"There wasn't a guidebook for this": caring leadership during crisis

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Introduction: In this study, we seek to add to the descriptive literature on caring leadership through an examination of the work principals did to guide school communities through the COVID-19 pandemic. In this time, one essential role they played was as caretaker for all; not simply deciding, advising, or providing resources but responding with advocacy and compassion. Even so, they simultaneously had to consider traditional instructional leadership expectations including teacher observation and supervision as well as student evaluation.

Methods: This study examines the acts and expressions of caring leadership. Our research responds to one overarching question: What does caring leadership look like in action? Through close examination of 17 elementary principals' recollections of work during the school closures of 2020, this study highlights the elements of their decisions and choices that embodied caring leadership as well as demonstrates how these moves both incorporated and exceeded traditional leadership work.

Results: Our findings highlight the centrality of caring leadership not merely as part of leaders' work, but as the actual work itself. We extend a presumed tautology of caring leadership to explicate the discrete tasks undertaken by caring leaders to sustain the work of schools.

Discussion: Research on leadership practices frequently emphasizes professional work as relational and interactive to achieve instructional goals without acknowledging that much of the contemporary leadership work both centers on and draws strength from mutual, authentic caring for others to accomplish work. Thus, this investigation enhances research on leadership in education to recognize the caring work that principals perform and the value they ascribe to caring.

KEYWORDS

leadership, principal, leadership theory, crisis leadership, school leadership, caring leadership, pandemic leadership

Introduction

Caring is critical to successful schooling and school leadership (Smylie et al., 2016). Caring matters because it functions as a positive, protective force in the formation of social life, but in schooling, caring fosters both student academic success and well-being (Smylie et al., 2020). Caring leaders understand the foundational importance of caring for others; they recognize the "intrinsic interests" of their community and "try to protect them" (Noddings, 2006, p. 343). Competent caring leadership aims to achieve holistic benefits for students such as engagement, social integration, positive feelings of support, increased capacity for achieving goals, and the ability to reproduce caring (Smylie et al., 2020). Even so, while research on the importance of strong instructional leadership remains dominant in the literature (Neumerski, 2013; Grissom

et al., 2021), less attention has been given to caring as a function of instructional leadership, perhaps in part due to the demand for growth and achievement over an explicit focus on the changing needs of students and teachers. At times, teachers report that a tight focus on student achievement directs both time and attention away from forming caring relationships with students and other educators (Smylie et al., 2016, 2020). While theoretical work asserts caring as the foundation for ethical decision-making (Noddings, 2013), little research has described what caring leadership looks like in action.

There are also discrepancies between how schools enact care and the extent to which their institutions are experienced as caring (Mehta and Fine, 2020). Contemporary American schools are organized to provide care, supporting students with safe spaces, material resources, and extracurricular activities, but research casts doubt on whether schools are felt to be caring by their constituents (McHugh et al., 2013; Bonanno et al., 2023; Carroll et al., 2023). Work on school climate documents the ways in which schools fail to support student well-being, particularly students belonging to minoritized social groups or marginalized identities (Valenzuela, 1999; Antrop-González and De Jesús, 2006; Khalifa, 2018). Because schools serve particularly situated communities, they can function as sites of oppression, reproducing harms that historical structures have set in motion (Khalifa, 2018). Khalifa (2018) argues that educators must confront oppression with leadership that is empowering and humanizing, challenging principals to look beyond the school and center community perspectives. Mehta and Datnow (2020) similarly critique how uncaring schools disconnect students from their community-based capital by offering "stratified and dehumanizing spaces" (p. 495). They call for new work on school organization that expands on their potential as responsive, humanizing institutions.

Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the potential for schools to transform the supportive relations between educators and the educated, underscoring the centrality of caring leadership. When American schools closed in response to the COVID-19 public health crisis, principals adopted newly intensified roles as community caregivers and architects of school culture while working to maintain connections with students, teachers, and families (Anderson et al., 2020). Amidst ongoing uncertainty, they bridged interacting roles of caring leadership and instructional leadership to keep the positive relations of schooling going, asserting the organization of school as an important "hub of the community" (p. 4).

