



Global Perspectives on Teacher Leadership for Whole Child Education

STEMTLnet Theme of the Month Synthesis:
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The emergence of the COVID pandemic has been (and continues to be) a true disruption, and the education system. It has been a sort of "stress test" for our socio-cultural life, highlighting and in many cases exacerbating systemic inequalities in wealth, privilege, and power. Yet educators, faced with their bedrock commitment to their students, have in many cases done more than tread water during the COVID event.

Many teachers have implemented innovations in their pedagogical repertoires, in their use of technology, in outreach to their student's communities, in introducing interdisciplinary curriculum, and in increasing support and collaboration with each other. Parents and others in the community have had to pitch in and help their children cope and continue to thrive, and as a result, many have had a glimpse of how education might be and continue to be different, even as the masks and other COVID precautions slowly relax, at last. The STEMTLnet Theme of the Month for March 2022 focused on lessons from this historical moment, and their implications for a true turn towards the kinds of teacher and student agency which are essential to an educational process that does not merely 'train' students ([Leadbeater, 2022](#)). Together with this, we are seeing an increasing interest in "whole child" learning:

The pandemic — coupled with a growing awareness of the emerging science of learning and development — has created a much clearer focus on the need for a "whole child" approach to education. Whole child education refers to educators attending to students' academic, social, and emotional development in learner-centered and culturally relevant ways that encompass their families and communities. When educators meet these goals, schools benefit from partnerships with a wide range of community organizations and local agencies — from food banks to local businesses to health and social service agencies ([Berry et al. 2021, pg 7](#)).

Our expert panel included [Barnett Berry](#), Professor at the University of South Carolina and Senior Director for Policy Innovation; [Anthony Mackay](#), CEO and Board Chair of the Washington DC-based National Center for Education and the Economy; [Chanda Jefferson](#), Science Department Chair at the Fairfield Central High School in Winnsboro, South Carolina, and the Albert Einstein Distinguished Educator Fellow in the House of Representatives this year; and [Janet English](#), a PAEMST-recognized teacher who moved to Finland to learn what Finnish teachers are doing and returned to adapt the lessons learned for American schools.

Collaboration during COVID

While the pandemic isolated teachers from physically being in touch with each other it also created an urgency to collaborate, to figure out new models to teach virtually or in

hybrid form, to explore technological solutions with each other, and to learn about new ways to engage students at a distance. The distance also caused teachers to become more connected with students' families, to partner with them to maintain student involvement and engagement. Potentially, this is one positive outcome of COVID. As Anthony Mackay said, "You could have been forgiven for thinking that during the pandemic, the focus would've been back on the individual teacher in the sense that they had to draw upon their own resources in order to connect online. But many teachers actually were inspired to share ideas and resources, and work together."

Much of this inventiveness took place at a breathless pace and at the local scale, so that if teachers connected to others beyond their "home turf," and learned and shared what they were confronting and inventing. A key need for this present moment is storytelling — reflective sharing about what was tried, what worked, and what didn't — and why. Chanda Jefferson spoke from her own experience:

The first thing, I was able to work side-by-side with instructional leaders to develop a repository of virtual learning tools for teachers in that moment, because we knew it was going to be a transition to a virtual learning. Then after that, working with the Office of Nutrition and Health to approve grab-and-go meal sites in high-poverty areas where we knew kids needed to have access to food. So while all of this was happening simultaneously, my colleagues in rural areas were creating these packets for students that didn't have access to the internet. So teacher leaders, they sprang into action.

As Berry et al. (2021, pg. 10) argued,

In some ways, we believe that everything that needs to be done to create a system of teacher leadership for whole child education is being done somewhere. However, we need to learn more about how to create and sustain these systems in different contexts.

