Teachers' Perceptions of Principals' Supportive Behavior during COVID-19

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Abstract

After the sudden shutdown of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were faced with providing online instruction for students. Some schools conducted teacher professional development and provided electronic devices to the students, while other districts lacked that capability. According to one study, schools that offered online learning during the pandemic provided a stable environment that reduced stress and uncertainty.

Although there is a dearth of research about how to manage such a crisis, some parallels can be drawn from available information and applied to the current pandemic. The purpose of the present study was to determine what professional development and support were provided and how that impacted teachers' instructional delivery during the shutdown.

In the present mixed methods study, public school teachers completed a Likert survey with an option for an open-ended comment after each question regarding teachers' perceptions of professional support from administration and perceptions of their own professional practice. Mean responses are displayed as descriptive statistics and sorted by geographic regions.

One implication from the findings is that teachers need professional development for online instruction and time to adapt to it.

Keywords: coronavirus, distance instruction, principal support of teachers, school shutdown

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Louisiana Teachers' Perceptions of Principals' Supportive Behavior during COVID-19

1. Introduction

Immediately after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, information was plentiful, inconsistent, and dramatic. Schools were shut down one state at a time until almost all schools were closed in an effort to stop the spread of the virus and to allow the medical community to prepare for the onslaught of cases that would inundate many hospitals. Most schools did not resume face-to-face classes for the rest of the 2019-20 school year.

In order to keep instruction going for students, schools were faced with providing online distance instruction for their students. Policies were developed quickly for school systems to provide online learning opportunities that had to address student access to technology, nutrition, and special education services (DistrictAdministration Staff, 2020). Some schools hosted teacher training sessions and sent electronic devices home with students (District Administration Staff, 2020). District leaders made decisions quickly and communicated frequently with the public to manage the transitions during the pandemic (District Administration Staff, 2020). Schools in a Pennsylvania district made the transition smoothly because they were already using virtual learning with their students and teachers had already been trained. Even with this preparation, the district had to shift to an all virtual instruction setting and recognized the need for a better line of communication with parents and preparation for younger students using electronic classroom formats (Hogan, K.,2020). Some districts had much lower technological instructional capabilities.

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One Oregon district, for instance, set up drop off meeting areas for parents to come get their weekly printed packets of student work because more than 40 percent of families did not have access to electronic devices or the internet or both (Hogan, J., 2020). Schools that were able to offer distance instruction during the time of pandemic crisis helped to provide a stable environment that reduced stress and uncertainty according to a study recently conducted in the Ukraine (Dushkevych et al., 2020).

One issue highlighted by the pandemic was educational inequity. Student access to the technology required for distance learning varied from district to district and school to school based on poverty. Only 59 percent of districts represented in a nationwide study had one device for each student. Even if students had devices, many students lacked internet accessibility. Student truancy was higher in districts with high poverty at 28 percent compared to 11 percent in low poverty districts (Herold & Kurtz, 2020). A recent study of students using distance learning because of the pandemic was recently conducted in the Ukraine and showed that 44 percent of them were comfortable or quite comfortable using a distance platform. However, problems with technology were cited as a frustration for the students, and 65 percent of them had poor internet connection (Dushkevych et al., 2020).

2. Statement of the Problem

School leaders, teachers, students, and parents were in uncertain times. A pandemic of this scope had not happened in a century so little research exists about how to manage the crisis for schools, teachers, and students. As districts pivoted to offer distance learning, there were many questions which still remain for consideration by policy makers and school leaders including the following: have teachers been adequately trained to provide the distance instruction effectively, are they receiving ongoing support, and do they feel prepared to manage distance instruction on a daily basis? Little research exists about school leadership responses in natural disasters (Fletcher & Nicholas, 2015); however, some parallels can be developed from the information that is available and then applied to the current pandemic in an attempt to answer these questions.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Distance Instruction