In this study, we seek to add to the descriptive literature on caring leadership through an examination of the work principals did to guide school communities through the COVID-19 pandemic in its earliest days. Because students and staff were separated during closure and resorted to novel methods to keep schooling at least minimally intact, principals became the connection linking organizational guidance, decision-making, and physical and psychological safety (Weiner et al., 2021; Kaul et al., 2022). In this time, one essential role they played was as caretaker for all; not simply deciding, advising, or providing resources but responding with advocacy and compassion (Anderson et al., 2020).

This study examines the acts and expressions of caring leadership. Our research responds to one overarching question: What does caring leadership look like in action? Through close examination of principals' recollections of work during the school closures of 2020, this study highlights the elements of their motivation and decisions that embodied caring leadership and demonstrates how these moves both incorporated and exceeded traditional leadership work by trying to provide for students without the typical resources and place-based interactions of school.

This study emerges from a national exploration at the Consortium for Policy Research in Education of leadership in crisis (Consortium for Policy and Research in Education, 2022). The Leading in Crisis larger study included interviews with 120 principals in 19 states in the United States. Here, we draw on a subset of interviews with 17 elementary level principals in 14 states.

Review of the literature

Caring leadership concerns how school leaders model and provide care to support the growth of their organization, addressing the needs of teachers and students in order to create a positive environment and motivate learning (Noddings, 2006; Louis et al., 2016; Smylie et al., 2016, 2020; Ryu et al., 2022; Bonanno et al., 2023). Caring—the process of helping another grow and being attentive to their interests—is the foundation to positive interactions and relationship growth (Noddings, 2006, 2013). Caring is also rooted in the practices of service to and for others as a professional occupation; the work of pastoral care, nursing care, and disability services addresses personal needs and concerns while it promotes well-being, communal caring, health, empowerment, and autonomy (Smylie et al., 2016). Although the concept of care is multidimensional, consisting of emotion, action, identity, and commitment, caring leadership synthesizes the purpose of care for students by attending to both the social ideals and instructional aims of schooling (Noddings, 2006; Louis et al., 2016; Smylie et al., 2016; Ryu et al., 2022). Whether caring is engaged to support who students are and the concerns they have in the moment versus moving students toward academic achievement and a desired future poses a complex task for leadership, because students may receive different messages about what care is and what teachers value (Antrop-González and De Jesús, 2006; Walls et al., 2021). Furthermore, the support students receive as care at the high school level differs from the support that younger children may expect at the elementary level (Ellerbrock, 2012; Weissbourd and Jones, 2014b). However, even at the secondary level, students labeled teachers that related like a friend, like family, or like a parent as the most trusting relationships (Antrop-González and De Jesús, 2006). Caring leadership must therefore seek to satisfy multiple aims on behalf of children and educators, incorporating a moral purpose to helping students and expanding interpersonal relationships to enact community (Noddings, 2006).

Caring leaders are not satisfied with practicing only what works; they balance the interests of the people they lead with their aims for the organization and model care by listening, asking questions, and leading discussions; inviting participation and experimentation; and fostering intellectual excitement (Noddings, 2006; Ryu et al., 2022). However, caring does not consist of acts alone, and its power does not rest on authority, contractual obligation, coercion, or expectation of return—it is motivated by concern for and service to others (Smylie et al., 2016). While early conceptions of caring leadership describe it as a relational property, an extension of the work of the caring teacher and their individual, supportive relationships (Noddings, 2006), more recent conceptions of caring leadership move beyond a property of relations, to who perceives care and how it is shared as a property of the organizational culture (Walls et al., 2021; Bonanno et al., 2023).

However, there is little consensus on the core features of leadership that engender this culture (Ryu et al., 2022). Walls et al. (2021) connect caring leadership to mean more than trusting relations by attending to how students conceptualize belonging. They particularly observe which organizational practices foster student engagement and the multiple layers of relationships and spaces where caring occurs within schools. For example, collaborative work by staff to practice small routines—friendly interaction in hallways, adult greetings at school entrances—supported student belonging as a daily experience.

