

Internal, Moral, and Market Accountability: Leading Urban Schools During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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When the Covid-19 pandemic forced U.S. schools to shutter and teach remotely in March 2020, several states suspended external measures intended to hold educators accountable for student learning. Some scholars, including ourselves, welcomed this moratorium, having long questioned whether external measures could genuinely advance student performance (Francois & Weiner, 2020). Though external accountability proponents believe standardized tests and formal teacher evaluations motivate teachers to advance student learning (see Lee & Reeves, 2012 for a review), others argue that deficit-oriented discourse about urban schools¹ fueled an accountability era that has sabotaged equitable outcomes (Au, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Horn, 2018). We heard deficit-oriented thinking in talk of the “learning loss” urban school students experienced during remote and hybrid learning (Gabriel, 2020). And we continue to hear it now that students have returned to school amid expectations to frequently administer high-stakes tests to monitor academic progress.

Despite these debates, we know little about how urban school principals perceived and navigated the pause in external accountability mandates. If

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anything, this pause may elevate other accountability forms that urban school leaders already deploy to support teaching and learning, ones that external measures overshadow (Portz, 2021). As Ehrich (2000) explains, policy-makers' overemphasis on external standardized measures and control (i.e., "contractual" accountability), has been at the "detriment of other accountabilities that principals should consider such as those supporting the 'moral' purposes of teaching and learning" (p. 120).

Research on leadership during the pandemic highlights how the pause on external performance measures shifted school leaders' behaviors; they used alternative accountability levers to support teachers and students (Francois & Weiner, 2020; Netolicky, 2020). For example, Weiner et al. (2021) describe how urban school leaders used cultural norms regarding collaboration and care to foster responsiveness and learning (i.e., internal accountability). Such work holds useful implications for future investigations into urban principals' motivations, struggles, and practices during this unprecedented moment and beyond. Building on these contributions, we asked: How, in the absence of external accountability measures, did urban school leaders engage their teachers to meet students' and community members' evolving needs?

We found that the 29 urban school principals in our study used internal, market, and moral accountability to address student learning when schools closed and external accountability measures were paused. Therefore, the deficit perspective that these educators can only perform under the pressure of extrinsic accountability is false. Indeed, though participants detailed extraordinary challenges in their schools, our findings illustrate how external accountability's de-emphasis—and other accountability forms' elevation—may cultivate teacher professional growth, student learning, and just leadership.

Literature Review

External Accountability: From the Public Sector to Educational Policy

Seated in neoliberalism, since the late 1980s, public sector external accountability has grown throughout the world and in westernized countries particularly (Piazza, 2017). Organizational psychologists treat accountability as a "system" designed to improve individual or organizational decision-making, performance, and/or judgment (e.g., Tetlock & Mellers, 2011). Extending both to employees' ability to obtain results (i.e., the what) and the processes they use to achieve these results (i.e., the how), accountability includes formal compensation models, how members treat one another (i.e., culture and

norms), and individuals' motivations and orientations towards their work (Tetlock et al., 2013).

In education, U.S. federal policies like the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 and the Every Child Succeeds Act (2015) ushered an "accountability era" intending to disrupt inequalities in student performance and ensure all schools perform according to district, state, and federal expectations. Described as being "tight on ends" and "loose on means," policymakers' theory of action presumes external accountability measures--namely high-stakes standardized tests and teacher evaluations--will motivate educators to increase student achievement (Jacob, 2005). This theory of action also presumes that educators lack the will or rational decision-making to perform well on their own (e.g. see Au, 2011 for a review), thus necessitating inspection and oversight to "control both the content of their work and how it is done" (Apple, 1985, p. 457). Furthermore, such power dynamics influence external accountability expectations as educators come to feel beholden to meeting accountability requirements or be considered "unprofessional" if they underperform (Anderson & Cohen, 2018). And yet, as organizational scholars have long cautioned, "accountability is not the simple and clear social panacea that its advocates might pitch" (Ebrahim, 2005, p. 60).

External Accountability and Urban Schools

The discourse surrounding accountability policies focused squarely on U.S. urban schools - those largely serving Black and Brown students - positions them as sites in need of constant intervention to overcome inequities in teacher and student performance (Milner & Lomotey, 2021; Welsh & Swain, 2020). However, researchers have challenged accountability policies' claims to promote equitable outcomes by highlighting how these policies neglect capacity building, poverty, and institutional racism in favor of standardized tests and evaluations (Au, 2016; Horsford & Vasquez Heilig, 2014; Peck & Reitzug, 2012). In urban areas, scholars suggest that policymakers' preoccupation with external measures has ultimately harmed student and teacher outcomes (Hinnant-Crawford, 2019). For example, Payne (2008) has argued that external accountability does not dramatically change school practices but rather exacerbates already struggling circumstances.

Corroborating observations on external accountability's harmful impact, longitudinal studies of student outcomes during the first 10 years of the accountability movement showed only modest shifts to Black students' achievement (e.g., Braun et al., 2010) with more changes occurring when states first implemented NCLB (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). More recent

policies like *Race to the Top* show equally mixed results for student test scores and/or gap closures (e.g., Dougherty & Weiner, 2019). Others have highlighted how external accountability has undermined educators' professionalism (Anderson & Cohen, 2018) and urban schools' standing in public discourse (Pazey & DeMatthews, 2016). As Reed and Swaminathan (2016) explain, "rarely, do we describe the opportunities and resilience presented by urban settings and instead... the term 'urban' is considered tantamount to 'deficit'" (p. 1097).

External accountability policies have also reshaped urban school activity in ways that, some argue, limit students' learning experiences. Research shows that external accountability mandates have constrained curriculum (e.g., Diamond, 2012), shifting teachers' attention from deep learning to test preparation and rote memorization (Hinnant-Crawford, 2019). Harris (2012) observes such instructional shifts have ultimately solidified social stratification already pervasive in urban schools.