Some teachers were experienced in distance instruction, so the shift from face-to-face instruction had already been made; some of them saw benefits of distance instruction. Results of a study of teacher perceptions of online instruction found that 86 percent of teachers liked the format for students, and 72 percent thought that students had improved academic performance (Marteney & Bernadowski, 2016). The study also found that 83 percent of teachers agreed that students had increased motivation while 81 percent said students received more individual feedback with online instruction. Furthermore, 53 percent agreed that providing student accommodations for students with 504 plans or an Individualized Education Program (IEP) was more easily accomplished in a distance learning format than in a face-to-face format. Special education teachers were surveyed in another 2016 study about a specific program for students struggling with social skills (Nussli & Oh, 2016). Concerns were expressed about students finding inappropriate material online or becoming distracted from their learning as well as the possible lack of technology for all students. Teachers recognized that the program worked better for some participants than others.

Nonetheless, other teachers have been forced to learn how to provide distance instruction all at once. Teachers were learning that being flexible with student schedules, providing practice with different technologies, implementing a variety of instructional tools, and focusing on student engagement are important (Maynard, 2020). A study of teacher perceptions of their instruction showed that, by the end of the school year, 87 percent of teachers were spending more time "troubleshooting problems with technology" and 71 percent were spending less time on student instruction (Herold & Kurtz, 2020). Interestingly, teachers reported that live video conferencing was the most effective method of instructional delivery for math and English Language Arts.

3.2. Time to Learn

While making a quick shift to a new curriculum or instructional strategy is challenging for teachers, completely changing from a face-to-face instructional delivery to an online distance learning format is especially challenging. Results of several studies indicated that teachers benefitted from distance instruction professional development when it was presented over time and that they needed time to become immersed with the practice (An, 2018; Gaudelli & Taylor, 2011; Martin et al., 2019).One study of the use of video games as an instructional strategy found that teachers believed that the game strategies were useful after traditional instruction had taken place and that they had more favorable perceptions at the end of the study.

This shift led the researchers to conclude that teachers need time to become comfortable with the prescribed strategies before they would use it in their classes. Even younger teachers (under 30) in the class were reluctant to have a favorable opinion about the new strategy and held very traditional views of instruction (Gaudelli & Taylor, 2011).

A similar study about using video games and video game design showed that professional development had a statistically significant positive impact on participants' perceptions, attitudes, and self-efficacy regarding the use of digital games in instruction (An, 2018). Results of a perception study of online instructors examined the gap between having knowledge and skills about the task and the perceived readiness to do the task (Martin et al., 2019). Several findings from the study included the following: (1) giving prompt feedback, allotting adequate time for course development prior to the course, and knowing how to manage the learning management system (LMS) were important; (2) all online instructors thought they had adequate skills in each of the competencies. However, most instructors had to figure out how to do the distance instruction on their own and developed confidence as they taught with that platform over time. Instructors with less than five years' experience in online instruction had lower perceptions of their ability.

A study of special education teachers (Nussli & Oh, 2016) found that teachers who had better competencies with the technology rated the program more favorably. After participating in the study, teachers were much more open to trying the program with their students.

A review of course development for an online instruction course at a rural university found that the participants had few prerequisite skills to complete the requirements for the course (Shepherd et al., 2016). The purpose of the course was to give instructors the opportunity to acquire the requisite skills to conduct online courses, a growing need in that rural state. Course instructors and designers saw that the participants required more skills and foundational knowledge than the stand-alone course provided. To fill that gap in teacher preparedness, the university developed a full certificate program for online instruction consisting of three courses: Introduction to Instructional Design, Technology and Distance Education, and Communication in Distance Education.

3.3 Principal Leadership

Professional development and time are needed for teachers to feel comfortable managing and, in some cases, attempting distance instruction. Teachers also need support from their principal to learn and apply new skills. A Turkish study (Gulcan, 2012) about principal instructional leadership found that 64 percent of teachers thought that their principals supported their development. Principal support for teachers helps them to increase teacher collective efficacy, the belief that they, as the faculty of a school, can manage the tasks required of them. Likewise, principals' instructional leadership behaviors have a positive and significant effect on teachers' self-efficacy because principal support can build teacher self-efficacy, which can lead to teacher collective efficacy (Calik et al., 2012). In other words, the encouragement of the principal can help individual teachers and teachers as a whole to have the confidence needed to attempt online instruction.