As Smylie et al. (2016) caution, caring production is often ignored as a leadership skill and capacity because it is assumed to spontaneously exist between adults and students within schools. When time and attention are focused on the instructional core, teaching around caring and concern is subsumed by the explicit value, achievement. The connection between authentic caring and instructional leadership intersects in research around the creation of a positive school climate (Tichnor-Wagner and Allen, 2016). For example, caring school leaders use critical methods to employ a specific political consciousness for leading with anti-racism and ameliorating social injustice (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021). This leadership suggests that caring should be culturally responsive, specific to student populations and culture (Khalifa, 2018); in this vein, leaders' goals for organizational improvement stem from their own caring stance regarding justice for their students (Tillman, 2004; Khalifa, 2012; Wilson, 2016; Bass and Alston, 2018; Irby et al., 2020; Rivera-McCutchen, 2021).

Critical caring handles the tension between instructional aims and caring by raising the value of authentic caring over esthetic caring (Valenzuela, 1999) and emphasizing the role of students' home contexts and community capital (Bonanno et al., 2023). Noddings (2013) describes esthetic care as limited to a feeling virtue, abstract, a caring about, in contrast to the relation caring for, which attends to a bond in which caring is recognized, felt, and acknowledged. Esthetic caring can be harmful and subtractive, by limiting concern to student performance, whereas authentic caring involves caring for student interests with warm, encouraging relationships (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021). These relationships not only create compassionate trust but also actively acknowledge school structures and routines' capacity to inflict harm without the guidance of spiritual, moral, or empathetic leadership (Witherspoon and Arnold, 2010). When culturally and community grounded, authentic caring can work toward a more connected organizational process of positioning educators as co-advocates who promote social trust (Bonanno et al., 2023).

Studies on school climate and organizational improvement indicate that caring leadership can influence the character of the whole school (Astor et al., 2009; Kudlats and Brown, 2021; Rivera-McCutchen, 2021; Ryu et al., 2022). One crucial aspect of caring leadership is that the social connection provided via caring leadership has proven more effective in improving school climate than research-designed, evidence-based interventions (Astor et al., 2009). Recent work by Ryu et al. (2022, p. 599) confirms the way that caring leadership becomes successful "lies in a leader's relational competency and genuine caring behaviors;" how leaders activate caring with individuals "allows teachers to observe how their school leaders care for themselves, interact with students, and respond to their expressed needs and concerns." Relational caring moves beyond the dyadic when, like notions of radical, critical, or community care, it becomes public, and visible. When caring exerts positive influence, it identifies what is desirable and demonstrates active strategies for support to all members of the organization. Caring leadership widens the circle of concern by creating the expectation that all students belong to a community to which they also have a responsibility to demonstrate ethical care, to reach out to each other, particularly to isolated or struggling students (Weissbourd and Jones, 2014a). Weissbourd and Jones (2014a) assert that while educators create and model social norms of caring and concern, students are the ones positioned in schools to change norms. Particularly in middle and high school, students have inside knowledge of social dynamics, and they have more leverage with their peers than adults.

However, current trends in curriculum and pressing anxiety about the increased need for mental health supports have evolved into the direct teaching of social and emotional learning (SEL) for affective change (Kennedy, 2019). This positions adults as the authorities on social competencies that may obscure the obligation of students and the unique perspective that their experiences form. It also becomes a new responsibility that schools might find expensive or burdensome. Kennedy (2019) suggests that affective reforms like SEL require different "resources, time, expertise, and leadership" than instructional reforms and pose the additional task of transforming theory into practice without explicit training (p. 474). Reform-minded implementation of social emotional learning risks becoming another audit culture or version of aesthetic care without the presence of caring leadership. It also risks overlooking the foundational environment of caring leadership and the enabling conditions that would sustain social support by first ensuring teachers are supported by models of care and staff experts in SEL, like school psychologists and social workers. Teachers must also be enabled to develop their caring competencies.