Scholars also depict strained working conditions under external accountability policies. For example, teachers feel stressed to comply with school and district policies without visionary leadership (Camacho et al., 2018; Payne, 2008). Some teachers feel ineffective (Day & Gu, 2007) because external accountability demands thwart opportunities to connect with and care for students (Valli & Buese, 2007). External accountability demands can also undermine principals' relations with parents (Conwell & Ispa-Landa, 2020). Furthermore, accountability policies are blamed for increased teacher turnover (Rooney, 2015), and, in some cases, moved teachers to cheat en masse (Aronson et al., 2016). Researchers observe that urban schools endure these strains most acutely (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Indeed, Hinnant-Crawford (2019) and others (e.g., Milner, 2013) argue that the myriad external reform efforts directed at urban schools—including performance pay, high-stakes testing, scripted curriculum, teacher evaluation, and school choice—consume resources but lack potential in genuinely supporting schools' focus on teaching and learning (Childress et al., 2006; Pazey & DeMatthews, 2016; Reed & Swaminathan, 2016). Together, such findings conclude, as Hinnant-Crawford (2019) suggests, that "accountability erodes the equitable access to high-quality education that its rhetoric claims to foster" (p. 7).

While we and others argue that educational "accountability" has become synonymous with federal policies aimed at ensuring students meet standardized test score goals (e.g., Ehrich, 2000; Francois & Weiner, 2020; Higgins et al., 2020; O'Day, 2002), accountability is a more expansive construct and is often negotiated in complex and contradictory ways. This is particularly true for school leaders, who, positioned as "street-level bureaucrats"

(Lipsky, 1980), must, as Koyama (2014) says, “negotiate data-monitoring accountabilities in nuanced, unexpected, and sometimes savvy ways” (p. 281), including sometimes pushing teachers to adhere to external performance pressures. Here, however, we ask whether and to what degree other accountability forms create similar outcomes. Could it be that school leaders could use more expansive accountability forms to positively impact instruction and learning? To create more equitable outcomes? In the following section, we explore this idea by presenting alternative forms of accountability, forms that might have been elevated during the early days of the Covid-19 crisis when external accountability measures were put on hold.

Conceptual Framework: Reconceptualizing Urban School Accountability

We reconceptualize accountability to fully examine how urban school principals supported teaching and learning during a unique crisis. We use Abelman et al.’s (1999) questions, “to whom, for what, and how” (p. 2) to examine how educators are held accountable in their daily practice. While we discuss different accountability forms discretely, all interact and conflict with one another. Thus, the school leader navigates these tensions across and beyond the school community.

Internal Accountability

While external accountability focuses on district-, state-, and federal understandings about achievement, internal accountability concerns school-level expectations and organizational routines designed to support teaching and learning (Abelman et al., 1999; Carnoy et al., 2003; Francois & Weiner, 2020). Carnoy et al. (2003) describe three levels of internal accountability: Individual responsibility for teaching and learning; school members’ mutual expectations for instruction; and the school-wide mechanisms and processes that create accountability. As a subjective construct that elucidates one’s perceptions of their professional culture and capacity, internal, or “felt” accountability can be captured when individuals describe the extent to which they believe their colleagues feel mutually accountable to school-level learning and teaching expectations (Higgins et al., 2020). Researchers have measured teachers’ feelings of accountability by examining responses to survey items such as, “our school is focused on improving performance on measures of student achievement for this year,” “helping students reach mastery for important skills and content is a priority for this school,” and “meeting

targets for student progress is a priority in this school” (Higgins et al., 2020; Weiner & Higgins, 2017). Research establishes that leaders in organizations with strong internal accountability facilitate it via building relationships and communal norms as well as rewarding attempts to try new ideas and practices (Wang et al., 2019). In schools, such efforts and corresponding higher levels of internal accountability are shown to strengthen teacher capacity to improve instruction and thus respond to external accountability measures and/or internally determined measures of success (Abelmann et al., 1999; Higgins et al., 2020; Weiner & Higgins, 2017). Thus, internal accountability provides a much-needed lens for this study to examine how school staff operate to promote teaching and learning in the absence of external performance expectations.

Market Accountability

As Darling-Hammond (1989) explains, market or “consumer” accountability means “governments may choose to allow clients or consumers to choose what services best meet their needs” (p.73). Market accountability resembles school choice efforts including charters and vouchers and is often measured with instruments aimed to quantify the relative “competitiveness” of one school over another (e.g., waiting lists, attendance records, student enrollment) (Garn, 2001). Such efforts, though seemingly evergreen as policy levers, have neither increased access nor improved urban schools (Jennings & Sohn, 2014).

Still, and important for our study, market accountability can also elevate parental voice and decision-making in schools (e.g., Robinson & Timperly, 2000). Such an orientation draws on Hirschman’s (1970) work explaining how, rather than using market mechanisms of exit (or entrance), parents and others in the school can remain affiliated and use their voice to shape and improve the school and/or district. Indeed, when urban school leaders listen and attend to parental voice in vision, practice, and policies, the school community flourishes (Louis & Khalifa, 2018; Tate, 2021). Moreover, an orientation towards centering the community and their needs reflects “authentic” (Valenzuela, 1999), “critical” (Rolón-Dow, 2005), and “radical care” (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021) in which school leaders prioritize respectful and trusting relationships among staff, students, and families. This expanded version of market accountability contrasts with external policies that inform more traditionally-conceived market accountability mechanisms (e.g., via school report cards, teacher value-added scores, etc.), primarily “substituting reassurance for rigor” (Robinson & Timperley, 2000, p. 86). Here, we build on these contributions to understand market

accountability as the pressure parents put on schools to meet their children's needs.

Moral Accountability

Moral accountability explains how individuals feel moved to adhere to common norms and beliefs regarding ethical behavior (Oshana, 2004; Van Schoelandt, 2018). Applied in school contexts, and to school leadership specifically, we can then understand moral accountability as situated both at collective (e.g., education as a moral endeavor (Dewey, 1966)) and individual levels as actors position themselves as moral agents vis-à-vis their conscience (Ehrich, 2000).