Distance learning is new for many educators due to lack of access to relevant course work or professional development; however, teachers develop a favorable view of various technologies as they have time to experience and apply them. Principal encouragementcan help teachers develop the confidence they need to accomplish the task of delivering distance instruction.

3.4 Principal Leadership duringCrises

What do teachers need when schools are impacted by disasters? An interview study focusing on principals' perception of their role in the aftermath of Christchurch earthquakes provides helpful information about principal practices in a disaster (Fletcher & Nicholas, 2016). Immediately after the earthquake, principals had to look at new strategies to solve problems because of the sheer magnitude of them. For instance, because principals recognized the importance of communication with students, teachers, and parents, they set up phone chains, updated the website regularly, sent text messages, and began using social media. Schools became a hub for distributing food and water in poor communities. Principals were anxious to get schools open for the community, and they used a leadership style of caring for the community and for their teachers' well-being.

In the case of the recent pandemic, teachers were asked to provide distance instruction during the school shutdown. This task was asked of teachers even though many did not have the relevant prerequisite skills (Shepherd et al., 2016) or time to learn and apply the new skills (An, 2018; Gaudelli & Taylor, 2011; Martin et al., 2019). Even experienced online instructors who are comfortable teaching online had to learn much on their own (Martin et al., 2019).

Did teachers receive the training they needed to change from face-to-face instruction to online instruction? The principal's role in teacher development is critical during the pandemic because their leadership style can create a learning environment that allows teachers to develop confidence as they attempt new practices (Calik et al., 2012; Fletcher & Nicholas, 2016). Did principals support teachers as they learned this new format of instruction?

The present study examined teacher perceptions about (a) their own readiness for distance instruction at the beginning of the COVID-19 school shutdown and (b) the principal leadership practices that supported their professional practice during the shutdown.

4. Methodology

The present study is a nested mixed method design wherein both the quantitative and the qualitative data were collected at the same time in a single questionnaire (Bazeley, 2006). The study describes teacher perceptions at the beginning of the COVID-19 school shutdown with a focus on the following questions:

- What are teachers' perceptions of their distance instruction preparation?
- What are teachers' perceptions of the support received from their principal about their learning?

After the researchers secured consent from superintendents in various Louisiana school districts, their respective school principals were emailed alink to the online survey for distribution to their teachers. Additionally, other teachers who were members of a Louisiana teacher union voluntarily completed the online survey. The survey was comprised of questions about the perceptions of the teachers regarding their preparedness for online distance instruction, the perceptions of teachers regarding the professional support provided by their principal, and the perceptions of teachers regarding their own distance instruction to students. Additionally, there was an option for comments after each question. There were also demographic questions such as school and district name, school level, and grade and subject taught.

4.1 Sample Population

A total of 563 teachers from 30 school districts completed the survey. All participants were teachers who had experienced the COVID-19 shutdown of schools in the spring of 2020. The school level participation rate was 38.6 percent high schools, 37.7 percent elementary, 16.1 percent middle/jr. high, 3 percent K-8, and 4.6 percent other. Teachers hailed from school districts that were spread throughout the entire state of Louisiana; however, the vast majority was in south Louisiana. School districts were located in urban, suburban, and rural areas of the state. Although there were 563 participants, not all respondents answered every question, nor did they make supporting commentary for all of their responses.

4.2 Survey

The Likert scale and open-ended survey concerned the perceptions of teachers about their preparedness for and support during the COVID-19 shutdown as well as their own online instructional delivery. The survey items emerged from a review of the literature regarding effective principal leadership practices in times of disaster or during crises. Those survey items were organized into patterns or categories. The categories that were identified were the following. Regarding principal's professional support, there were three categories: providing professional development for distance instruction; providing professional development for social and emotional learning for students; providing emotional support for teachers. Regarding the teacher's own professional practice, there were two categories: delivering distance instruction; providing social-emotional support for students. The survey items were posed as questions with response choices of strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree. At the end of each section was an open-ended question asking for commentary to support responses in that section.