It is not clear that school organizations have the resources and information they need to implement SEL as caring. Weissbourd and Jones (2014a) suggest that schools regularly survey students and staff whether they experience caring and inclusion. What is clear is that principals describe the mental health needs of both teachers and students as an evolving challenge that is stressful and time-consuming (Reid, 2021). Leaders express doubt about supporting mental health, because their preparation focuses on analyzing student data and staff performance without training around social and mental health as they work harder on "making sense of these complex and delicate situations" (Reid, 2021, p. 259). This literature indicates that organizational cultures that want to balance caring, positive climates with strong instructional leadership find it immensely challenging to do so now because of these prevalent social conditions. Caring leadership offers a potential way that educators might bridge student social and academic support.

Louis et al. (2016) measure caring leadership by focusing on how leaders understand the individual needs of teachers and are motivated to act on behalf of everyone in their organization. They maintain that academic support reflects a "particular kind of caring" for students by allocating support to those most in need of it. In this way, caring is not defined only by an increase of caring actions but an effort to distribute critical resources in such a way that it reaches those most in need (p. 334). Caring leaders are cognizant that caring is always at play—every action and interaction can take on qualities of caring or not caring. In this framework, caring uses attentiveness and professional motivation to meet their teachers' and students' explicit needs and discover implicit needs. Caring becomes authentic when leadership

engages with positivity and energy that children can receive; it is open, genuine, meaningful, affirmative, and playful.

The caring leadership enacted during such an evolving, indeterminate context as the school closures of 2020 suggests that learning cannot proceed without the foundation of a caring school culture. During 2020, leading with care involved meeting students' and teachers' inferred and expressed needs without the proximate social relationships or physical structure of the organization. To better understand this concept, this study employs the framework of caring leadership developed by Smylie et al. (2016) and Louis et al. (2016) to examine the dynamic acts school leaders used to maintain caring. In this framework, caring leadership rests on social relationships as the foundation for a connected, responsive school community. To cultivate a caring school environment, the principalship must become centered around the ethic of care. Caring is embodied in and cultivated by school leadership as an ethic, comprising the aims, mindsets, and competencies of care. In this ethic, leaders recognize the value of every individual member of the community and desire to foster a place where all persons may flourish.

Caring leadership cultivates its ethic using the following (Louis et al., 2016) elements:

1. *Attentiveness* as understanding grounded in empathy.
2. *Motivational displacement* as prioritizing other's needs.
3. *Situationality* as adaptive and responsive to variable and particular conditions.
4. *Mutuality* as the assumption of flexible roles and cooperative responsibility.
5. *Authenticity* as openness, transparency, and meaningful attention.

The model of Smylie et al. (2016, pp. 17-18) asserts that leadership becomes caring in the "matter, manner, and motivation of its practice." Any action may be done with caring, beyond social interactions, to encompass the organizational goals via "a wide range of tasks that can be filtered through a lens of caring." Building from the core elements, leaders may structure caring in their school community around the following practices: developing the capacity for caring in others, shaping proximal social relationships and school conditions to make caring explicit, and promoting a shared meaning of caring as a primary quality of the organization. A leader may pursue capacity via teaching and guiding, positive modeling, and promoting the experience of caring. They might also build capacity by engaging supportive structures beyond the school to foster and strengthen the acts and relations of caring. These webs involve drawing on relationships with families as well as community organizations to gain important sources of understanding about student needs. This coupling action may strengthen the caring that students receive and help schools identify weaknesses in community networks of care by becoming receptive to familial or cultural orientations that the community wants reflected in the school organization. A network perspective also acknowledges that the individual leaders may not always be best positioned or suited to cultivate meaningful relationships of care with every member of the organization (Bonanno et al., 2023).

In typical times, these caring actions occur through proximal social relationships and attention to the social architecture of the organization. In this study, such relationships and architecture were absent. Leaders worked with an ethic of concern by using their knowledge of individual student-family situations and needs and by positioning themselves through relationships and intensive outreach to receive and discover information they could act on. This work adds to the concept of caring leadership by detailing its expression through the relational and organizational actions, interactions, and practices during an evolving crisis context. Our findings indicate that leaders' actions demonstrate a highly motivated and expansive caring capacity—one that was very much present prior to March 2020 but also grew because of ongoing challenges.

