Emotionally Agile Leadership Amid COVID-19

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Introduction

Over the last decade, the demands of the principalship have increasingly surmounted due to growing accountability measures associated with teacher performance and student achievement (Wells, 2013; West et al., 2014). Adding to the scope of school administration is the challenge of improving chronically low performing schools. With approximately 2.5 million students at more than 5,000 failing schools in the U.S., closing the achievement gap is, and continues to be, urgent (Duke, 2006; Fisher et al., 2011). These challenges have been exacerbated by the emergence of the novel COVID-19 pandemic which has widened the opportunity gap while also magnifying the racial, social, and economic inequities amongst students throughout the United States.

School leaders' roles have unexpectedly and dramatically morphed as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. With such sudden shifts in response to this crisis, school leaders have found themselves in the position of leading in "triage-like" conditions, with either no playbook or a very limited one, to mitigate the challenges of leading a school during COVID-19. The COVID-19 crisis resulted in abrupt school closures across the United States and an expedited transition to online learning. With this transition from the classroom to an online learning environment, emerging literature supports that this conversion from onsite schooling to a solely online modality of education will impact educational outcomes. A recent study by the Annenburg Institute for School Reform projected that COVID-19 learning losses will result in students likely returning in fall 2020 with approximately 63-68% of the learning gains in reading and with 37-50% of the learning gains in math relative to a typical school year (Kuhfeld et al., 2020).

Being a school leader comes with a great deal of responsibility; however, the existing literature is limited on how school leadership programs can adequately prepare candidates to effectively manage the emotional weight associated with leading in a high-stress and high-accountability schooling environment during times of crisis such as a pandemic. School leaders are often faced with numerous decisions which impact the livelihood of others and educational outcomes of students. With such high levels of stress, individuals are often placed in emotionally demanding situations that can ultimately create a sense of secondary trauma and mental strain, if not properly managed. Research supports that intense and consistent emotional turmoil exacerbated by the stress of school leadership can present mental, emotional, physical, and medical threats (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Murphy, 2011; Sorenson, 2007). As a result of the current pandemic, COVID-related crisis management has exacerbated stress for school leaders. A study conducted in May of 2020 by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence (YCEI), in collaboration with the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators (CSA) in New York City, revealed that 95% of

participants experienced negative emotions in response to leading during the COVID-19 pandemic (Brackett et al., 2020). In this study, anxiety was the most commonly mentioned emotion followed by feelings of being overwhelmed, sadness, stress, frustration, uncertainty, and worry. In response to these emotions, survey results indicated that most school leaders reported that they were using a range of ineffective strategies to manage their anxiety (Brackett et al., 2020).

The negative emotions reported as a result of COVID-19 is impacting the retention of school principals and exacerbating an already challenging principal attrition crisis (Fink & Brayman, 2006; Levin et al. 2020; Pijanowski et al., 2009). An August 2020 poll conducted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals indicated that 45% of school administrators reported accelerated plans to leave the profession due to working conditions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Farrace, 2020). Often regarded as a "job too big for one," the new demands associated with leading schools has perpetuated a culture of stress across the United States. A recent study supported that school leaders with greater levels of emotional exhaustion were more likely to experience a range of negative emotions and were less likely to experience various positive emotions, leading to less job satisfaction and an increased likelihood of career change or retirement (Brackett et al., 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic has produced unprecedented times which require unconventional approaches to school leadership. Many school administrators, particularly those new to the field, do not anticipate the risk associated with workplace stress (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). In recognizing the dire need to not only improve schools but to also sustain them during times of crisis, it is imperative that school leadership preparation and training is inclusive of grooming modern-day school administrators for effective crisis management. School crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic has offered opportunities to explore how educational leadership programs across the United States can better prepare candidates for stress management during times of crisis.

