DISTRICT LEADERS' SUPPORT FOR CARING SCHOOLS: A NORMATIVE INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH

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POLICY CONTEXTS

- Some evidence that ESSA has opened the door to broader conceptions of school quality (Blad 2016; Slack 2012).

- States and districts have adopted use of social-emotional learning (Dusenbury et al., 2018), reducing exclusionary discipline (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017), and multiple measures more generally (Allbright & Marsh, 2020) in assessing school quality

- At the same time, there is evidence that that these new emphases have been absorbed into existing routines and paradigms (Allbright & Marsh, 2020)

CARING LEADERSHIP FOR CARING ORGANIZATIONS(PT. 1)

Caring is an intersubjective way of being in relation (never a one-way street) (Noddings, 2012)

Caring is often "taken for granted" in education, though many (most?) students don't experience school as a site of caring (Weissbourd & Jones, 2014)

Care is not generic, but culturally and contextually grounded (Valenzuela, 1999; Curry, 2016)

Caring in organizational settings is different than care in families because it implicates purpose (are the aims of care appropriate) and politics (is "care" being forced upon someone) (Tronto, 2010)

Caring School Leadership Involves (Smylie, Murphy, & Louis, 2016)

- Leader Caring (Relational Care)
- Cultivating Caring Communities (Organizational Conditions and Capacity to Care)
- Developing Caring Contexts Beyond School

Caring leadership has been shown to facilitate trust and organizational learning

My own work has investigated:

- How do caring leaders navigate organizational politics/contests about care (Walls, 2020)
- How do leaders and teachers work to balance intention to care with performative pressures (Walls, 2020)

But work on caring leadership has focused primarily on schools despite obvious intersections with district/system leadership

SUPERINTENDENTS AND DISTRICT OFFICES

Teacher/Scholar

Manager

Democratic Leader

Applied Social Scientist

Communicator

Post NCLB, an emphasis on reorganizing district central offices to support learning (Honig, 2006; Honig & Copland, 2008)

Bjork et al., 2014

AN INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

- Schools are Institutions. They, "operate based on a set of beliefs, practices and structures that are long-held, value-laden and widely accepted as appropriate even when they may no longer accomplish desired functions or outcomes" (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2018)

- From an institutional perspective, much of what happens in schools is grounded not in utility maximization, but in legitimacy. Three sources of legitimacy (Scott, 2008):
  o A regulative pillar (laws, rules, policies)
  o A **normative** pillar (social rewards and social sanctions)
  o The cultural/cognitive pillar (schema and taken-for-granted scripts)

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WHY A NORMATIVE APPROACH?

A *Logic of Appropriateness* vs. a *Logic of Consequence*

- In a logic of appropriateness, actions "matched to situations by means of rules organized into identities." (March, 1994, p. 57)
- "When decision makers follow a logic of appropriateness, they fit a situation to a particular identity. These decision makers will not ask, 'What is most efficient in this situation?' and choose that approach. Rather, they will ask, 'Who am I in this situation?' and 'What behaviors are appropriate to that identity in this particular situation?' and make their choices based on answers to those questions." (Honig, 2006, p. 362).

Caring as a social and relational phenomena

- On the one hand, caring is highly attuned to social rewards and sanctions
- On the other hand, caring leadership demands authenticity and particularlity

A regional cluster of districts who see each other as models

RESEARCH DESIGN

- Data collected from Superintendents, Assistant/Associate Superintendents, and Directors of Student/Special Services in 14 districts.

- Semi-structured interview of Superintendent in every case, along with an ask ("who else should I talk to among the district leadership team"?)

- In some districts, only superintendent, in others up to four personnel. 27 total interviews.

- Districts quite different:
  - From ~30,000 students to ~150
  - From ~60% FRP qualification to ~20%
  - From ~35% students of color to ~8%

- 14 men and 13 women, BUT, all superintendents save one were men

- Supported by an AERA Educational Research Service Grant, so, all in Pacific Northwest

TWO BROAD QUESTIONS

1

How do district leaders describe caring and supportive schools?

2

How do district leaders support caring and supportive schools?