Methodology

This qualitative study of principals' leadership during the COVID-19 crisis draws on interviews with a nationwide sample of school principals across the United States. The findings come from the study led by Dr. Jon Supovitz and based at the Consortium for Policy Research in Education at the University of Pennsylvania. In this paper, we limited participants to school leaders at the elementary or middle level based on the assumption that leaders at these levels have wider engagement with teachers as these levels are typically not departmentalized. We further limited participants to those who had at least 3 years in their current building based on the assumption that these leaders would have had ample time to build relationships and create both formal and informal communities in their schools, unlike principals who were newer to the role and to the particular context (Table 1).

The interview format limited the data to descriptions of school shutdown and health risks to students and teachers. In 45-min interviews conducted on Zoom, leaders were asked about the timing and logistics of closure, pressing issues, their support work to students (including food aid), their communication methods, support work to

TABLE 1 Study participants.

Pseudonym	State	Gender
Alex	New Jersey	Male
Anna	Colorado	Female
Belinda	Minnesota	Female
Bess	California	Female
Bill	Tennessee	Male
Briana	New York	Female
Chris	Colorado	Male
Edward	California	Male
Elias	Florida	Male
Jada	Virginia	Female
John	Minnesota	Male
Julie	Colorado	Female
Kerri	Maryland	Female
Kevin	Massachusetts	Male
Logan	Pennsylvania	Male
Rachel	Delaware	Female
Sarah	Connecticut	Female

teachers, and their support for self. Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater (2012) recommend qualitative researchers continually ask themselves what surprised, intrigued, or disturbed. In doing analysis on these data for a study of leader relationships during closure (Stone-Johnson et al., 2023), we were surprised by the prevalence of affective voice of the leaders' statements in expressing concern for others: fear, stress, and worry; and we were intrigued by the intensity with which individual leaders worked to reduce harm. Guided by the concept of "caregiver for all" coined by Anderson et al. (2020) in working with a different subset of the Leading in Crisis data, we then asked: What does it mean for leaders to work as caregivers for all? How was care work embraced or performed? To answer this question, we each coded the transcripts deductively for expressions of and acts of care. Using this shared dataset of 26, we coded until reaching saturation = this was 17. As we progressed, we compared and discussed codes and noted whether caring was directed individually, collectively, toward students, staff, families, or self. In the second round of coding, we used analytic memo writing (Saldaña, 2016) to reflect and generate categories, which enabled us to organize themes centered on responsiveness, social concern, navigating inequality, and shared morale. During the final coding process, we wrote memos to relate the categories to concepts from the literature on caring leadership. Finally, we grouped strategies descriptively into areas centered on attentiveness, motivational displacement, situationality, mutuality, and authenticity (Louis et al., 2016). We chose these competencies of caring relationships to focus on leadership practices as work. We could closely examine what leaders as individuals displayed without information on enabling or antecedent conditions like trust or continuity, or particular information on the organizational conditions in their schools.

Sample

The full sample of principals from which this study draws included 120 participants from across the nation. The sample was purposively selected through researchers' networks; this choice was made due to the immediacy of the crisis and the researchers' attempts to not burden leaders at that time. Fifty-two of the 120 schools (43%) were classified by the National Center on Education Statistics (NCES) as suburban; 47 of the schools (39%) were located in cities; 16 of the schools (13%) were rural; and five schools (4%) were located in towns. Twenty-two of the schools (18% of the sample) were located in four western states (CA, CO, MT, and ND); 12 schools (10% of the sample) were from three central states (MN, OH, and OK); 34 of the schools (28% of the sample) were from five southern states (VA, FL, GA, TN, and TX); and the remaining 52 schools (43% of the sample) were from seven eastern states (CT, DE, MA, MD, NJ, NY, and PA). Fifty-seven of the study schools (48%) were majority white; 23 of the schools (19%) were majority Hispanic; 19 of the schools (16%) were majority Black, and three of the study schools were predominantly American Indian. On average, about 52% of students in schools in the sample qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. Principals averaged just over 8 years of experience as a principal, which ranged from 1 to 19 years. Seventy-one (71%) were white; 20 (18%) were Black; and 7 (6%) were American Indian. Sixty percent of the sample were women. From this larger sample, we selected a total of 17 principals. We limited participants to individuals working at the elementary level who had a minimum of 3 years working in their current school. The choice of 3 years was made to ensure that only leaders who had previous experience in the building prior to COVID-19 would be selected. The choice to limit the sample to elementary principals was based on leaders' proximity to teachers and students; at the secondary level, leadership is frequently distributed through department chairs and other forms of teacher leadership.