Sergiovanni (1992) and others (e.g., Greenfield, 2004) formalized “moral leadership” in education leadership literature, calling on school leaders to lead authentically and with their values. This call includes nurturing professional relationships and appreciating the local context and community members' experiences. Additionally, this call includes understanding institutional discrimination and other societal forces that impact students' and families' ability to thrive (Crow & Scribner, 2013; Reed & Swaminathan, 2016).

Moral leadership overlaps with calls for leaders to center their vision and practice on disrupting injustice and act as social justice leaders (Theoharis, 2007). Salient among Black principals (Lomotey, 2019), many of whom work in urban schools, we might expand our understanding of moral accountability to include buffering staff and children—not from the surrounding community—but from a heavy-handed external gaze mandating narrow and racialized expectations for teaching and student learning. Indeed, as Ehrich (2000) explains, an orientation towards moral leadership and accountability often puts school leaders in conflict with external accountability efforts that emphasize the transactional nature of schooling and performance and create “moral and ethical dilemmas or decisions that leaders face in their day-to-day work” (p. 122).

Methodology

We used an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012) to investigate how twenty-nine urban school principals perceived and negotiated accountability in their schools during an unprecedented crisis--sudden school closures and changing mandates. As Smith and Shinebourne (2012) point out, this approach allows researchers to ask critical questions regarding participants' meaning making, such as, “What is the person trying to achieve here? Is something

leaking out here that wasn't intended? Do I have a sense of something going on here that maybe the participants themselves are less aware of" (p. 53)? Throughout the process, we excavated our knowledge of and personal experiences with accountability by writing memos, frequently discussing our findings, and returning to the original data. In keeping with Smith et al.'s (2009) position regarding interpretative phenomenology, we found the approach useful in encountering data in fresh ways, centering the participants' experiences and treating those experiences as part of a so far unstudied phenomenon.

Positionality

Our individual and collective identities shaped our approach. Author 1 is a Black, straight, cisgender woman who is a former urban public-school teacher and school leader. Author 2 is a White, straight, cisgender woman who worked as a teacher and as a school, district, and state consultant for school improvement and turnaround. As current scholars and instructors of educational leadership, our experiences have compelled us to challenge deficit-oriented assumptions about urban schools, often laden with racist and classist ideologies. Furthermore, as we conducted our readings of the data, we were struck by the numerous stories of staff turning toward—not away from—the numerous challenges the pandemic raised. These early readings prompted us to systematically investigate participants' conceptualizations of accountability.

Participants

We constructed this sample from a larger qualitative inquiry that investigated how principals across the United States responded to school closures at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Along with 16 other researchers from across the country—who also collected data, but did not participate in the conceptualization, analysis, or writing of this paper—we developed a convenience sample of 120 principals in 19 states. While most principals led traditional public schools, the settings varied in size, location, urbanicity, and demographics.

For this study, we created a sub-sample of 29 urban school principals. We used Milner's (2012) classification of urban schools—one that moves beyond a focus on location and size but rather includes settings whose social realities resemble what we might see in a populous setting—to identify which participants to include in our sample. These social realities, Milner describes, might include schools with high concentrations of English language learners,

students living in poverty, and/or Black and Latinx students. For this study, we consulted the National Center for Education Statistics' guidelines that define mid-high and high-poverty schools as those in which 50.1 to 75.0 and greater than 75.0 percent, respectively, of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Thus, our sample features 15 principals in urban intensive districts—large and populous settings whose social and geographic features shape the school community. Additionally, eight principals worked in urban emergent schools, ones smaller than urban intensive areas but navigating similar—albeit less acute—social circumstances than an urban intensive school. Finally, six principals from urban characteristic schools comprise our sample. Milner explains that while urban characteristic schools are not located in densely populated areas—and may operate in suburban or rural areas—they still navigate social challenges commonly attributed to urban intensive schools. Milner's inclusive definition of urban schools enabled us to focus our analysis on how similar social circumstances informed how participants navigated the shared experience of school life without external accountability mandates. See Table 1 for principal and school characteristics.

Data Collection

Interviews were an ideal data source because they enabled us to learn about participants' perceptions of their leadership and practices during a time when teaching and learning expectations were continually changing (Seidman, 2006). Participants completed a consent form and a survey about their and their school's demographic information. Some principals shared artifacts relevant to topics that emerged from the interviews, including documents about learning plans or examples of parent communication.

The original team of 18 researchers conducted interviews in late Spring and early Summer 2020. This team collectively designed an interview protocol focused on school closures from March 2020 until the end of the school year. The protocol included questions about accountability, supervision, students' experiences, staff development, and family communication. See Appendix for questions from this protocol that were relevant to this study. Researchers interviewed each principal once; each interview lasted between 45 and 120 min and was conducted and recorded via video call. Transcriptions were verbatim.

Data Analysis

Our data analysis combined the two authors' initial impressions of the subsample of 29 participants' transcripts with emergent themes as well as

Table 1. Selected School and Principal Demographics.