Agency, leadership, and well-being

Apart from health, safety, and support, an often-overlooked aspect to teacher well-being is the extent to which they are trusted to make decisions that best serve the needs of their students. But as many participants noted, many teachers around the globe have little authority, autonomy, or ability to innovate. (ISTP-21)

Researchers have long known that one of the most stressful features of organizational life is the combination of responsibility with powerlessness (Sapolsky 2004), which is bad for morale, inhibits creativity, and is damaging to health on many levels. As the ISTP report notes, this kind of stress is a widespread feature of educational systems. Quite aside from the costs to teachers, however, this limitation on teachers as professionals is itself a lesson that is passed on to students. During COVID conditions, when systems were losing function, teachers nevertheless had to act, and as always with teachers, the lessons they learned for themselves could shape their students' experiences. To this point, Barnett cited Leadbeater (2022),

Here is the iron law of co-agency: it is impossible for students to develop agency unless teachers themselves are agents, trusted by the school and the wider system to craft and design learning with students. Students only become agents when capable teachers do as well. (Leadbeater 2022, pg. 10)

As home, school, and community settings combined to be the setting for students' learning, teachers and others became aware anew of students as whole persons, and artificial distinctions between "content," "process," and "social-emotional" compartments are broken down: education can become more naturally about the whole child. Janet English remarked in speaking about the importance of understanding the whole child, "When a child walks in the room, they are different than every other child. Their experiences are different, their skills are different, their motivations are different."

Barnett also commented on the way that this realization spread in the system "while the colossal inequities exposed and deepened by the pandemic...It's been awful for kids, families, teachers, but it has led to more organizations, more think tanks, more political leaders from both sides of the aisle here in the States to think more about whole child, whole community systems of education."

Distinctive contribution of STEM teachers

STEM teachers, with their aim to support student inquiry and phenomenon-based sense-making, can make their approach available both to students, and to their colleagues, as schools and districts experiment, innovate, and evaluate fresh responses to the unfolding situation brought by the COVID event. Janet said,

... what I think STEM teachers have that really can contribute to this whole overall change is that inquiry method and that curiosity about what is working and what isn't... If the conversation is about what's working and what's not, the conversation is very different if you have specific questions you're trying to answer, because that ... And then when you start collecting data about what's working and what not working, it's actually informing the system and it gets people curious, and hopefully overrides these staunch patterns we have about we can't do that because we don't do it that way....So students have agency, teachers have agency, the district has agency, but everyone's informing outwards so that they can support inwards, so that the child stays at the center. That becomes a systemic process of improvement.

Reconstructing education and teacher learning

John Dewey described education as "that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience" (Dewey 2008a). We have an opportunity for the kinds of analysis and reconstruction that can finally make more permanent many long-held aspirations of an educational system that helps our children grow into reflective, creative, and socially engaged citizens. As our experts pointed out this

includes building new structures, habits, and expectations to support teacher agency both in their work and in their professional growth.

Deconstructing these structures requires deepening teacher preparation and professional learning so teachers build the knowledge, skills, and mindsets they need to succeed in an autonomous professional working environment. It also requires recreating the grammar of schooling so that teachers have the time, space, and support to exercise leadership in classrooms, schools, and policy settings. (ISTP-21)

Chanda reminded us that the COVID event has given us the opportunity to incorporate teachers' voices in these changes going forward. After all,

teacher leaders sprang into action. They were doing this work. It is important that we continue to have their voice being involved in the process and decisions and policies that are made going forward to reimagine education, especially related to the whole child, because teacher leaders are closest to the child. They're in the classroom every day. Teachers are closest to the child. They know what their needs are. They know exactly what they should be doing in this moment in order to solve some of these tough challenges.

There is no doubt that there are forces that would prefer to put the genie back in the box, so to speak, and try to re-establish the status quo ante. As a webinar participant said,

from all of the teachers that I am in touch with and talked to, my impression is teachers want to make change. They recognized with COVID that this is imperative and now is the time. This is our opportunity to make some really big changes and move to holistic approaches, move to project-based learning, place-based, culturally responsive. So many things that we could be doing. Then we try and it's just you can't get it past administration, especially with subjects like science that are deemed to be less important, and social studies.

