The impact of COVID-19 on educational leadership in the 21st century

Dr. David Vázquez González
Assistant Professor, Leadership in Educational Organizations
Department of Graduate Studies
Faculty of Education
david.vazquez@upr.edu

Abstract

This article would like to provide some research-based tools to help educational leaders transform their educational community post pandemic. The objective is to help educational leaders enhance their leadership style through a critical reflection that will help them face the challenges of the 21st century. The goal is to empower educational leaders and their learning communities to impact students' academic and socioemotional learning in the archipelago.

Keywords: epistemology, transformational leadership, teacher leadership, multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), and social-emotional learning.

Introduction

During the beginning of this 21st century, leadership has played a leading role in the world. Research in leadership has increased dramatically around the world and this research exposes the different theoretical approaches that aim to explain the complexities of the leadership process (Northouse, 2021). This situation has created many controversies among researchers. Some researchers conceptualize leadership as a traitor behavior and other researchers see it as an information process or relational point of view (Northouse, 2021).

After many decades of dissonance, researchers agree that they cannot create a common definition of leadership because there are factors such as global influences and generational differences (Northouse, 2021). But according to Northouse, leadership is a process by which a person influences a group to achieve a goal. Leadership involves influence because it is interested in knowing how the leader affects his followers and the communication that occurs between the leader and the followers (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2017). The influence of the leader is exerted within a group context. Thus, leadership involves influencing a group of people who have a common purpose (Northouse, 2021).

The 21st century also saw the emergence of moral approaches where authentic and ethical leadership created much interest. This moral approach gained momentum during the presidencies of many populists and corrupt politicians around the world. According to Northouse (2021), there are two lines of thought about the relationship between leadership and morality: (1) leadership is a neutral process that is not guided or dependent on a system and values to advance the common good; and (2) leadership is a moral process that is guided by and dependent on a value system to promote the common good.

Kouzes and Posner (2017) proposed a leadership model that contains the following five fundamental practices:

(1) Model the path – the leader must be clear about their educational values and philosophies.

(2) Inspire a committed vision – the leader must be willing to challenge the status quo and walk into an unknown future.

(3) Enable followers to act – the leader creates an environment that promotes communication and helps followers feel fulfilled with their contributions.

(4) Inspire from the heart – the leader uses celebrations and rituals to show his gratitude to continue inspiring his followers.

(5) Challenge the process – The leader is willing to change the "status quo" to innovate and lead their organization into the unknown.

It is vital that the educational leaders develop a theoretical framework on his/her educational philosophy and that includes the following: (1) educational vision and mission (2) educational philosophy; (3) purpose of education and (4) know the leadership style exercised. The educational leader must know his/her leadership style in addition to knowing other styles to be able to adapt his style depending on the complex situations he faces. Therefore, the leader must know a little about epistemology and different leadership styles to effectively exercise the dimensions of educational leadership (didactic, political, ethical, administrative, community, technological and strategic) in the post-pandemic era. Here are some evidence-based tools education leaders can use to transform their post-pandemic school community.

Educational Philosophy

Kouzes and Posner's model mentioned the importance of the leader's educational philosophy. According to Noddings (2016) epistemology is a branch of philosophy that evaluates questions about the theory of knowledge. Epistemology is an especially important branch of philosophy that addresses questions of the theory of knowledge. Noddings argues that every educator must know something about epistemology to understand the different debates within education, such as the debate on the perspective of constructivism. Constructivism can be defined as a philosophy, an epistemology, a cognitive position, or a pedagogical orientation. One of the premises of constructivism is that knowledge is constructed. These educational philosophical debates are of immense importance to help educational leaders reflect on their praxis and to make objective decisions.

Depending on the educator's philosophy, his/her stance will impact the education of all his students (Noddings, 2016). For this reason, it is especially important that the leader knows his/her educational philosophy and the purpose of education. The leader must know the different educational philosophies and their philosophers to have the flexibility required to understand different educational perspectives. Education leaders hear or use words like equality, equity, standards, standardized testing, and accountability, but Noddings (2016) argues that educators rarely stop to think about the meaning of these words and the implications they have on education. The great demand for accountability comes from the business world and politicians adapted it within the framework of education. Accountability ensures compliance, but it does not ensure good education.

According to Knight (2008), the study of educational philosophy helps educators to: (1) recognize the problems that exist in education; (2) evaluate different solutions to pressing problems; (3) develop critical thinking to set life and educational goals and (4) develop views that relate realistically within a global context. Epistemological assumptions related to the communication and transmission of knowledge from one person to another will impact teaching methodologies and the role of the teacher within the educational context. Educators must know their epistemological presuppositions before they can operate effectively within a classroom. Educators must accept and recognize that all educational practices are based on assumptions rooted in philosophy, and that different philosophical starting points can lead to different educational practices (Knight, 2008).