Historically, educational leadership programs have been deemed as needing improvement. Critics argue that most university school leadership programs offer curricula and preparation that is out of touch with modern-day responsibilities associated with the role of school leadership (Mahfouz, 2017). In an attempt to address this need for improvement, new professional standards for educational leaders were adopted by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration in November 2015. These new standards emphasized the importance of "promoting each student's academic success and well-being;" however, did not address the well-being of school leaders (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2018).

This is a major oversight, considering the level of influence school administrators have on the overall cultural health of their schools. Educational

leadership preparation programs have been criticized for reinforcing this oversight by not providing adequate preparation on effectively managing the emotional aspects associated with school leadership (Barnett, 2004; Hale & Moorman, 2003). Consequently, university preparation programs tend to address the "hard skills," such as managerial responsibilities, without addressing the "soft skills," such as social-emotional well-being (Hale & Moorman, 2003). As the role of school leaders has changed dramatically, neither professional development programs nor formal university-based programs can, at present, adequately prepare candidates for twenty-first century school leadership (Schmidt, 2010).

Prior research on educational reform has rarely taken educators' emotions into consideration (Hargreaves, 2001). Spillane et al. (2002) supported that using social-emotional well-being as a theoretical construct in educational leadership, is often overlooked and given the least recognition in leadership preparation programs. This literature supports a need for educational leadership preparation to understand how emotions influence and are influenced by the work of school leaders.

The conceptual framework for this article is based on an extensive literature review on stress management for school leaders, emotional agility, and emotional intelligence. This article offers practical strategies to guide educational leadership programs with how to cultivate emotionally agile school leaders.

The Study of Emotions

The study of emotions includes both a sociological and psychological perspective. This paper focuses on the sociological perspective of emotions to better understand how educational leadership programs can prepare candidates from a social-emotional construct. The sociological perspective distinguishes emotions from being merely psychological and instead explores how work-related stressors associated with school leadership impacts emotional well-being (Hargreaves, 1998; Schmidt, 2010).

Susan David (2016), author of *Emotional Agility: Get Unstuck, Embrace Change, and Thrive in Work and Life,* describes emotional agility as having the capacity to discern environmental cues within an organization using the needed emotional tenor at a given time and then responding in a manner that is in alignment with an individual's personal values. Essentially, emotional agility is the ability to timely apply accurate emotions to the correct situations in order to receive the best outcome. A lack of emotional agility breeds stress and flawed decision making. School leaders are tasked with the daily responsibility of making critical decisions affecting the academic livelihood of students and the well-being of those that they lead. When considering school leadership, emotional agility is an essential skillset. David (2016, p.11), describes emotional agility as "a process

that allows you to be in the moment…[it] isn't about ignoring difficult emotions and thoughts. It's about holding those emotions and thoughts loosely, facing them courageously and compassionately, and then moving past them to make big things happen in your life." For some, this level of agility takes years of experience to develop; however, for others, emotional agility is an innate ability. Possessing a solid capacity for emotional agility is critical for effective leadership.

It is also important to emphasize the difference between agility and adaptability. Being adaptable involves a willingness to adjust to expected and unexpected change, whereas agility involves adjusting to change. (David & Congleton, 2013). Leadership agility is classified in two categories: behavioral and emotional. Most school leadership programs focus on preparing candidates for behavioral agility with little emphasis on emotional agility.

Emotional agility, first introduced by the Harvard Business Review (David & Congleton, 2013) is closely aligned with the concept of emotional intelligence. Although similar, the two concepts are not exact nor are they mutually exclusive. Emotional intelligence, popularized by Daniel Goleman (1995), focuses on self-awareness, motivation, self-regulation, and social skills. As explained by Phipps and Prieto (2017, p. 57), "emotional intelligence refers to one's ability to recognize and manage one's emotions, as well as the emotions of others, as one engages in behavior that demonstrates this emotional understanding." According to research, "Leaders with emotional intelligence are more likely to build and maintain strong working relationships that are built on trust and respect, facilitating greater employee satisfaction, engagement, motivation, commitment, creativity, and performance" (Phipps & Prieto, 2017, p.57). The intersection of emotional intelligence and emotional agility impacts the ability of school leaders to be emotionally resilient during crisis situations.