After constructing the survey items into an online survey, the researchers ran a pilot study, which is a practice test performed to detect possible problems with the survey before conducting the actual study (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Several suggestions were offered by the pilot participants, mainly slight rewording of several questions for clarity, but there were no major concerns. One suggestion for improvement was to offer the respondents the opportunity to provide supporting commentary after each question rather than only at the end of each section. Therefore, the clarification issues were resolved, and the suggestion was added. The follow up question asking for supporting commentary was added at the end of each objective Likert scale question, and the study was ready to be conducted.

It should be noted that, although the full survey encompassed a broad range of questions, the focus in the present article is on teacher perceptions of their own preparedness for distance instruction and the professional development support provided by their principals.

4.3 Method of Analysis

After a review of the literature on principal practices after disasters or during crises, the researchers used content analysis and *a priori* or template coding to create survey items under the major themes of (1) principal support: providing professional development for distance instruction; (2) principal support: providing professional development for social and emotional learning for students; (3) principal support: providing emotional support for teachers; (4) teacher practice: delivering distance instruction; and (5) teacher practice: providing social-emotional support for students.

"Content analysis is dependent on creating labels (codes) that can be applied to data in order to develop data into meaningful categories to be analyzed and interpreted" (Blair, 2015, p. 16). Template or *a priori* coding is a tool for classifying data into an organized framework (Blair, 2015). Open coding is a "method of generating a participant-generated theory from the data" (p. 17), whereas in template or *a priori* coding, "the codes used are defined by the researcher, which involves using *a priori* codes drawn from research, reading or theory" (p. 19). The application of content analysis and *a priori* coding in this instance was used for the purpose of constructing an organized survey based on the literature. Again, the focus of the present article is on the themes of (1) principal support: providing professional development for distance instruction; and (4) teacher practice: delivering distance instruction.

The Likert responses were quantitatively analyzed and displayed as descriptive statistics. Quantitative responses from the whole sample were disaggregated by region in Louisiana: southwest, central south, southeast, north, and central. The quantitative mean scores were presented by region.

The qualitative data were first analyzed "by condensing the qualitative descriptions into the appropriate unit of analysis" (Campbell & Parker, 2016, p. 21). Subsequent analyses of the qualitative open-ended questions entailed a combination of *a priori* and open coding. After answering the objective, Likert-scale questions, the participants were asked in an open-ended question to furnish comments that supported their responses. For example, one response to the statement "The principal provided distance instruction professional development to teachers" was "The principal maintained weekly virtual faculty meetings and provided resources to assist in the shift to online virtual instruction."

Using open coding, the researchers grouped qualitative responses together into thematic categories. For example, grouping the responses given for the statement "The principal provided distance instruction professional development to teachers" resulted in five themes: frequency, method of communication, method of professional development, types of meetings, and other.

In summary, the researchers used both *a priori* coding and open coding to classify the data. From a review of the literature, the researchers used *a priori* coding to categorize and construct the survey items. Responses to the Likert type items were quantitative data and were displayed as descriptive statistics; responses to the open-ended questions after each Likert type questions were qualitative data for which the researchers used open coding to classify conceptually similar (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) responses. After coding, the results were displayed in tables comparing the responses of all teachers.

5. Results

Survey results for the three research questions show that teachers received professional development prior to and during the pandemic shutdown in each of the five regions. High school teachers made up 38.6 percent of the respondents, Junior high or middle schools made up 16.1 percent of the respondents, 37.7 percent of the respondents teach at elementary schools, and 3 percent are from K-8 schools from the entire sample. Central and North regions had only 8 participants in each region.

Survey results about the question "What is teacher perception of distance instruction preparation?" can be found in Table 1. Fifty percent or more of teachers from each of the regions except the Central region (25 percent) agree or strongly agree that they received distance instruction from their principal. Agreement about receiving professional development was much higher in Southwest (67%) and Southeast (61%) regions than the other three regions. Sixty-two percent of participants from the Southwest agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they received professional development on special education guidelines with distance instruction which was higher than all of the other regions.