Interestingly, after this critical reflection on educational philosophy, the leader will be able to create an educational vision and mission. Noddings states that the experiences of the leader will impact how he exercises his leadership, so this retrospection is important to be able to know himself well as a human being and then as an educational leader. David Eagleman (2011) stated that how we think, determines what we see and how we respond to different situations. Therefore, this critical reflection will also help the educational leader to exercise different leadership styles to respond to different situations within their school community.

Adaptive Leadership

Since Heifertz's publication "Leadership without easy answers" (1994), adaptive leadership has occupied a unique place in the leadership literature. Northouse (2021) explains that adaptive leadership focuses on the adaptation that people need to respond to changing scenarios. Quite simply, adaptive leadership prepares and empowers people to face difficult changes. Northouse also posits that the adaptive leader does not exercise their power or authority, but through communication helps them adapt to new realities. The leader provides a space called a holding environment for followers. This waiting environment offers you the safe space to face the inevitable changes that affect your emotions, values, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors already established. The goal of adaptive leadership is to motivate people to change and learn new behaviors so that they can succeed and face challenges and at the same time grow during the process. Adaptive leadership is a unique style in that it focuses on the dynamics of mobilizing people to face change (Northouse, 2021).

Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership was identified in the literature review on transformational leadership, but was not articulated (Bass, 1990; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Burns, 1978; Howell & Avolio, 1993). Authentic leadership develops in people throughout life and can be initiated because of a tragic event such as suffering from an illness or even a job change. Avolio, Walimbwa, and Weber (2009) suggest that authentic leadership is composed of four distinct components: (1) self-awareness; (2) an internalized moral perspective; (3) balanced processing and (4) transparent relationships. The authentic leader can develop these four components during his life trajectory. Critical events are events that impact people's lives, therefore, impact the development of authentic leadership. Critical life events function as a catalyst for change. Also, these critical events stimulate growth and make the leader stronger and more resilient.

Bill George (2003) presented a model for authentic leadership. In the model, authentic leaders demonstrate five basic behaviors: (1) they have a strong sense of purpose; (2) they do the right thing based on their values; (3) establish strong relationships with others; (4) demonstrate great discipline and act in accordance with their values; (5) They are sensitive and empathetic to the situations of others. Also, George identified five dimensions of authentic leadership (1) purpose, (2) values, (3) relationships, (4) self-discipline and (5) heart. These five dimensions of leadership are associated with five related characteristics: (1) passion (purpose), (2) behavior (values), (3) connection (human relationships), (4) consistency (self-discipline), and (5) compassion (heart). These dimensions and related characteristics are the conceptual framework of authentic leadership (George & Sims, 2007).

Inclusive Leadership

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

Brewer (1991) linked inclusion to optimal distinctiveness theory. According to this theory, individuals strive to balance their basic human needs to be part of larger social groups without losing their distinctive self-concept. Northouse (2021) explains that people want to belong, feel accepted and connected to others, but not to the extent that they lose their sense of themselves as unique individuals. Inclusion means feeling like a full member of a group, but at the same time maintaining your own sense of self. The educational leader has an obligation to create a healthy environment where people feel they belong in the school community. According to Ferdman (2014) the values, processes and decisions of leaders influence the experiences that members have within groups in organizations and studies show that leaders are essential to facilitate inclusion.

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

Servant Leadership

On the other hand, Robert Greenleaf developed a paradoxical approach model called the servant leadership which is based on Herman Hesse's (1956) novel "The Journey to the East". Servant leadership emphasizes its commitment to serving the needs of followers through empathy, nurturing, and strengthening them. Servant leaders are ethical and exercise their leadership for the common good of the organization and the community they serve. The servant leader first serves the interests of followers before his own and his emphasis is on developing his followers. The servant leader's priorities are to listen to their followers and develop strong, long-term relationships with them. Servant leadership succeeds when leaders are humanistic and altruistic with a genuine vocation to help and serve others.