Emotional intelligence involves the ability to be emotionally aware and in control whereas emotional agility focuses on approaching experiences mindfully and productively. Similar to emotional intelligence, emotional agility requires an individual to be aware of their emotions, but it does not place emphasis on either suppressing or controlling these emotions. These two concepts intersect because emotional intelligence influences emotional agility. While both are essential for effective leadership, emotional agility is most relevant for the context of this discussion.

Mindfulness in a School Leadership Construct

Mindfulness is a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment while calmly acknowledging and accepting feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations. Jon Kabat-Zinn (2003, p. 145) provides an operational definition of mindfulness: "the awareness that emerges through paying attention

on purpose in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment." Additionally, mindfulness is described as "The capacity to be fully aware of all that one experiences *inside the self* – body mind, heart, spirit – and to pay full attention to what is happening *around us* – people, that natural world, our surroundings and events" (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005, p. 113).

The conceptualization of mindfulness for educational leaders is grounded on the attitudinal foundations of mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2003); emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2000); social intelligence (Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008); resonant leadership (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005); and neuroscience (Davidson, 2012). Furthermore, although there is limited literature on integrating mindfulness in educational leadership preparation, there is extensive research on the combination of mindfulness constructs with emotional intelligence, social intelligence, and resonant leadership (Browne et al., 2003; Glass et al., 2000; Grubb & Flessa, 2006; Hawk & Martin, 2011; Mahfouz, 2017; Petzko, 2008; Wells, 2015).

There is also a direct correlation between the foundational aspects of mindfulness and effective leadership behaviors and dispositions. Although not explicitly expressed, many of the educational leadership professional dispositions identified in seminal work by Wilson et al. (2020) are supported by mindfulness practices. Table 1 below illustrates corrections between professional dispositions for school leaders and mindfulness. Professional dispositions are defined as personal qualities or characteristics, such as interests, values, beliefs, attitudes, and modes of adjustments that are possessed by individuals which are reflected in outwardly actions and interactions with others (Borko et al., 2007; Taylor & Wasicsko, 2000).

Empirical research by Wilson et al. (2020) suggested that educational leadership programs should integrate professional dispositional development into their coursework. The research of Wilson et al. (2020) also included the development of a valid and reliable educational leadership disposition assessment (EDLDA), which has proven to be successful in university preparation programs throughout the United States. It is imperative to also consider that many educational leadership programs refer to the national professional standards when determining which dispositions to assess programmatically (Green et al., 2011). Although the current national standards for educational leadership programs (NELPS) do not specifically delineate dispositions in nature, professional dispositions are characterized and undergirded by mindfulness in Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms, Standard 3: Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness, and Standard 5: Community and External Leadership (National Policy Board for Education Administration, 2018; Wilson et al., 2020).

As suggested by research, cultivating a "habit of mind" is an imperative disposition to cultivate during school leadership preparation (Roeser et al., 2012). Habits of mind are defined as "those dispositions toward behaving intelligently when confronted with problems, the answers to which are not immediately known" (Costa & Kallinick, 2011, p. 1). As a school leader, such habits include being aware of and reflecting on current, present, and past experiences in a nonjudgmental manner, demonstrating flexibility and appropriate responsiveness when problem solving, effective regulation of emotions, resiliency during difficult times, and demonstrating empathy and compassion towards others (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Roeser, 2012).