School	Urbanicity	School Level	School Characteristics						Principal Characteristics			
			Total Students	% Black	% White	% Hispanic	% Black/ Hispanic	% FRPL	Race*	Gender		
											% Black	% White
1	Characteristic	Elem	502	5	11	83	88	84	Black	Female		
2	Emergent	Elem	290	96	2	1	97	100	Black	Female		
3	Emergent	Elem	340	47	13	10	57	80	White	Female		
4	Emergent	Elem	451	36	50	7	43	100	Black	Female		
5	Emergent	Elem	474	14	49	27	41	74	Black	Female		
6	Emergent	Elem	717	57	6	22	79	71	White	Female		
7	Intensive	Elem	311	90	1	3	93	100	White	Male		
8	Intensive	Elem	404	5	2	87	92	97	White	Female		
9	Intensive	Elem	573	8	65	6	14	100	Asian	Female		
10	Intensive	Elem	592	6	1	81	87	94	White	Female		
11	Characteristic	Middle	1,348	27	39	26	53	50	White	Male		
12	Emergent	Middle	817	21	24	44	65	72	White	Male		
13	Emergent	Middle	1,187	20	3	67	87	90	Black	Female		
14	Intensive	Middle	1,291	10	16	69	79	90	Hispanic	Male		
15	Characteristic	High	393	76	9	9	85	55	Black	Female		
16	Characteristic	High	2,053	33	11	54	87	73	White	Male		
17	Characteristic	High	481	83	7	6	89	82	Asian	Female		
18	Emergent	High	987	66	19	9	75	62	Black	Female		

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

School	Urbanicity	School Level	School Characteristics						Principal Characteristics			
			Total Students	% Black	% White	% Hispanic	% Black/Hispanic	% FRPL	Race*	Gender		
											% Black	% White
19	Intensive	High	439	66	2	26	92	69	White	Female		
20	Intensive	High	454	17	9	69	86	100	White	Female		
21	Intensive	High	506	61	11	15	76	82	APPI	Female		
22	Intensive	High	529	39	1	58	97	81	White	Female		
23	Intensive	High	678	17	15	54	71	66	White	Male		
24	Intensive	High	1,718	12	2	36	48	79	Black	Female		
25	Intensive	High	235	32	1	63	95	100	Asian	Female		
26	Intensive	High	351	24	8	49	73	79	Hispanic	Female		
27	Intensive	High	375	18	26	36	54	76	White	Male		
28	Characteristic	High	2,258	89	3	6	95	81	Black	Female		
29	Intensive	K-12	870	3	3	91	94	81	White	Male		

* Self-identified

those reflective of literature on accountability. We first randomly identified five interviews to generate initial ideas about how participants described accountability in their schools. As we discussed our shared ideas, it became clear that participants were engaging structures, policies, and routines associated with internal and external accountability and this realization led us to formalize codes for these elements aligned with the literature. External accountability codes included instances when principals described how they or their school accepted, rejected, or modified external expectations. For internal accountability, we included codes such as “sense of responsibility” to school members and “shared expectations about how and what students should learn.” We also found other ways participants talked about accountability and specifically to whom principals and staff felt accountable and for what (Abelmann et al., 1999), that went beyond our initial readings and conceptualizations. Thus, we returned to the literature, and in doing so, we realized participants’ responses also often reflected elements of moral and market accountability. Thus, we revised the codebook to add these dimensions.

Using the revised codebook that now included all four accountability forms, we each analyzed half of the sample, thus re-analyzing the original 15 transcripts and adding the remaining 14. We discussed our interpretations frequently throughout this stage to ensure valid data interpretations. We continued to revise and refine the codes accordingly. We then categorized salient excerpts across all 29 transcripts under each of the four accountability forms. We reread each excerpt to examine how they reflected our reconceptualized understanding of the four accountability forms that emerged in our participants’ responses. This final stage enabled us to define how our participants conceived of each accountability form.

Findings

In our analysis of 29 urban school principals’ interview transcripts, participants discussed how they continued to develop teachers and attend to student learning through internal, market, and moral accountability even though state educational leaders suspended external accountability measures during the Covid-19 pandemic. Responses indicate how these three forms of accountability shaped, and were shaped by, a variegated infrastructure of informal and formal systems, rituals, and discussions about what it meant to teach, to learn, and to support the school community during a crisis. As our goal was to consider how those principals who likely felt prior external accountability pressures most acutely (i.e., those leading urban schools), responded when these pressures abated, we focus on the generalized

themes across our sample. Future work may look at nuanced differences across different types of urban schools but would likely need a larger sample to do so effectively. We first present how our participants responded to changing external expectations. Following, we highlight the three school-level accountability forms that emerged from our analysis.

External Accountability

Across our sample, participants explained that, as state educational leaders suspended external accountability measures when schools closed, they struggled to negotiate district leaders' changing and inadequate policies meant to ensure performance. For example, 11 participants reported that their district leadership, in collaboration with teacher unions, went so far as preventing principals from entering teachers' virtual classrooms. While this policy intended to alleviate pressure from evaluation while teachers learned new practices, participants discussed how the policy hurt their efforts to lead. Principal 24 explained, "We weren't able to push into any teacher's class to observe what they were doing without permission.... That it was a little problematic because I was blind. I couldn't really help on that level."

Nineteen participants also observed that district leaders' new focus on student accountability in the form of attendance and grading policies sabotaged student engagement. For example, Principal 3 explained that once district leaders communicated that students could not receive failing grades,

Students who had been signing on to our platform stopped. It turned into disengagement. So, it was this back and forth struggle of messaging. My teachers, right there in the trenches, and you feel like you get slapped every time there's something that comes in [from our superintendent].

Meanwhile, 17 participants lamented that their district leaders' instructional guidance reflected mediocre expectations for student performance. Principal 5 explained, "It was very basic. We deserve more than that. If you give less to everyone, then everyone stays there."

Thirteen participants also recalled moments when, even while looking for support in negotiating new expectations for teaching and learning from the district, they were met with silence. Principal 21 explained,

They [district leaders] have these meetings where everyone's on and there's a chat. Everyone is muted. No one can take themselves off mute. There's a chat that you can type into, but you can't see what anyone else is saying. You can type in questions, but no one ever responds to your questions.

She added that this feeling of silencing during a pandemic felt particularly deafening because “the stakes are life and death.”

These responses highlight how, without established accountability measures, new district policies were incompatible with principals’ efforts to support teachers or student learning.

Internal Accountability

As participants indicated temporary external accountability measures were unhelpful as leadership tools, their conceptualizations of internal accountability permeated responses about how their school operated. Our analysis revealed three features of internal accountability: Principals’ expectations for teacher performance, principals’ collaboration with teachers, and teachers’ collaboration among one another. We discuss each below.