Symbolic Leadership

In addition, the leader also must create symbolism within the work environment that inspires his followers. A symbolic leader aspires to offer hope through interpretations of personal and professional experiences to inspire and motivate their followers within their organizations. According to Bolman & Deal (2014), a symbolic leader can interpret the experiences of the organization through persuasive communication of a positive picture of the future. The leader can achieve this by developing a vision that faces the challenges of the present and the desires and values of the followers. The leader shares this vision using history, poetry, passion, and courage. Symbolic leaders infuse magic into their organizations through the artistic approach to history, shared values, heroes, rituals, ceremonies that embody the values and spirit of the group. The purpose of the leader is to use these rituals and ceremonies to inspire and motivate all followers. This is a way to make magic in organizations. Symbols help form a healthy organizational culture and share how things work or are done in the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2014).

Situational Leadership

In 1969, Blanchard and Hersey developed situational leadership theory in their classic book "Management of Organizational Behavior." At first, the theory was called Life Cycle Leadership, but in the 70s it was changed to situational leadership theory. This leadership style tends to choose between managerial behaviors or supportive behaviors. The premise of this leadership theory is that different situations will demand different leadership styles. Effective leadership requires people to adapt their leadership style to address different situations. Leadership is flexible and adapts to existing work situations and organizational needs. Situational leadership does not focus on the specific skills that the leader has, but on how the leader can modify his style to address the situations faced by the organization (Northouse, 2021).

Transformative leadership

Transformational leadership emerges based on the classic work of political sociologist James MacGregor Burns entitled Leadership (1978). Transformational leadership is a process that changes and transforms people. This style takes into consideration emotions, values, standards, and long-term goals. It also includes diagnosing motives, followers' needs, and treating followers as human beings (Northouse, 2021). Transformational leadership includes elements of charismatic leadership and visionary leadership. A charismatic leader in essence is a great communicator who is very eloquent and knows how to communicate very deeply and on a very emotional level. These leaders can articulate a very captivating vision that creates extraordinarily strong emotions in their followers. A visionary leader mobilizes his followers toward a common goal. This style is distinguished by its persuasion, charisma and has an extremely high emotional intelligence. These visionary leaders also articulate a vision of the future and build the path for others to achieve (Northouse, 2021).

For example, depending on the situation presented by the organization, a transformational leader may come to an organization to motivate followers and develop them as leaders. A charismatic leader can go to an organization to inspire and create a lot of excitement around the organization's vision and mission. The visionary leader can reach out to the organization to promote innovation and cultivate a new direction for the organization (Northouse, 2021).

Tragically, we must recognize that there are also transformational leaders who only seek to satisfy their own interests. To these leaders, in 1998 Bass, created the term pseudo-transformational leadership that refers to leaders who are focused on exploitation, abuse of power and the leader uses moral values to disguise his interests before his followers (Bass & Riggio, 2006). But the true transformational leader motivates followers to do more than expected and cares about helping all his followers to fully develop (Avolio, 1999).

Teaching Academic and Social-Emotional Skills

The literature shows that academic skills not only determine academic achievement, but also that social-emotional health is part of that academic achievement (Algozzine, Wang, & Violette, 2011). More importantly, social-emotional learning aims to understand culture, empower community, and solve collaborative problems that can change school climate, improve communication, and reduce inequities (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Borowski, 2018).

A Multi-Level Support System (MTSS) is a theoretical framework used to maximize the success of all students with academic, behavioral (discipline), and social-emotional skills. MTSS is a comprehensive process for organizing and differentiating instruction to help all students. The model uses test results to diagnose students' needs and prescribe interventions. According to Batsche et al. (2005), MTSS seeks to improve outcomes for all students by using assessments to assess academic achievement and behavioral performance to identify students who are not making progress and implement early interventions to address students' individual academic needs.

This author describes MTSS as a coherent continuous line that uses evidence-based practices to address the recovery of students' specific academic skills. MTSS includes academics, behavior (discipline), and social-emotional skills. The first level of MTSS is the universal level, where all students receive core instruction. Level two increases support and students receive intense intervention in a small group with a focus on reinforcing skills. The third level implements an intense one-to-one intervention for a minimum of 20 minutes and a maximum of 1 hour.

The multi-level support system is not a particular "curriculum," it is a proactive approach that includes several essential elements:

1. Use diagnostic tests to identify the needs of all students.
2. Create integrated plans aimed at students' academic, behavioral, social, and emotional needs.

3.   Implements specific evidence-based strategies to address lag.
4.   Continuously monitor interventions so that adjustments can be made based on students' weekly results.
5.   Implement a holistic approach to address students' academic and social-emotional needs. Teachers, counselors, psychologists, social workers, and other specialists work as a team when evaluating students and planning academic and social-emotional interventions.
6.   Implement ongoing professional development so that school community staff can provide interventions and track progress faithfully and efficiently.
7.   Include and inform families so they can support students at home.

