33.64	10.96	57.14	31.90
Assessments for learning	7.37	53.94	38.69	16.20	55.15	28.65
Sense of community	1.82	40.61	57.58			

Note: The table provides the percentage of teachers and school leaders who said that the various concerns had a lower, similar, or higher priority because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 2. Issues that Limited Remote Instruction During Spring 2020.

	Overall	Minority-serving school	Non-minority serving school	<i>P</i> -value	Large	Medium	Small	<i>P</i> -value
Equitable instruction	32.13	35.80	28.22	0.012	32.69	34.31	29.37	0.343
Student Internet	23.54	34.78	11.59	<0.001	16.02	20.53	30.23	<0.001
Student technology	20.89	29.98	11.18	<0.001	15.29	18.18	26.55	0.002
Financial constraints	15.69	21.81	9.19	<0.001	14.10	14.46	17.23	0.502
Communication with family	10.71	14.40	6.78	<0.001	12.73	9.09	11.58	0.355
Teacher internet and technology	4.34	6.57	1.97	<0.001	1.91	4.16	5.36	0.201
Limitations on online tools	5.08	5.03	5.13	0.944	3.82	6.61	3.67	0.135
Collective bargaining	6.25	7.39	5.03	0.138	8.92	6.37	5.08	0.259
Privacy	4.03	4.32	3.72	0.639	8.33	3.43	3.11	0.015
<i>n</i>	943	457	486		157	407	354	

Note: The table presents the percentage of school leaders who felt that the particular issue (e.g. equitable instruction) limited the amount of distance learning materials the school was able to provide while the school building has been closed due to COVID-19. The table is disaggregated by the majority population in the school (i.e. whether the school's population is more than 50 percent Black, Hispanic, or Black and Hispanic) and by the size of the school.

Table 3. Teachers' and School Leaders' Instructional and School Needs during COVID-19.

	Teachers (n = 990)			School leaders (n = 939)		
	Minor to no need	Moderate need	Major need	Minor to no need	Moderate need	Major need
Student engagement	16.43	39.42	44.15			
Hands-on learning	26.46	45.14	28.38	20.13	47.92	31.95
Counselling	33.91	44.60	21.49	32.69	49.52	17.78
Social-emotional learning	28.23	51.11	20.67	27.05	49.73	23.22
Academic instruction/ curriculum adaptation	37.00	46.17	16.83	33.97	46.11	19.91
Teacher support	40.40	42.63	16.97	22.36	48.46	29.18
Access needs for teachers	64.31	19.96	15.73	60.77	29.32	9.91
Opportunities for networking	47.68	40.22	12.10	37.31	50.32	12.37
Access needs for students				38.55	39.19	22.26

Note: The table provides the percentage of teachers and school leaders who said that the various needs had become a minor, moderate, or major need because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interestingly, the other set of resources that teachers and school leaders felt they had a major need for were not so much academic as personal in the sense of tools and resources to enable counsellors and school psychologists to support students, and social-emotional learning strategies that can be used with students learning remotely.

Taken altogether, these results emphasise the dual need for addressing academic instruction (inclusive of equity issues of access and instruction) and personal social-emotional wellness (inclusive of counselling and engagement) in the context of prioritising student health and wellbeing.

Discussion and conclusions

Initial studies on COVID-19 and education have focused on how to address specific problems or issues of school closure, remote instruction, mental health concerns, and the negative impact for children, particularly those living in poverty (Lancker and Parolin 2020; Lee 2020; Masonbrink and Hurley 2020; Viner et al. 2020). Inasmuch as it is

important to address these individual issues swiftly, these issues are not independent of each other and they may at times come into conflict with one another. For example, students with mental health issues and special education needs use school routines and school social connections as important coping mechanisms (Frydenberg et al. 2009; Lee 2020). However, this solution for mental health difficulties come into conflict with the physical health need to socially distance and contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic (Courtemanche et al. 2020; Lewnard and Lo 2020).

Thus, the need is not only to look at how to address these discrete issues in education during a health crisis but also to have a holistic picture of how these issues are understood and prioritised by school staff, and how the issues are, at their core, legitimately competing values that need to be balanced and creatively addressed. An even more holistic picture *sees* these competing issues and values as embedded in school organisational dynamics of central administration and on-the-ground implementation, and *historicises* these issues in the context of how schools respond to societal crises.

In this research of a representative sample of US K-12 teachers and school leaders, three issues were on the school staff's highest priorities: *academic achievement gaps*, *student engagement*, and *physical and mental health*. During the COVID-19 pandemic, school organisations have been challenged to address these issues more holistically rather than discretely. A fundamental first step in this challenge of addressing organisational issues is the process of diagnosing and clarifying what are the competing values that lurk behind the problems and issues being raised.