Table 1

*Educational Leadership Professional Dispositions Connected to Mindful Leadership*

Educational Leadership Dispositions	Mindful Leadership
High Expectations	Demonstrates personal accountability for one's self as evidenced by modeling behaviors of high expectations
Relational	Possesses an ability to create positive and professional relationships with faculty, staff, and students by supporting others within and outside of their presence Demonstrates dedication towards building positive relationships with community stakeholders Creates a climate of respect and rapport amongst faculty, staff, and students
Positive Attitude	Demonstrates a growth mindset towards challenging tasks Anticipates and responds in a positive manner at all times
Conflict Resolution	Listens to understand conflict before acting or offering a resolution
Integrity	Demonstrates accountability for one's own behavior Accepts personal and professional accountability for the educational processes of the school
Possesses Professional Beliefs, Commitment, and Work Ethic	Promotes academic, social, and emotional success for all students
Adaptable	Differentiates leadership based on the different needs of those being led
Self-Aware of Strengths and Weaknesses	Demonstrates a level of maturity to self-reflect on strengths and weaknesses Is able to accurately self-assess to identify weaknesses in order to improve leadership capacity

Source: Wilson et al., 2020

The benefits of mindfulness are difficult to ignore when considering how this practice can be beneficial for school leadership preparation. Mindfulness increases alertness by reducing the likelihood of getting distracted by an array of wandering thoughts. Furthermore, mindfulness allows individuals to accept their emotional responses in order to effectively self-regulate (Kudesia & Tashi Nyiman, 2015). McKee et al. (2008, p. 45) identify the benefits of mindfulness: "People who deliberately practice mindfulness are consciously self-aware and self-monitoring; they are open and attentive to other people and to the world around them."

Mindfulness practices have been shown to yield many physical, psychological, and emotional benefits, including decreased stress, improved health, mental flexibility, increased attention, decreased anxiety, blood pressure, depression, increased immunity, compassion, empathy, and emotional regulation (Baer, 2015; Grossman et al., 2004; Jha et al., 2007). Kearney et al. (2013) posited a significance between school leaders who engaged in mindfulness and student achievement. As referenced in Figure 1, Kearney et al. (2013) developed this concept map to emphasize the importance of having adequate time to reflect, build relationships with others, and engage in perpetual renewal as it relates to mindfulness practices.

Figure 1
*Mindfulness Concept Map for School Leaders*
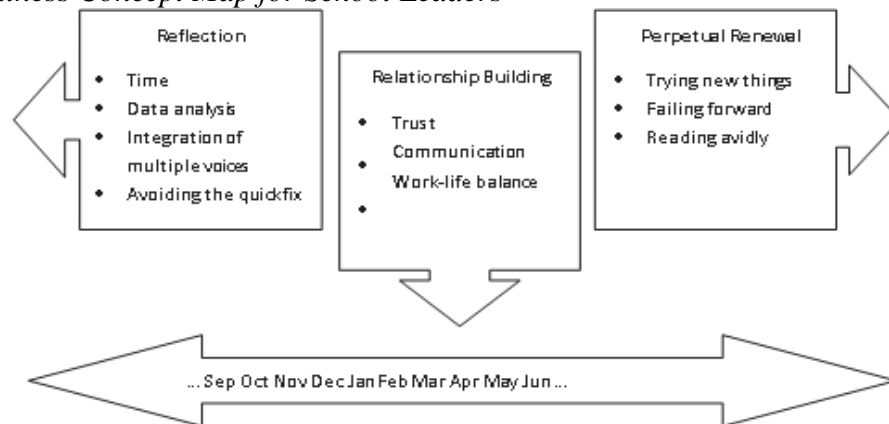
Source: Kearney et al., 2013

Adding to the mindfulness concept reflected in Figure 1, Jennings and Greenberg (2009) argued the importance of the pro-social classroom model which stresses the correlation between educators' social and emotional well-being and its impact on student achievement. The pro-social model suggests that healthy

teacher-student relationships are critical to the overall success of student academic outcomes and socio-emotional well-being.