Table 1

Results of survey questions measuring teacher perception of distance instruction professional development prior to and during the 2020 pandemic school shutdown.

| | Louisiana Regional Totals | | | | |
| | | Central | | | |
Survey questions	Southwest	South	Southeast	North	Central
The principal provided distance instruction professional development to teachers.					
n	199	149	142	8	8
% agree or strongly agree	67.34	51.10	60.56	50.00	25.00
The principal provided special education guidelines for use with distance instruction.					
n	221	151	144	8	8
% agree or strongly agree	62.90	48.34	46.52	39.50	12.50
I had knowledge and skills required for distance instruction.					
n	219	159	148	7	8
% agree or strongly agree	56.16	52.83	60.14	57.14	37.50
I felt comfortable providing distance instruction.					
n	221	158	148	7	8
% agree or strongly agree	54.75	46.20	66.21	57.15	50.00

Qualitative data for this question is found on Table 2 and was sorted into five categories: frequency of professional development, method of professional development, specific professional development topics, principal support, and other. Principals provided professional development on a daily and weekly basis. Zoom meetings and instructional emails were the most frequently mentioned method of communication. Specific programs mentioned in the responses included: Google Meet, Odysseyware, Schoolology, Blackboard, and E-School Classroom. Teachers mentioned that learning opportunities were provided to them for independent learning. One teacher described the preparation at the school with this statement: "During the week before lockdown, we had daily PD on virtual learning techniques."

Table 2

Qualitative responses to teacher perception of preparation for distance learning instruction.

Categories based on frequency	n	Comments
Frequency of professional development	13	Weekly
	2	Daily
Method of professional development		
	19	Zoom meetings
	19	Virtual Meetings
	14	Instructional email
	5	Virtual Learning Sites
		Text messages
		Video
		Instructional Meetings
		Power Point Presentations
		Virtual meetings
		Inservice
		Teams meetings (PLC, small group)
		Campfire meetings
		Microsoft teams
		Webinars
Specific professional development topics	n	
	8	Blackboard
	5	Google Meet
	4	Google Classroom
		Schoology
		E-school Classroom
		Odysseyware

Principal support

24	Principal provided professional development for all staff
3	Principals received and shared information with teachers a needed
3	Principals did the best they could (time, resources)
2	Principals gave professional development opportunities
	Principals tried to find answers to questions
	If we needed help, principal was there
	Principal has a plan and implemented it
	Technology purchase
	Principals had specific instructions for various situations
	Principals gave instruction for communicating with parents

Other

2	Worksheets in box for parent pickup
	Week before lockdown, we had daily PD on virtual learning techniques
	We were already a virtual school

Over 52 percent of teachers in each region except the Central region perceived that they had the knowledge and skills required for distance instruction. The Central region had only 37 percent agreement for that question. Teachers in the Southeast region had the highest agreement (66.21%) that they felt comfortable providing distance instruction. Central South region had the lowest amount of agreement about feeling comfortable providing distance instruction with only 46 percent of teachers agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement.

Additional information about teacher preparation for distant instruction is included in Table 3. Twenty-eight percent of teachers from Southwest region, the region with the highest amount, agreed or strongly agreed that they received distance instruction from their teacher preparation program when preparing to be a teacher. Twenty-five percent of teachers in the Central region, the region with the highest amount, had an add-on certification for distance instruction.

Table 3
Results of survey questions to measure teacher perception of preparation for distance learning instruction.

	Louisiana Regional Totals				
Survey questions	Southwest	Central South	Southeast	North	Central
I received distance instruction training from my teacher preparation program when I prepared to be a teacher.					
n	219	156	143	8	8
% agree or strongly agree	27.85	17.95	14.69	0.00	12.50
I have an add-on certification for distance instruction.					
n	215	158	143	8	8
% agree or strongly agree	11.44	12.03	14.59	0.00	25.00

Survey results that addressed the question "What is teacher perception of the support they received from their principal about their learning?" can be found in Table 4. Teachers from all regions agreed or strongly agreed that principals encouraged teachers while they adapted and gave teachers time to learn new distance instruction techniques with the North region having the highest amount (88% for both questions, but with a small sample of 8). Teachers from all regions except the Central region had 60 percent or higher agreement that principals supervised distance instruction; the Central region had only 38 percent agreement regarding principal supervision. Teachers perceived that principals provided assistance with distance instruction with the South Central having the lowest agreement (56%) and the North region having the highest (75%, but with a small sample of 8).
Table 4