DATA ANALYSIS (IN PROGRESS!)

Wrote brief summaries detailing themes in each interview (Corbin & Strauss, 2014)

- Inductive codes generated based on summaries
- Deductive codes generated from literature on
  - Caring Leadership (esp. relational caring and organizational capacity)
  - Superintendent and district office roles and practices

Currently in the process of identifying and categorizing described supports

- Striving to categorize deductively as logic of appropriateness, logic of consequence, or ambiguous

Final stage (not started) is comparison across districts and by role

- Matrices and analytic memos

CARING AS NATURAL

- Leaders described that caring is the natural state of schools, and what school adults naturally do:

  "It's about just that natural care and concern, and relationships, and positive adult relationships, and all those types of things. Sometimes we make it too complex in my opinion. As a teacher, it was just those things that you do naturally like you're going to build rapport with kids, you're going to support them, you're going to care for them, you're going to know what their situation is." (Superintendent)

- One upshot of this is that care is often about removal of obstacles:

  "Sometimes it's about helping to remove barriers, so kids can be successful is. That's what the caring really is… A barrier sometimes is the academic press that we think we need to have all the time… I've started to be way more outspoken about state testing. Sometimes you have to have somebody like me who can say, " Hey, wait. Let's take that off people's plates." There's no reason to do that." (Asst. Superintendent)

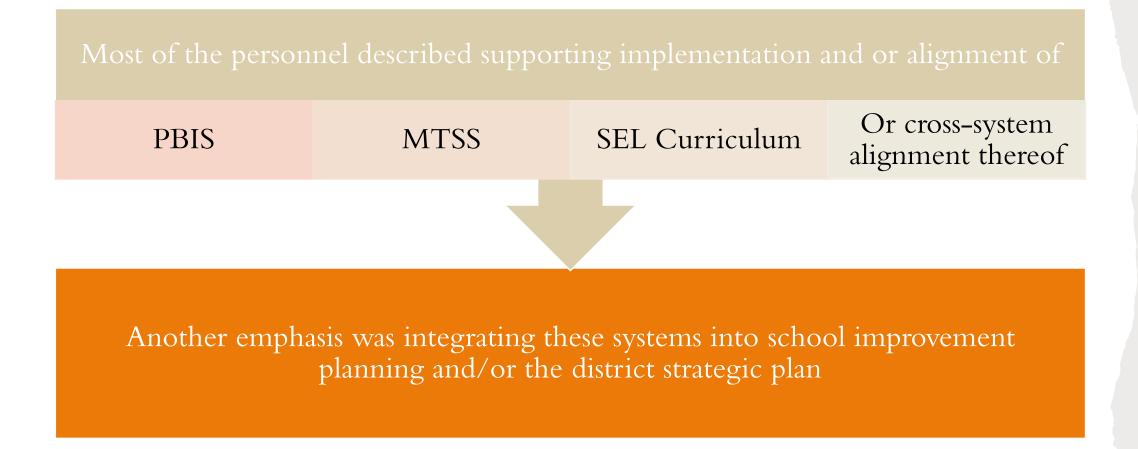# CARING AS AFFECTIVE

By far, the most common descriptions involved:

- Smiles
- High level of interaction
- High Adult visibility and warm/welcoming interactions
- Student work on walls and in common spaces

The theme is a sociable, pro-social affect

Less consensus on learning environments:

- "What looks like chaos in the classrooms"
- v.
- "Kids like structure" and "the school should feel calm"

SYSTEMS IMPLEMENTATION

Most of the personnel described supporting implementation and or alignment of

| PBIS | MTSS | SEL Curriculum | Or cross-system alignment thereof |

Another emphasis was integrating these systems into school improvement planning and/or the district strategic plan

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CAPACITY BUILDING

- "I think in professional development, one of the things that my job is to lead and guide our principals, or our TOSA's in providing that professional development for teachers…We've also spent a lot of time on training staff on social and emotional learning, on how to take care of themselves, how to build relationships with kids, how to identify their own triggers. It's really about building that toolkit for teachers, for themselves, so that they can be the best person they can be in front of those kids. I think, that's part of my role as far as professional development goes." (Student Services Director)

