

Leading Through Crisis: Unplanned School Leadership in the Wake of a Natural Disaster

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Purpose

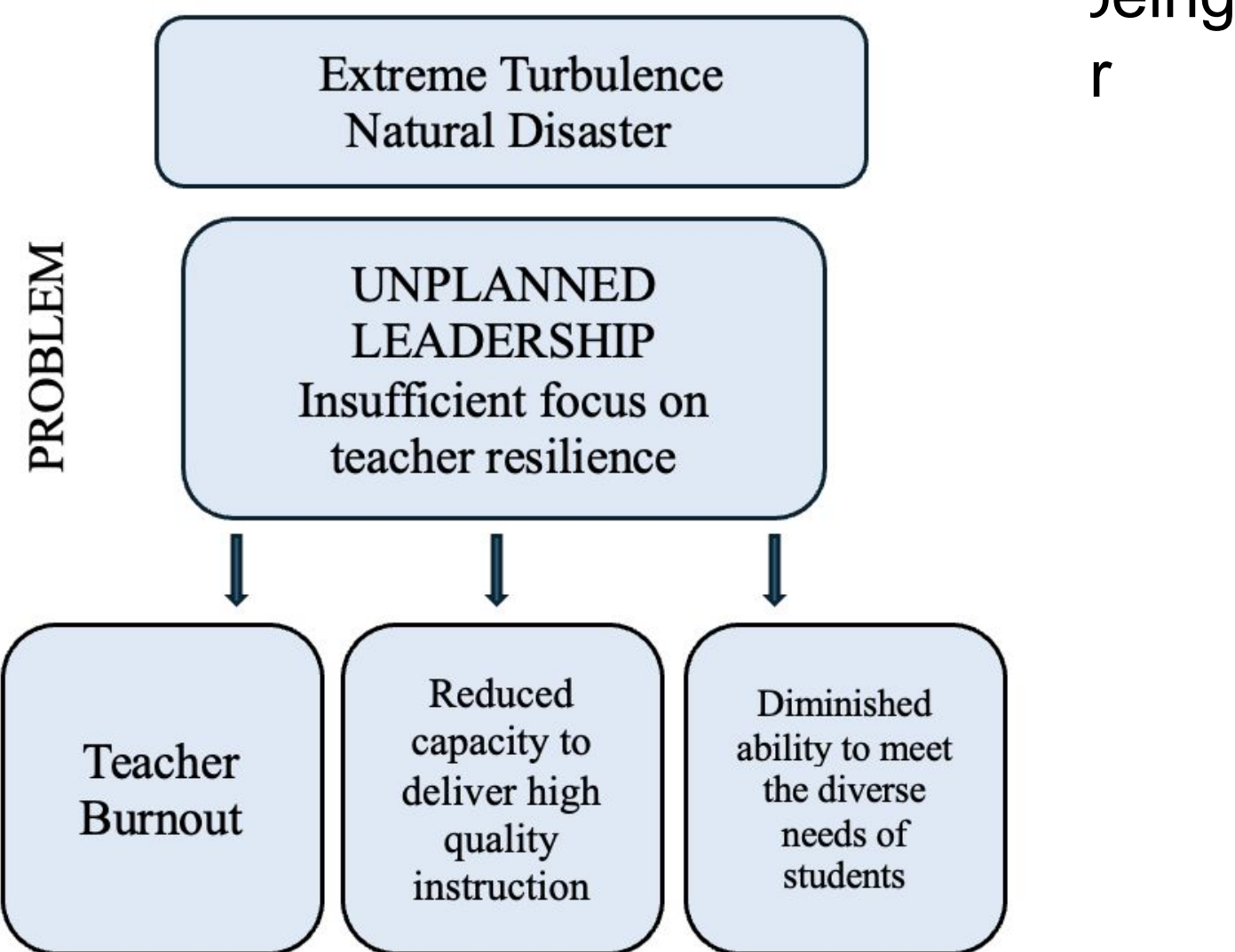
The purpose of this study is to foster resiliency and ameliorate compassion fatigue among sixth-grade teachers in a middle school as they seek to meet the academic and social-emotional needs of students after a 500-year natural disaster.