Results of survey questions of teacher perception of principal leadership professional practices during the pandemic compared by region.

| | Louisiana Regional Totals | | | | |
Survey questions	Southwest	Central South	Southeast	North	Central
The principal encouraged teachers while they adapted to distance instruction methods.					
n	225	157	149	8	8
% agree or strongly agree	83.11	68.79	83.89	87.50	62.50
The principal gave teachers time to learn new distance instruction techniques.					
n	219	157	147	8	8
% agree or strongly agree	74.43	62.42	64.63	87.50	37.50
The principal supervised teacher distance instruction.					
n	213	156	145	8	8
% agree or strongly agree	72.30	60.26	68.28	62.50	37.50
The principal provided assistance with distance instruction implementation.					
n	218	158	147	8	8
% agree or strongly agree	67.89	56.33	63.26	75.00	62.50

6. Data Analysis

A small percentage of teachers in each region received distance instruction from their certification provider, and few had an add-on distance learning certification. This is consistent with research that shows teachers do not have the prerequisite skills for distance instruction (Shepherd et al., 2016). While the majority of teachers received professional development from their principal, the qualitative responses suggest that teachers were given opportunities for professional development that could be accessed independently. Past research indicates that teachers need adequate time to learn how to implement new distance learning skills (An, 2018; Gaudelli & Taylor, 2011; Martin et al., 2019), yet the immediacy of the shutdown suggests that teachers did not have time to learn. One adult learning theory principle is that adult learners are motivated to learn subjects that have immediate application (Knowles, 1984). It is possible that the pandemic produced a crisis situation that was highly motivating for teachers to learn independently.

Additionally, teacher perception responses indicated that their principals gave them time to adapt to distance instruction, encouraged them, and provided assistance. These principal practices combined with the frequent communication via zoom and emails are consistent with leadership behaviors that can have a positive and significant effect on teachers' self-efficacy (Calik et al., 2012) in taking on a new task. The urgency of the school shutdown, the availability of ongoing professional development by the principal, and principal encouragement could explain the teacher perceptions about having the knowledge and skills needed for distance instruction and feeling comfortable with distance instruction. Qualitative results indicated that teachers received training from other sources and that some teachers were already using online instruction, which further explains teacher perceptions about their preparation.

7. Conclusions

A great responsibility was placed on teachers to implement distance instruction to provide a stable environment that reduced stress and uncertainty for students (Dushkevych et al., 2020). Although teachers did not receive distance instruction from their teacher preparation program or have add-on certification in distance instruction prior to becoming teachers, principals provided some training prior to the shutdown and during the period immediately preceding the shutdown for teachers to prepare for the school shutdown as well as ongoing professional development during the school shutdown. Principal leadership practices were supportive of teacher professional development in distance instruction and included providing encouragement and assistance and giving teachers time to learn. Principals supervised the distance instruction professional development by meeting with teachers weekly via zoom meetings and email correspondence. Principals also provided many resources to teachers for independent learning. Teachers perceived that they had the knowledge and skills needed and felt comfortable providing distance instruction.

8. Implications and Recommendations

The pandemic school shutdown forced teachers to immediately implement distance instruction for their students. Although teacher professional development in distance instruction was not uniform across the state or within regions, the results show that districts within each region provided distance instruction and had principal professional leadership that supported teachers as they adapted to new methods of instruction. Principals that are not providing distance instruction should consider adding this to their professional development schedules. The pandemic may have highlighted the lack of distance instruction by teacher preparation programs; perhaps some changes in curriculum in university teacher preparation programs would be helpful for aspiring teachers. Principals were perceived as being encouraging of teachers during the shift to distance instruction within each region, which probably made it easier for teachers to learn. School districts and university principal preparation programs should emphasize to principals and aspiring principals, respectively, that principal encouragement of teacher efforts can be helpful when implementing new initiatives in the school.

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