The first concern is about *equity*. Given school closures due to social distancing guidelines, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the issue on academic achievement gaps, which more fundamentally is about equity and access (Berger et al. 2020). Students without means to technologies and without access to stable internet capabilities are disadvantaged when remote instruction means online instruction (Daniel 2020; Dorn et al. 2020). School districts and national education systems with limited financial resources will find it a challenge to move not only students but also teachers to online platforms (Atchison 2020). From the present research, around a quarter of the school leaders mentioned that student internet and technology access posed a major limitation to their remote instruction. This highlights how differential access to technology can be a source of inequity in instruction.

However, more than access to technology and internet, this issue is an issue of equitable instruction for all. Emphasised here are people who are doubly disadvantaged by the pandemic: students in minority-serving schools, low-income families where both parents (or single parents) have to work jobs or have lost their jobs, children with special needs or mental health issues, and youths who are at a greater risk of falling farther behind in academics (Berkman 2008; Armitage and Nellums 2020). The pandemic requires not only more technological resources to be available, but more directed academic and personal supports extended to those who feel the negative effects of the pandemic far more than the general population. The issue of equitable instruction is not limited to individuals adjusting to just another learning modality but encompasses the more consequential disruption to students' personal, social, and family lives.

A second common concern that arises because of the pandemic is about student *engagement*, with more than half of teachers and school leaders answering that this had become a higher priority during the pandemic, and half of the surveyed teachers

responding that they need more supports and resources to engage students during this shift in their instruction. With the limitations in personal physical interaction and the shift to a remote learning environment, students may find it easier to disengage and disconnect from both course and content (Azevedo et al. 2020; Linden and Gonzalez 2020). The issue of engagement thus becomes more pressing as the new remote mode of instruction could influence students feeling unengaged, distracted or disconnected (Dooley and Wickersham 2007).

However, more than the change in modality from in-person to online, the issue of student engagement is also about sustaining academic engagement when many other factors take precedence: economic uncertainties, physical health, social isolation, and personal tragedies of sickness and death. In a way, some educators may ask, 'How *can* we teach if so many students' concerns are more pressing, more urgent, and more legitimate?' Thus, engaging students is not merely about finding a way of enticing them with the new online modality, but more fundamentally, finding ways of justifying the continuation of instruction in the face of a global pandemic that has upturned people's everyday lives.

A third issue is about *health* as more than two-thirds of teachers and school leaders mentioned that this had become a higher priority in 2020 than in previous years. Given news about the virus' impact on bodily health, prioritising students' and educators' health in school decisions has become paramount. Schools' choice and decision to stop in-person classes were usually motivated by public health advice on preventing transmission by social distancing (Martin and Sorensen 2020). Likewise, schools' decisions to resume in-person classes will be significantly influenced by the health situation in states and localities.

However, more than these aspects of physical health, educators have also been concerned about the mental health repercussions of the pandemic (Racine et al. 2020). In this situation of limited social interaction and greater uncertainties, educators have voiced the higher priority needed for social-emotional learning strategies to help students weather the challenges of isolation, lack of structure, and other adverse conditions (Elmer, Mepham, and Stadtfeld 2020). Similarly, educators will need to also attend to their own mental health because of the greater demands of online instruction and the demands that can come from living with family or living alone (Roman 2020; Sahu 2020). As noted before, physical and mental health needs *may* compete with each other given the physical health need to socially distance and the mental health benefit of social closeness. Nonetheless, both are considered important and are necessary in organisational decisions.

In sum, crucial school organisational issues that were emphasised during this pandemic were regarding equitable instruction, student engagement, and people's physical and mental health. In each of these issues lie deeper values such as *equity* not only with technological access but also with resources for those doubly disadvantaged by the pandemic; *engagement* not only in the transition to remote instruction but also in the face of disruption to people's everyday lives; and *health* not only in terms of physical safety but also in terms of mental resilience and social bonds.

From a practical organisational perspective, this research highlights the need to balance the competing demands and values during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although different schools and districts will have their own unique challenges to face, this research

hopefully provides an initial vocabulary that can be used to highlight organisational issues and values that were experienced universally by all schools and that were unique to particular situations. Although differences in priorities may arise between central administration and school staff on the ground, the provision of this shared vocabulary of *equity*, *engagement*, and *health* can help stakeholders clarify why they are advocating for what they are advocating. This then has the potential of promoting dialogue in the often-tenuous relationship between centralised decision-makers and grounded implementers.

From a more abstract theoretical perspective, this research contributes to understanding school organisations during times of crises, and the role that values play in the decisions to be made during different crises. Many of the studies on schools during times of crises focus on the effects of these crises on student learning, teacher employment and other educational outcomes (Berkman 2008; Strunk and Marianno 2019; Azevedo et al. 2020). However, less understood and documented are the decision-making dynamics in response to crises, teachers' and school leaders' concerns with the consequences of these decisions, and the competing values inherent in these concerns. In this present research, I suggest the need to understand the perspectives of school staff on the ground during a societal crisis, and how this perspective-taking can happen through the study of the deeper values in what teachers and school leaders say they prioritise, need, and are concerned with.

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