- Trauma-Informed (ACES) and Discipline systems (Sound Discipline) were most common

- Emphasis on getting educators "tools" or on "changing beliefs"

REMOVING BARRIERS/PROVIDING AUTONOMY

- "I provide a lot of autonomy to our principals…I would say that my role, I believe, is to remove barriers for administrators so that they can in turn remove barriers for staff and then remove barriers for kids. It's all about support and customer service. What can we do to better support you so that you can do your job? That inevitably comes down to the kid level." (Superintendent)

- "I've thought about that question asked in various ways a lot. From a central office and from where I sit, so often, I have found that it boils down to one thing. That's removing barriers. There are so many things that educators are being asked to do, so many things our schools are being asked to do and oftentimes people feel like there's layers of bureaucracy, there's layers of things that are in their way to doing that. I want for people to feel like they are freed up to do what we talked about in the previous question, build relationships and engage with kids. If, as a central office, you can remove barriers to them doing that work, make the operational elements of their work really easy so they can get to the relational elements of their work." (Superintendent)

RELATIONAL MODELLING AND SUPPORT FOR ADULTS

Most described district leadership modelling caring for administrators as a model for staff

Two said, "place your own mask over you face before assisting others".

Another superintendent notesd "if the adults aren't happy, the kids aren't cared for"

For some, this involved understanding what to be tight on, but also what to be loose on (i.e., ending PD early after a hard week)

For others, simply emphasizing importance of relationships (i.e., ending professional development instructing people, "email three people here and tell them what you appreciate about them."

PERSONNEL

- "That's back to the question you asked about, how do we support buildings…. Oftentimes in schools, it's additional bodies, it's hiring more people. In most schools, you're going to find it anywhere from probably at the very least 75% up to 85% of our cost, of our entire budget, is people. That's important because obviously, those are people that are making this work real for kids. Those MTSS structures can be resources… but the real resources are the right people in the right place." (Superintendent)

- Varied emphases in support personnel, including:
  - Counselors
  - Mental Health Therapists
  - Academic Support Specialists
  - "Care Coaches"
  - Restorative Discipline Specialists
  - Hiring an Assistant Director of Teacher and Learning to focus on SEL
  - Additional Dedicated staffing for Student Services (i.e., McKinney-Vento)

IDENTIFYING GAPS & PROBLEM SOLVING

Over half of the participants said that finding gaps in current supports and figuring out how to address them was a way that they supported caring schools

Examples included:

- Counselor affinity groups for students with particular challenges (i.e., going through divorce, lack of friendships)
- Partnerships to bolster family engagement and meet community needs (e.g., with health clinics and Boys & Girls clubs)
- Better supporting youth experiencing homelessness
- Finding ways to support average performing but disconnected students

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION (PT. 1)

- One concern with an affective and "natural" view of caring is who it might leave out
  - Caring is not "one size fits all," and what seems "naturally" caring to one person may not be so to another
  - Furthermore, care and affect are not necessarily tied
    - For example, care may manifest as righteous anger when an individual, family, or community faces injustice (Wilson, 2015)

- Fewer than half of interviews mentioned equity. Those that did mentioned mostly in the context of either beginning work, or as a new emphasis

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION (PT. 2)

- Two broad strategies (**Systems Implementation** & **Professional Development)** seem driven by a logic of appropriateness.

   Certainly, regulative institutionalism is at work.

   But… many districts adopt the same (regional) programs and approach support in similar ways. Emphasis on smoothly appending to school functions (i.e., **barrier removal**)

- **Relational Modelling** seems "in-between". Often was tied to Covid-19.

- **Personnel** & **Bespoke problem-solving** seem driven by a logic of consequence.

   Lots of variation in emphasis and varying theories of how this would impact schooling

   Raises questions: if this is where district leaders apply the most discretion and creativity, what of the other areas?

OTHER ONGOING STUDIES

Moral Distress (when one knows what the "right thing to do" is, but is prevented from doing so).

Rural superintendent response to the pandemic and critical rural leadership of place

THANK YOU! AND, QUESTIONS?