Conclusion

The Department of Education of Puerto Rico (DE) has faced great challenges during the past years which have had a disastrous effect on the academic and socio-emotional achievement of the students of the archipelago. The DE continues with its bureaucracy under a transactional model that impacts the entire school community. The DE must be decentralized to empower learning school communities address their unique educational needs. Sadly, the academic gap of students continues to grow, and the consequences are dire with the increase in school dropout. The DE does not provide the necessary tools for school communities to effectively fight against school dropouts. The responsibility falls on educational leaders who in turn wait for the directives from the Secretary of Education. With this back-and-forth, the entire school community is affected and the "status quo" is maintained. The school leader wants to transform and innovate their school community, but the bureaucratic and politicized system of the DE keeps school communities from addressing their unique challenges. The school leader must exercise effective educational leadership to impact their school community.

It is of utmost importance that the educational leaders know the strengths and weaknesses of his/her leadership style to exercise effective leadership. The educational leader must know different leadership styles, so they can exercise leadership that impacts their school community. The educational leader must be astute and intelligent to know what leadership to exercise to succeed in different educational scenarios. In addition to this, the leader must be clear with his educational philosophies, behaviors, values, virtues, abilities, strengths, prejudices, and weaknesses.

Every education leader must recognize that the key to success lies in empowering their teachers. Especially the leading teachers at their school community. Collective effectiveness promotes high school performance. According to Bandura (1993), leading teachers who believe in their "self-effective" didactic ability contribute significantly to increasing students' academic achievement. Bandura (1977) defines self-efficacy as one's belief and ability to organize and execute the actions necessary to produce desired results. In another study by Ross and Bruce (2007), they found that highly effective teachers persisted and demonstrated more commitment to addressing academic gaps. This study determined that teachers with a high sense of effectiveness have positive attitudes towards lagging students and develop effective human relationships while creating high-achieving goals with their students.

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

Principals play a critical role in developing and supporting teacher leaders. According to Acker-Hocevar and Touchton (1999) they found that schools with greater participation of leading teachers were led by educational leaders who were willing to share their authority and delegate their control. These researchers also found that education leaders respected and trusted their teachers to create a culture of collaboration. Moller (2001) argued that these cultures of trust and respect empower leading teachers to continue developing and creating goals with the educational leader to transform the school community.

The 21st century began with complex and challenging challenges for Puerto Rico's education. At this point it is not important to conceptualize leadership as a trait or behavior or as a relational process. The art of exercising leadership is changing and leaders must adapt based on the situations they are facing. The educational leader should aspire to see the world through multiple lenses and perspectives where partisan politics and religious ideologies do not negatively impact their inclusive leadership style. For the leader to succeed in this educational management, the leader must exercise inclusive leadership to motivate and inspire all teachers and develop those teacher leaders to exert their influence for the benefit of the school community. This educational leader must have a vocation for service and the behaviors and characteristics necessary to transform their school community by exercising effective educational leadership. These educational leaders must be prepared to create healthy spaces where the school community can have dialogues that aspire to understand the purpose of education in these challenging times. At this historical juncture, the leader also must help teachers make continuous critical reflections to further develop their emotional and academic intelligence.

School leaders' goal must be to educate and address the academic gaps and socio-emotional skills of all students. The leader can succeed if he/she manages to empower all his teachers through rituals and ceremonies that motivate and inspire the entire school community. At the same time, the leader can implement a multilevel support system to address the academic and socio-emotional gaps of all students in the archipelago. In the aftermath of hurricanes and the global pandemic, the focus should be on attending to students' social and emotional learning. It is of utmost importance that students learn and apply prosocial behaviors that promote social awareness and responsible decision-making. More importantly, education must aspire to develop the critical thinking of all students through a relevant and motivating curriculum. It is vital that the role of the teacher is to transmit knowledge and provide examples of the ethical ideal we aspire to in our nation. Teachers are examples that students should follow in both their intellectual and social lives. Indisputably, teachers create change, promote social justice, and can transform our nation's schools. Finally, the Department of Education of Puerto Rico must aspire to offer a liberating cosmopolitan critical education. A transformative education that empowers students to become global citizens through local and global activism to build a better world.

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BIODATA

I have been in the field of education for over 30 years. I hold PA certifications in the following areas: (1) ESOL K-12 Program Specialist; (2) Secondary and Elementary School Principal; and (3) PA Letter of Eligibility for Superintendent.   I have an extensive professional background in leadership, assessment, innovation, and providing quality equitable education for all students.