Principals’ Expectations of Teacher Performance

Navigating Technology for Observation and Feedback. Though states where our participants worked suspended formal teacher evaluations, participants nonetheless maintained expectations for teaching by navigating online instructional platforms. They visited classes, provided feedback, monitored teachers’ class pages, and communicated with families about learning expectations. For example, Principal 13 explained that beyond visiting classes regularly, each day, “I would pick a content area and grade level, and just visit those teachers’ instructional pages to see what students were learning for the day and if it aligned with the instructional calendar.” Similarly, principals used online class pages to support individual students’ progress. Principal 8 recalled circumventing a new district policy that prevented principals from entering classes: “I told the teachers, ‘if you want me to help you, I need access to your classrooms.’ And that way, when I get a phone call from a family saying we can’t find the assignment, I would just say, ‘Alright, let me log into the Google Classroom. And I’m gonna tell you where to click.’” In the absence of external accountability measures, participants’ ability to navigate technology ensured that teachers remained accountable to students for virtual instruction.

Communication. Almost all of our participants explained that communicating clear and ambitious expectations for remote learning replaced delayed or absent district guidance and enabled teachers to problem-solve around new remote technologies. For example, when Principal 7 observed teachers’ struggles with virtual instruction, he assembled a “remote learning leadership team. We were the hub of information, just taking in information from the district”

and sharing it with the school community. Similarly, Principal 2, along with other building administrators, became “telecaptains... responsible for nine [staff members]... to have at least one touch point with that person every day.” Participants recalled that they instituted new mechanisms for increased communication to maintain a sense of internal accountability; in this case, to augment staff’s awareness and expectations of school practices.

Additionally, 18 participants discussed that they communicated ambitious expectations to staff that replaced external accountability metrics for student performance. For example, while figuring out new grading policies, Principal 27 explained to his staff,

‘We have to have something to grade them on,’ you know? ... I had to be a balance to try to keep our standards high...like I just didn’t want it to be that the whole school fall apart and then there was nothing, right? You had to have some work, we had to have some kind of expectations.

Participants’ internal accountability influenced how they navigated technology and communicated with teachers, ensuring teachers remained accountable to the school community for student learning.

Principals’ Collaboration with Teachers

Shared Vision. While districts’ expectations for student performance focused on grading and attendance, participants explained how school-based leadership teams navigated external policies and determined how their school’s vision would inform remote instruction. During meetings, as Principal 5 conveyed, “people are empowered and understand what the county’s expectations are... so that you can really be part of the decision-making.” Twenty participants described how dialogue with staff ignited a renewed focus on student engagement, interdisciplinary learning, and individual and collective well-being in the absence of a test-driven curriculum. One principal (27) explained that the instructional leadership team sought to center their ideals of connectedness: “We made it clear that was the number one important thing, to provide support for the kids.” Thus, instead of focusing on making up assignments during advisory, the team collectively decided, “let’s just put that aside and we’re just gonna bond with each other, we’re gonna play games with each other, we’re gonna talk about things.” Other participants described how they revisited their goal to support diverse learning styles and thus recreated a teaching schedule to offer synchronous and asynchronous sessions.

Shared Practices. Twenty-two participants also recounted how they employed established infrastructures during the new work climate—particularly administrative, grade-level, departmental, and whole-staff groupings—to cultivate the staff’s internal accountability. Like Principal 1, participants explained that rather than directing teachers to adhere to fixed instructional expectations, they trusted teachers to

Come up with their own expectations, online teaching expectations. And they went to work. I was really surprised. I never had one single issue, any teacher saying, ‘I’m not gonna do this,’ because they came up with it as a team, at each grade level.

Furthermore, participants explained meeting with staff—informally and formally, collectively and individually—facilitated frequent discussion about expectations. Principal 16 attended professional learning communities to ensure staff had ample opportunities to collectively reflect on their teaching:

I was on Google meetings all day long. I knew the teachers were there, we knew they were working.... It’s not like we stayed on top of our teachers, it was more like we walked beside our teachers, I think, through that whole process.

Participants’ accountability conceptualizations reveal how, now free from external performance expectations, collaborating with staff clarified instructional expectations, sometimes in ways that in-person schooling could not accommodate.

Among Teachers

Going Above and Beyond. Across our sample, all of the participants recalled how their staff worked beyond their formal responsibilities, further revealing how they and their teachers conceptualized internal accountability for effective virtual teaching and learning. Often, principals characterized their staff as “dedicated,” “conscientious,” and part of a “collaborative culture” in which staff members regularly acted beyond their expected tasks. Therefore, they were unsurprised, yet felt affirmed, to observe staff engaging beyond their formal responsibilities when states suspended formal teacher evaluations and high-stakes standardized tests. For example, one principal shared a schoolwide expectation for all teachers to have a ten-minute call with each of their students every day to support students. Principal 3 explained,

And I thought maybe my teachers would push back, because that’s a lot, you know? They’ve got 25 kids times 10 min times all the work plus all the other

stuff that they had to prepare. But my teachers did not push back, and I will tell you that was the most important thing that we did.

Additionally, participants observed other activities such as perfect attendance at optional faculty meetings and teachers working extra hours to communicate with families that exceeded the scope of teachers' in-person work.

Learning New Ways to Teach. Sixteen participants conveyed that, without state tests and formal evaluations, teachers nonetheless exceeded expectations to learn how to teach remotely. As Principal 5 recalled, initially some teachers

Were completely tech adverse. Who were crying in the beginning, 'I just can't do it' to having their own meetings, and they became independent, and they could get kids to participate, and they could give feedback. The growth in people really astounded me.

Even in cases where staff participation was uneven, participants nonetheless observed a communal effort to accomplish tasks. For example, Principal 21 explained,

We had a couple of people didn't do what they were supposed to do. We had teachers get sick. We had teachers who had severe childcare issues. But there was this kind of spirit of, everyone is going to do what they can do. There are going to be times when people have to step back drastically and other people take up the slack.