Conceptual Framework

Turbulence Theory (Gross, 2020) overlays the Ethic of Care (Noddings, 1988; Gross & Shapiro, 2004) to form my conceptual framework. Leaders apply turbulence theory to identify, to assess the severity of, and to solve dilemmas in an unstable environment. Levels of turbulence are light, moderate, severe, and extreme. The ethic of care requires leaders to collaborate with others and to consider multiple voices in the decision-making process.

Problem Statement

Leading through times of crisis has become increasingly common for school leaders over the past couple of decades due to school shootings, a global pandemic, societal turmoil, and natural disasters (Urick et al., 2021). Crises like natural disasters disproportionately impact historically underserved communities, exacerbating existing inequities in access to resources and support systems (Fletcher & Nicholas, 2015). This lack of preparedness limits schools' ability to maintain stability and deliver equitable learning opportunities during and after such events. This problem underscores the crucial need to understand how school leaders can effectively manage unplanned leadership opportunities, particularly in fostering resilience within their school communities and ensuring equitable recovery. Insufficient focus on teacher resilience can lead to burnout, reduced capacity to deliver high-quality instruction, and a diminished ability to meet the diverse needs of students during and after a crisis (Fletcher & Nicholas, 2015). The problem of practice seeks to build teacher resiliency and ameliorate compassion fatigue among sixth-grade teachers and ultimately support students.



Local Context

In the wake of Hurricane Helene in the fall of 2024, school leaders in Western North Carolina faced unprecedented challenges in navigating structural disruptions in learning, necessitating unplanned leadership by managing the locus of change within the surrounding environment (Fletcher & Nicholas, 2015).

The difficulties were immense with the widespread devastation of homes, roads, buildings, and transportation, the lack of cell service and internet, electricity, and the months-long inability to access potable water in homes and schools. Recovery activities took precedence over teaching and learning, forcing school leaders to consider the magnitude of the situation and identify the social and emotional realities and conditions faced by teachers, staff, students, and families within their communities to lead effectively during and after the crisis.

Four weeks after the storm, schools reopened, providing stability for students and teachers. However, students and educators continue to experience trauma throughout recovery efforts.



Devastating flooding due to Hurricane Helene in Asheville, North Carolina



Community partnerships and distribution efforts by Asheville City Schools staff and students in the weeks following Hurricane Helene. Asheville, North Carolina

Methods

Improvement Science serves as the methodology for this improvement initiative. Improvement Science utilizes four types of practical measures, including outcome measures, process measures, balancing measures, and driver measures (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Langley et al., 2009); and is an iterative process carried out over a period of time that provides researchers with evidence to help determine what works, whom it works for, and under what conditions it works (Bryk et al., 2017). A Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) protocol (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020) will be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the improvement initiative.



Three fundamental questions drive Improvement Science: 1) What are we trying to accomplish? 2) How will we know that a change is an improvement? 3) What changes can we make that will result in improvement? (Langley et al., 2009)



Distribution efforts by Asheville City Schools staff and students in the weeks after Hurricane Helene. Asheville, North Carolina.

Improvement Initiative

- Three 45-minute, in-person training sessions for sixth-grade teachers and staff
- Compassion Fatigue training
 - Building resiliency in community
 - Reflection on resiliency in practice

Design Team

- Assistant Principal Intern (Scholar-Practitioner)
- School Principal
- Sixth-grade Assistant Principal
- Sixth-grade Counselor
- Sixth-grade Teacher

Implications for Practice

- Add to research centered in justice-oriented reform by challenging the status quo and prioritizing teacher resilience and well-being
- Provide insights and recommendations for current school leaders in times of extreme turbulence
- Provide principal preparation programs with ways in which they can support aspiring school leaders to lead effectively through times of extreme turbulence

Leadership Lessons

As a scholar-practitioner, I will actively cultivate my own critical consciousness and that of others by providing opportunities for teachers to reflect and engage in honest discussions about compassion fatigue and trauma. I seek to explore how systemic barriers may contribute to teacher burnout and how these variables may disproportionately affect educators in high-needs schools.

The intervention aims to create a culture of collective care within a sixth-grade team. It prioritizes the well-being of teachers and staff during a crisis as an essential component affecting equitable student outcomes. By providing sessions encouraging critical reflection and community, I will study efforts to foster resiliency and build teachers' capacity to serve students more effectively during crisis, recovery, and ongoing trauma.

References

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