Figure 2
Pro-Social Classroom Model
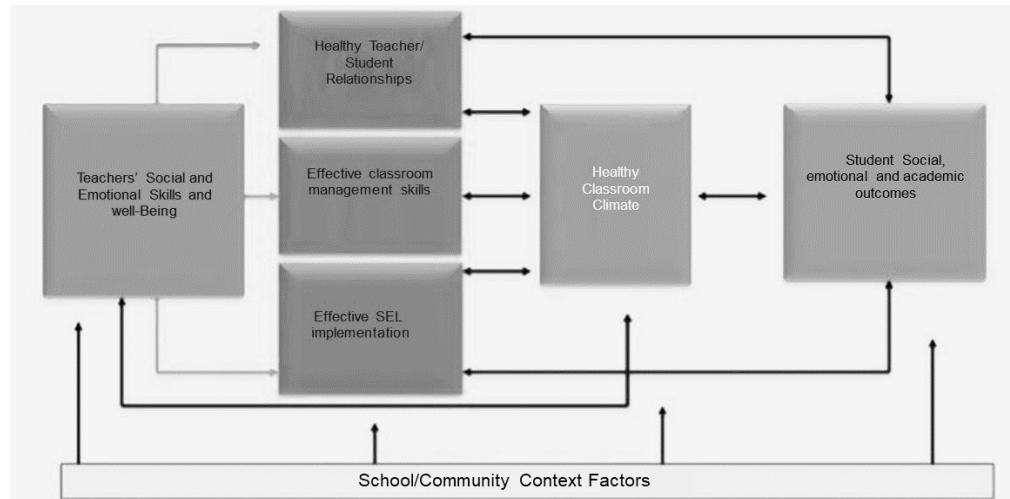
Source: Jennings and Greenberg, 2009

While the benefits of mindfulness are widely supported by the literature, the downside of not applying mindfulness practices as a school leader can be detrimental to one's leadership capacity. Boyatzis and McKee (2005) explained that effective school leaders can slip into the "sacrifice syndrome" due to repeated cycles of stress. The sacrifice syndrome includes ineffective attempts to cope with stress such as overreacting, blaming, or acting out of character. (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005).

Research on professional-based mindfulness has grown exponentially in recent years and is most evident in professional settings outside of education. Over the past 30 years, large corporations such as Target, Google, General Mills, Ford Motor Company, Facebook, and Twitter have integrated mindfulness programs for their employees (Hunter, 2013). Although significant research points to the benefits of mindfulness and its impact on possessing strong personal dispositional characteristics, this evidence is minimal in educational leadership standards, university courses, licensing requirements, and professional development for school leaders (Berson & Oreg, 2016; Louis & Murphy, 2017; Pijanowski et al., 2009). Professional dispositions are reflected in the CAEP national standards; however, the standards are not inclusive of a social-emotion construct, as discussed in this article (National Policy Board for Education Administration, 2018).

Mindfulness in Educational Leadership Preparation

Educational leadership preparation programs are now, more than ever before, key factors in preparing school leaders for crisis management. During leadership preparation, it is imperative that candidates have opportunities to safely engage in discussions, activities, and simulations involving the nature of emotions as discussed in the literature. School leadership preparation programs must be intentional about engaging candidates in meaningful discussions about the changing, challenging, and complex landscape of education so that candidates are better prepared to manage the demanding role of school leadership which has proven to be both emotionally exhilarating and dangerously debilitating.

One model proven to be successful is the Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE) program. CARE is a mindfulness-based professional development program originally developed by Patricia Jennings, Christa Turksma, and Richard Brown at the Garrison Institute. CARE was originally established to support teachers by increasing self-awareness and reflective practices in order to effectively manage their emotional well-being (Mahouz, 2017).

CARE, which includes training on mindfulness, awareness, emotional skills, as well as caring and compassion skills, is based on the notion that educators need to be equipped with skills and strategies to facilitate a positive school climate conducive to student achievement (Jennings, 2011; Jennings et al., 2013; Schussler et al., 2016). CARE includes a variety of practices based on adult learning best practices such as direct instruction, small group discussion, dyadic interaction, reflection, role-playing, experiential exercises, and mindful awareness practices (Jennings et al., 2013; Mahouz, 2017). Pilot studies conducted with approximately 300 participants have proven the CARE program to be effective for teachers in a number of areas such as improvements in teachers' well-being, efficacy, burnout, mindfulness, physical symptoms often associated with stress and emotional regulation (Jennings et al., 2013; Mahouz, 2017). A more detailed explanation of the CARE components is reflected in Table 2.