Even without external measures of accountability, and despite teachers experiencing personal challenges, participants recalled how internal accountability thrived in their staff's extraordinary efforts to ensure student learning.

Market Accountability

Principals also spoke to parental desires and demands in shaping their response to Covid-19. These moments were characterized by parents initiating changes to school practices like, for example, calling to pressure the principal to adjust the school day (e.g., fewer or more synchronous offerings) or a grading approach. This contrasts with principals' sense of responsibility or accountability to parents and community members, which, as we discuss later, was often driven by a sense of moral accountability. In the case of market accountability, groups of parents instigated the change, often positioning themselves as consumers demanding more from the system.

While there were a few cases in which principals instituted formal systems for parents to advocate for programs (e.g., one middle school hosted online extracurricular clubs in response to a parent advisory group's request), in most cases, as the principals explained, pressure often came from families who had, before the pandemic, already felt comfortable making demands. As Principal 18 explained,

Some families who said, you know, 'You're not meeting the needs of my child,' and me saying to the parent, 'Well, what would that look like? If we did meet the needs of your child, what would you like to see from my staff?' And just asking that question. And parents were like, 'Well, you know, I want an hour of this and an hour of that.' And I said, 'Okay, but here's the parameters we're given. So, what would that look like for you?' '...And because with some of the more challenging families, um, it was that personal conversation said, 'Look, I know what you want. I can't give you that. I can give you this. And that's pretty darn close, but I can't give you all of this.' that was the hardest thing...

Nineteen principals in our sample were pushed by vocal parents to make accommodations to newly designed structures and systems. At the same time, and as true above with Principal 18's comments, principals' frustration in response to such incidents appeared to be directed more at the impotence they felt to make these accommodations than the demand for them. If anything, principals seemed to sympathize with parents and their expressed desire for the school and the system to better meet students' varied and complex needs. This included, for 15 principals, and particularly those leading high schools, demands from parents regarding what they viewed as important events such as concerts, dances, sports championships, and, almost universally, graduation. As Principal 17, recalled,

I would say graduation was the biggest point of concern in the community. And so, when parents were coming to me as a principal, about, they were unhappy with what was happening with graduation every single time, I was just able to say, like, 'I'm with you. This is not how we wanted to celebrate our students, but we have to follow district guidance and their guidance has to be approved by the department of health.' ... Parents at the end of the day, once they learned, and understood, that it really was not principals making decisions, they were supportive of schools and just not supportive of the district decision.

Thirteen principals also shared several incidents in which parents called to express concern about their child's teacher. When asked about the calls they received from parents during this time, Principal 28 said,

Their [parents'] concerns were mainly around [online platform], and making contact with the teacher according to the many of the parents that I spoke to, they get reached out to the teacher...and the teacher did not return their call, or the teacher refused to open [online platform] back up so that their kid could submit a lesson or their kid tried to submit lesson and [online platform] closed right there in their face, and the teacher wasn't willing to cooperate, and they couldn't do it because the computer was down, and so just that mediation between the teacher and the parent.

Again, rather than express anger or annoyance at parents, principals supported parents' right to hold the school accountable. We might understand parental requests regarding gaps in teacher performance as replacing external accountability systems—specifically teacher observations—that districts and states suspended during the early days of the pandemic.

Moral Accountability

Principals also reported that much of their decision-making and actions during the early days of Covid-19 were guided by values and beliefs they deemed super-ordinate to, but driving, their duties as a school leader. These values were often articulated as what they felt they “just had to do” regardless of whether those actions aligned with district-level directives and/or expectations. Indeed, as we discuss below, these decisions often put them in direct conflict with directives. Thus, although the repercussions for these actions were personal in the truest sense, the consequences (good or bad) for these decisions were distinctly theirs.

For example, four principals decided to close their school buildings before their district or state acted. Principal 26, who had worked in public health before becoming a principal, anxiously watched, and waited on her district's inaction. She explained,

At the time when I had been working in hospitals... I worked in the hospitals through the AIDS epidemic, and when there was an outbreak of tuberculosis and these things, so I was a medical social worker for quite some time. And I understand what's involved when you have to contain an illness. So, the directives I was getting from the district about how to handle situations were completely inadequate. And I was like, 'Wait a minute, if this is supposed to be how you are going to contain an epidemic, this is inappropriate and impossible.' They even told me to assign a person to sit with a kid who might potentially be infectious. And I was like, 'This is ridiculous.'

Trusting her gut and worried about the harm caused by inaction, she closed her school and told her teachers to stay home for district-mandated professional development, providing the session remotely instead. Despite the potential backlash she might have faced, she also began calling her supervisor and rallying other principals to demand that schools be shut down immediately and that teachers would be allowed to stay home. While admitting that such work was risky and difficult, she was unwilling to endanger her teachers' well-being: "I'm not going to have them come in. We have no idea what is going on."

This decision to go against the district regarding closure was true for Principal 22 as well. As she explained, she told her families and staff to stay home a week before the official directive from the district. As a result, she made herself vulnerable to district reprimand either directly or via families who complained to the district. However, as she explained, she was less concerned about the latter as more families were inclined to trust her decision-making over the district's.

There's a high level of trust even though our families have a lot of reasons not to trust systems like the district. We had that going for us going into it, but I also think that there was some ... There was less spread within our school community because we really had less ... We had far fewer people coming in leading up to it.

While principals like 22 and 26 risked reprimand or worse for deciding to close their schools and to advocate for others to follow suit, it was also clear that they felt a sense of accountability to do so. These principals knowingly acted out of compliance with their districts' directives to do what they felt was necessary and right for their community.

And yet, only some of the principals' decisions and actions driven by moral accountability were incompatible with their official work. As principals provided essential resources (e.g., food and later internet and computers) to their communities during this time, sixteen participants explained that they and their staff's motivations were both morally driven and often supported (if somewhat reluctantly) by their districts. This was true for Principal 10 who advocated for her school to be a district food distribution site, calling the superintendent directly to ensure that her 600 students and their families could obtain meals at their school. Others, like Principal 5, similarly told of how they advocated for their school to become a food distribution site, even when it was not initially designated as such.