This is why it's important right now to gather up the stories of innovation and success, that can serve as the seeds for the growth of new possibilities. There are concrete stories of community and business leaders who found ways to cooperate with the aims of education, in dialogue with the schools; of teachers and systems transforming their professional development programs; of new uses of technology to support wider networks of collegial exchange. There are also ideas and practices from earlier waves of reform that can be adapted for fresh use, such as the example Barnett cited a district that is building on the long-established "team" model from the middle-school movement:

Six teachers, including some residents from the university, some paraprofessionals, specialist teachers, six adults responsible for 110 kids. They did some architectural redesign to help them work more closely together. ...One of the teachers tells me, "We were not stressed during the pandemic because we

had already developed these strong working relationships with each other. We were collectively responsible for 110 kids." Then she said, "I knew 110 kids better now than I did when I had my own classroom with 30 by myself."

Such innovations, as Tony remarked, will require new partnerships and alliances, and therefore new skills need for creating and maintaining such collaborations, focused on whole children, whole teachers, whole communities. Joni Falk's concluding remarks captured the moment of opportunity that the panelists and participants were envisioning — and reporting:

I was just also thinking of the pandemic as a disruptive influence, it disrupted what we knew is schooling, drop your kid on the school bus, take them to school, teacher sits in front of a class of 30 students. People who didn't necessarily have the ear of the community, like tech specialists, became extremely important in figuring out how to support teachers to make this work, so that it changed who is helping whom. Oftentimes the principal or the superintendent was really not well-qualified to really think about hybrid teaching or online teaching. And so, it changed the whole calculus there.

Recommendations for teacher-leaders

Teachers have innovated and experimented with new ways of presenting material, of structuring learning environments and tasks, and of partnering with colleagues and the community. Many teachers have taken leadership roles (and hence have become teacher leaders) during the pandemic, helping their colleagues to experiment with technology and providing support with online and hybrid settings. Teacher leaders can make sure that they and their colleagues collect these stories and evaluate them, deriving lessons both about pedagogy and whole-child education, and about how their roles have changed. These experiments often revealed cultural issues within and across communities that will require continued teacher learning and collegial exchange, and teacher leaders can play a role of lasting importance in nurturing networks and structures that keep conversations going.

Recommendations for administrators and policy makers

It is important for administrators to acknowledge and value their teachers' insights about innovations that can support whole-child and community-connected learning. Too often policy and implementation incorporate teachers as factors in the system, rather than as leaders, co-designers and investigators. Teachers must be given agency to create change, and time to collaborate with each other.

Administrators should be taking stock of their teacher colleagues' discoveries, partnerships, and challenges, and helping shape informed reflection on what worked, what didn't work and what opportunities might have been glimpsed that require systemic responses to make a reality. Finally, it has long been established that teachers should be co-creators of their professional growth; the disruptions of COVID have made that possible, and even necessary.

Where this is true, it is an important resource for your own setting and others', and teachers and administrators should find ways to tell their stories, sometimes perhaps in partnership with educational researchers.

Recommendations for researchers

Perhaps the most urgent need arising from the discussions and resources in this month's Theme is that of documentation and analysis of the multitude of challenges, solutions, successes and failures that were conducted around the country during the COVID event.

Such an examination should include not only an evaluation of "what worked" but also an inquiry into the conceptual frameworks and expectations that underlay the innovations: What new understandings about the process of education, and the experiences of different constituencies have emerged during this time? Surely the insights have not been only technical ones — the use of hybrid methods, new ways to partner with communities, etc. These are valuable, but not sufficient to support the kind of reconstruction we need and may have an opportunity to make real.

Finally, teachers, schools, and others have many stories to tell of their own community or their peers. Researchers could play an important role in helping such stories to take shape and reach the ears and eyes that educators want to reach.

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