Table 2

CARE Program Components

Program Components	Methods
Emotion Skills Instruction (40%)	Introduction to emotions, purpose, universal expressions, relevant brain research How emotions affect teaching and learning Didactic information about "uncomfortable" or negative emotions including physiological, cognitive and behavioral responses Didactic information about "comfortable" or positive emotions including physiological, cognitive and behavioral responses Exploring bodily awareness of emotions Exploring individual differences in emotional experiences Practice using mindful awareness and reflection to recognize and manage strong emotions
Stress Reduction Practices (40%)	Body awareness reflection Basic breath awareness practice Mindfulness of thoughts and emotions practice Mindful movement practices (standing, walking, stretching, centering) Practice maintaining mindful awareness in front of a group Role plays to practice mindfulness in the context of strong emotion related to a challenging classroom situation
Compassion Practices (20%)	"Caring practice": a series of guided reflections focused on caring for self, loved one, colleague, challenging person Mindful listening partner practices: one person reads a poem or talks about a problem, partner listens mindfully, practicing presence and acceptance

Source: Jennings *et al*., 2013

The CARE program was recently studied with principals in a rural school district in central Pennsylvania. CARE for School Leaders involved 20 hours of group training over four weeks with a booster session four weeks after implementation. After completing the program, principals reported improvements in leadership skills, relationships, self-care, increased self-awareness, ability to regulate emotions, self-management, and self-compassion. Although these findings are promising, further research is needed to investigate the effects of mindfulness programs for school leaders by examining its links to teacher and student well-being and school climate (Mahouz, 2017).

CARE is only one of several mindful programs for educators. However, just as with CARE, well-documented programs tend to cater to K-12 classroom teachers, leaving a void in mindfulness integration for current and future school leaders. As stated previously, one way to orient rising school leaders about mindfulness practices and its beneficial impact on effective leadership is through university educational leadership preparation programs. Dr. Caryn Wells, Professor at Oakland University's School of Education and Health Services, has successfully integrated mindfulness training into her university coursework.

Self-Regulation

Self-regulation, a form of mindfulness, refers to "how people manage stress, how much energy we expend, and how well we recover (Shanker, 2013, pg. 5)." Because unrelenting stress is a byproduct of the modern-day principalship, it is important that educational leadership programs include curricula focused on healthy and productive approaches to managing stress during crises. School leadership literature exploring coping approaches for work-induced stressors has traditionally focused on reactive strategies as opposed to proactive methods for effective emotional responses during crises (Austin et al., 2005; Boyland, 2011; Mearns & Cain, 2003; Van der Merwe & Parsotam, 2012). The literature also suggest that school leaders positively impact school-level outcomes by promoting a culture of caring. Highly self-aware leaders who possess clear goals and values are able to cultivate these same characteristics in others within their schools (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). An effective self-regulator pays attention to tasks, persists through difficulties, demonstrates flexibility, and is confident that additional effort will lead to positive outcomes (Schunk, 2005). Literature points towards self-regulation as an effective approach to maintaining emotional agility (Shanker, 2016). To effectively prepare rising school leaders for work-induced and crisis-triggered stress, the following self-regulatory practices, recommended by Shanker (2016), can be included in educational leadership coursework.

> **Reframe behavior:** Asking "why and why now?" can help mitigate and understand emotions and reactions. The goal of reframing behavior is to manage emotions and reactions effectively and responsibility, without

engaging in ineffective decision-making practices. Furthermore, sometimes busyness is perceived as an indicator of importance, power, and worth. Reframing perceptions of busyness and its impact can help school leaders with time-management, as well as efficiently addressing priorities.