We were not identified as a school. . . . I have a good relationship with my community association president and she asked me about it so I reached out to my executive directors. And by the next week, I had lunches being given out at our school. . . . I emailed my executive director, she forwards me to the superintendent. . . . And then I gave him information and he contacted food nutrition and they had it up and running.

Just as principals advocated for their families to access food, so too did they feel morally accountable to make sure students had the necessary resources to participate in school remotely. Again, while such work was aligned with the larger goals of the district, principals articulated that their drive came from a sense that it was the right thing to do and not because it was expected of them or within the scope of their normal duties. Principal 3 articulated the moral imperative surrounding distribution efforts:

You know, the two weeks of planning, and then spring break, and then they [the students] still didn't have devices. They just lost so much, and it got down to where I just couldn't even stand it anymore. So, we went and delivered our own devices. They [the district] finally let us do that. I said if they would've let us do that earlier, we could've handled it and our kids would've had them right away.

Seventeen principals described how they created means for getting computers and wifi routers to their communities, often risking their health and safety in the process. Across the interviews, it was clear that principals felt called during this time to serve and did so driven by a sense of purpose and moral accountability.

Morally Driven for Social Justice

As principals grappled with the Covid-19 pandemic, the persistent pandemic of racial discrimination in their schools continued to burden them. George Floyd's murder in May 2020, brought a type of racial reckoning to the U.S. that coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic, and many principals felt that they needed to address it, often without district support. In so doing, 16 participants evoked their long-time commitment to such work and explained that their drive to do so was deeply situated in their sense of right and wrong (i.e., morality) regardless of whether such efforts were "officially" sanctioned or supported by their district.

For example, Principal 24 explained how the Black Lives Matter Movement and racial injustice during this time reinvigorated their motivation

to lead. “I really got into education to be a role model for kids of color.” Driven by this higher calling, Principal 24 explained that they dug in and amplified the school’s equity commitments despite its fraught and difficult circumstances.

There needs to be a shift and to really talk about the why, the systemic oppression. Look at our biases and we all have them. How do you basically work on shifting things or stopping us, being more aware of it? Some of us have unconscious bias and some of our bias is very conscious...I don’t have it all figured out yet. But I do know that it is a passion of mine, this equity work, and I’m excited that I don’t have to do it alone because I have a team that is working with me.

Eleven principals shared how, while they had long worked for equitable systems in their districts, they felt a renewed desire to address racial injustice in their school and school system. Many also recognized that such work would take self-fortitude and an unwillingness to bend to what might be more convenient or in keeping with tradition. As Principal 12 explained,

When I became the principal, there were actually two separate programs inside of the school, and there was a magnet and a non-magnet, and really it was all just a farce... Kids were so equally brilliant, and there were civil rights, I think civil rights violations inside of this concept of a magnet...the programs had students that were stratified based on race, English language learning, access to special education, and so [school] has been... We had been fighting and pushing for more equity in this incredibly and richly diverse community of kids... We’re embedding this vision for next year and really trying to become... To activate anti-racism within that, “How do we, as educators, really become anti-racist, not just about equity, not just about tolerance, but about anti-racism?”

Discussion and Implications

This qualitative inquiry sought to explore how urban school principals engaged their staff to meet students’ and community members’ evolving needs in the absence of traditionally used external accountability measures during the Covid-19 pandemic. Our analysis revealed that, in addition to internal accountability, moral and market accountability shaped principals’ engagement in teaching and learning. These findings offer insights about accountability dimensions within schools that can encourage new research paths and policies that move beyond a singular and deleterious preoccupation with external expectations.

These findings also highlight the persistence and power of external accountability as some teachers and principals strove to reframe the purpose of schooling during this time to a focus on safety and well-being over academics. Either in district leaders' attempts to devise more "humane" or "flexible" performance measures or in efforts to re-exert attendance and grading expectations, most of our participants struggled through ever-changing and unclear external demands. Whether from the district, the state, or even teacher unions, participants recalled how external demands often undermined schools' ability to best serve students and families. Participants' challenges resonate with scholarship that describes a misalignment between the measures school adults value and those that policymakers champion (Au, 2016; Broadbent, Dietrich & Laughlin, 1996; Darling-Hammond, 2007). As one might imagine, this unprecedented crisis exacerbated this misalignment, unfortunately at a time when district and state leaders could have sparked innovative ways to support schools.

Our study reveals three interrelated processes of internal accountability when district and state leaders alleviated external measures for performance at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. First, principals communicated clear and ambitious performance expectations, often using informal and formal feedback to hold teachers accountable for effective remote instruction. Second, principals collaborated with teachers to revisit the school's mission to inform instruction and school policies. Third, staff took the initiative to learn how to teach remotely, going above and beyond their traditional duties to support their colleagues, their students, and their students' families. Collectively, these findings reveal a tripartite internal accountability system impacting individual teachers' commitment toward their professional growth and student learning, mutual expectations for instruction, and the mechanisms that developed and supported growth. These findings align with research on urban principals who effectively lead their schools to meet performance requirements and other outcomes of value to those working and learning in the building (see Williams, 2008, for a review). This study also extends this research, suggesting that even in the absence of high-stakes standardized tests and teacher evaluations, internal accountability sustained school staff's capacity to support instruction and learning.