Recognize the stressors: On any given day, school leaders are flooded with stressors from multiple sources simultaneously. Taking time to frequently recognize stressors creates an opportunity to address them.

Reduce stressors: The goal of reducing stressors is not to eliminate all existing stress. For example, eustress, which is considered good stress, can promote active engagement and productivity. However, learning mechanisms to reduce distress (bad stress) is critical for school leaders in order to reduce burn-out, increase job satisfaction, and maintain retention (Boyland 2011; Dicke et al., 2015). Additionally, school leadership preparation programs can put their candidates at an advantage by teaching the importance of work-life balance, which is considered a proactive self-regulation approach. Maintaining work-life balance for school leaders involves putting effort into changing the work environment so that potential stress can be avoided or diminished (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Greenglass & Fiskebaum, 2009).

Respond: School leadership programs can train candidates to develop personal strategies to promote restoration and resilience. Developing a personal toolbox of self-regulation strategies is another pro-active response to stress.

Recommendations for Educational Leadership

Cultivating the social and emotional well-being of principals is integral to effective school leadership and impacts a leader's ability to achieve and maintain a welcoming school climate. Educational leadership preparation programs can increase their effectiveness by including social-emotional competencies that prepare future school leaders for crisis management situations, such as COVID-19. School leaders usually do not take the necessary time for self-care, nor is it something that is heavily promoted within the profession. For this reason, it is imperative that leadership preparation programs consider the following recommendations.

- Support and cultivate a culture of self-care for school leaders. Principals should not be made to feel guilty for taking time to attend to their own well-being.

- Include the well-being of school leaders in standards for effective leadership by integrating social-emotional leadership competencies within coursework.
- Integrate social emotional practices into coursework where candidates can learn mindfulness and stress management techniques such as mindful listening, mindful walking, centering, wait time, breathing, and self-compassion practices.
- Promote networks for collaboration with local school districts that are inclusive of coaching and mentoring for rising school leaders.
- Facilitate collaborative models of learning where candidates are able to study real-life and situational dilemmas associated with school leadership and crisis management.

Because principals do not usually take a lot of time for self-care, we emphasized it as important. We also focused on several practices such as setting intentions, checking their emotional elevators, mindful listening, mindful walking, centering, wait time, awareness of scripts, breathing and self-compassion practices. As principals are responding to the stressful demands of operating a school, it is important for these school leaders to learn to not be reactive in the moment. It can help to use these practices and be committed to have them become a habit.

Conclusion

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated stresses, negative outcomes regarding the emotional well-being and retention for school leaders are emerging (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Brackett et al., 2018; Brackett et al., 2020; Farrace, 2020; Murphy, 2011; Sorenson, 2007). To mitigate these negative outcomes and prepare educators for future crises, educational leadership programs throughout the United Stated can engage current and emerging school leaders in interventions and trainings that focus on social-emotional well-being through the use of mindfulness practices, mindfulness-based programs, and self-regulatory practices. These interventions have been supported to cultivate emotional agility, emotional intelligence, social intelligence, and resonant leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Browne et al., 2003; Glass et al., 2000; Grubb & Flessa, 2006; Hawk & Martin, 2011; Mahfouz, 2017; Mahouz, 2018; Petzko, 2008; Schunk, 2005; Shanker, 2016; Wells, 2015).

To prepare school leaders for crisis related stress and outcomes, leadership coursework should focus on self-regulatory practices to include reframing behaviors, recognizing stressors, reducing stressors, and developing personal strategies to respond to stressors in order to promote restoration and resilience (Shanker, 2016). A variety of recommendations are provided to reduce the impact

of crisis induced stressors which emphasize self-care for school leaders, the development of social-emotional leadership competencies within coursework that focus on mindfulness as well as stress management techniques, building collaboration networks for the mentoring of rising school leaders, and facilitating collaborative models of learning.

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