As parents made demands of their schools, principals did what they deemed appropriate to modify school practices. This parental activism challenges deficit narratives regarding urban parents (Lightfoot, 2004) and highlights, as Hirschman (1970) pointed out, how voice creates organizational improvement in a market context. While principals clarified that parents had the right to hold the school accountable to meet their child's needs, this form of accountability was particularly appreciated in schools where

principals felt they had less access to teacher practice. Principals who were, often because of union rules, unable to observe their teachers online, spoke most positively of parental demands to enhance a particular teacher's instruction. Thus, market accountability helped to ensure teachers met internal accountability goals to serve all students fully. If this is indeed the case, it raises important questions about to whom teachers are ultimately accountable and, as Robinson and Timperley's (2000) suggest, calls us to incorporate parental voice more deeply into such processes including teacher evaluation to reorient it towards "rigor over reassurance" (p. 86).

Finally, we find principals were driven by and made decisions based on moral accountability, specifically around doing what they perceived as "right" or "just" during this time. On one hand, this orientation, as highlighted by Sergiovanni (1992), allowed principals to engage authentically and to lead with their values. Yet moral accountability also put principals in conflict with their districts as they attempted to negotiate between the "rules" and what they felt was most needed to ensure the health and wellbeing of their students and communities. While others have elevated moral leadership as an important element of school leaders' work (e.g., Greenfield, 2004; Quick & Normore, 2004), in our reading, much of this work suggests a natural alignment between morality and leadership as constructed in institutions (i.e., a moral leader will act in accordance with the district parameters of the role). However, scholarship (see Ehrich, 2000 as an exception) has less frequently explored independent morality in conflict with institutional morality. And yet, as we reckon not just with educational systems' response to Covid-19 but also with the longer-standing pandemic of racial discrimination, some educators are calling for genuine opportunities for educational leaders to dismantle inequity by critically examining "normal" schooling practices or "the right way to do things" (García & Weiss, 2020). Given the potential pitfalls of a system dependent on individual morality to ensure good decision-making and equitable practices (e.g., whose morality?), our findings suggest a need to consider collective approaches in naming and addressing moral conflicts as they arise.

Limitations

We acknowledge two limitations of our study. First, while our inquiry examines how urban school principals described accountability among their staff, the larger study's convenience sample was broader, including principals from suburban and rural school settings based on the entire research team's professional networks. Thus, our sample is constrained by the number of participants and locations included in the larger sample. Similarly, because the larger study focused on public school principals' responses at the beginning

of the Covid-19 pandemic, the interview guide did not include explicit questions about urban school leadership. Second, as the data collection focused on capturing principals' perceptions of their leadership, this study cannot corroborate these views with observations or with interviews from school staff, parents, or students. Nonetheless, we believe the participants' stories provide significant insight into accountability dimensions in urban schools.

Conclusion

Our findings provide a genuine opportunity to learn from, leverage and cultivate school-based mechanisms that encourage teacher development and student learning beyond the pandemic. Future research can investigate urban school leadership practices situated in commingling challenges. Additional research can also explore how internal, market and moral accountability permeate urban school life as schools today. Future studies can also explore how school leaders sustain, elevate, or even deprioritize these additional accountability forms with the return of external accountability measures.

This study also holds important implications for urban school leadership and policymaking. First, this study does not suggest that educational policymakers or leaders should replace one dimension of accountability form for another. Rather, this study highlights how these accountabilities may align or conflict, and how school leaders may best align accountability mechanisms to support student learning and community uplift. Furthermore, this study concludes that school leaders must be intimately involved in instruction. That is, urban school leaders can regularly observe teaching and provide feedback outside of formal evaluations and frequently communicate ambitious learning and teaching standards. Moreover, they can organize shared time for the staff to continually revisit the school mission and to collectively plan, execute, and reflect on practices that develop student learning and that affirm their school community.

Our study joins internal, moral, and market accountability—not typically highlighted together in urban education literature—to portray the complex ways school staff functioned when schools shuttered at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Findings document that external expectations were either absent or misaligned and thus urban school leaders drew on other accountability forms to support the school's main work of teaching and learning and to care for their school community. We offer this observation—that urban schools can still operate without external accountability's exclusive stronghold—to challenge deficit narratives replete with pathology and failure. We hope that these findings portray urban schools' complexities,

highlight the approaches leaders use to address challenges in their schools, and, in turn, provide practitioners and researchers meaningful insight into how to respond to similar challenges.


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Note

1. We use Milner's (2012) framework to define "urban". He designates "urban" schools as rooted in city size (e.g., intensive or emergent), or "characteristic" in that such schools may experience "some of the challenges that are sometimes associated with urban school contexts in larger areas" (p. 559).

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Appendix

Relevant Interview Protocol Questions

Background

Tell me something about your school that will help me understand your culture.

Phase 1: March 16th to March 30th

For the next few questions, think back to the week your school closed after the crisis hit.

- What were the 2-3 most pressing issues you faced that week?
- What was the decision-making process?
- What was the external guidance about what you needed to focus on that first week?
- What did you think of this guidance?
- What resources, if any, were provided to you to help implement that guidance? By whom?

Phase 2: Settling In

The next set of questions are about how you and your school settled in after the first week.

- How have you organized decision-making in your school?
- What do you see as the most important part of your job right now?
- What have you had to “let go of” because of Covid that was a usual part of your daily leadership practice?
- Where have you turned for guidance for important decisions?

Students

- What do the learning experiences look like now for your students?
- What has student attendance looked like since the Covid-19 outbreak?

Parents/Guardians/Families

- How are you communicating with parents? How is this different than your prior ways of communicating?
- What types of supports have been provided to families/communities as students have been expected to engage in their classes?

Faculty

- What are the biggest challenges your faculty have faced?
- How are you responding to your faculty's needs?
- Have you created/changed systems to do this?
- What is district policy for on-line instruction? How are you implementing it in your school?
- To what extent have you retained continuity of instruction or how has it changed for remote learning?
- What has professional development look like for your faculty? How are you continuing to provide professional development?

Accountability/Supervision

- What are teachers' responsibilities in the current environment?
- How do you know they are fulfilling these responsibilities?
- What is the district's policy for teacher supervision?
- How are you planning to/have you evaluate(d) teachers?

Closing

- Given all that's happened since mid-March, what are some of the things you have learned through this experience?