Limitations

The larger study from which this study emerged sought to understand the COVID-19 event itself and the ethical decision-making of leadership through crisis. The interviews were only with principals and not with other stakeholders. We do not have evidence from students or staff that principals' acts were received as caring. The sample in this study includes only leaders at the elementary school level; further research on how caring leadership manifests at the secondary level is needed. Finally, these interviews are a moment-in-time snapshot of leaders' experiences, responses, and adaptations in crisis. Interviews were conducted in July 2020, during ongoing risk to student and community health and uncertainty amidst fall reopening plans.

Findings

Principals acted as caring leaders by working to understand the needs of families and teachers, pursuing connection to respond with resources, answers, or emotional support. It is important to note that they engaged in this work above and beyond their typical leadership duties, although many of these duties were sidelined temporarily in the earliest days. Following Louis et al. (2016), we organize our findings around the thematic elements of caring leadership: attentiveness, motivational displacement, situationality, mutuality, and authenticity. Overall, leaders' actions converged around the way they positioned themselves to do the work and how relentlessly they prioritized caring, identifying shared priorities and performing the same role, if addressing them in varied ways depending on the particular community's location, advantage, or disadvantage. What follows is an exploration of what leaders did to recognize need, manage the emotions and experiences of precarity, and reduce harm for school communities–the embodiment of caring leadership. Within each element, we highlight thematic findings that elucidate a finer grained picture of caring leadership.

Attentiveness

As caring leaders, principals collected stories of need, acknowledging concern and articulating how their communities were affected. Even in July, leaders had identified that children's social, emotional, and mental health were at risk and that they had limited tools to foster connection. This work came through in their communication strategies and their identification of their priorities moving forward for "being in community" with children. Leaders thought communicating care was so important they began this work without guidance in the early weeks, by setting up systems for

checking in with families, or recording and posting supportive videos and content for children.

The priorities for *connection* and *social emotional* or *mental health* were repeatedly emphasized as major concerns by each leader, who at this time were serving school communities with uncertainty about disease spread and fall schooling plans. This sense of the collective needs also superseded concern for barriers to learning or having technology, centering the human aspect of loss and isolation. Kerri told us: "I would say the tech thing is one, but honestly, it's the social emotional connection. The human experience of this. It was so isolating for a lot of reasons. It wasn't like they could go outside and play either. It wasn't fun. It's scary. It's so uncertain. So uncertain." Leaders understood how radically children's lives had changed in a short period of time, and showed empathy for the fear and lack of security families expressed. One further aspect of care leadership beyond concern for others' emotional well-being was more traditional social work. Leaders enacted concern by navigating the urgent need for resources or safety exacerbated by the school closures.

In many cases, principals stepped up to fill work gaps, subbing for teachers who in some cases, being new, did not have existing relationships to students—or doing other kinds of service online to be in community with children. This work allowed them to practice and embody the care they felt during this crisis. Chris explained that he connected with students in new ways and felt validated in his love for educational work by making this effort.

> I led a novel club and I got to work with students in novel reading and seeing those were moments that really reminded me of what this was all about, and I kept it grounded and I think we had to go back to the reasons we got into this work to begin with. And I think it pulled us all back into that space of why we are educators. This is our work. And it just reminded me of how much we all love working with kids, but then how we really wanna fight for them to… I think fighting for them was something that really pushed me through all of it. I think the family that… lost everything in a fire right before COVID hit. Their whole home burned to the ground, and they lost everything they had… They have their lives, but then compounding, it was COVID, yet the community still pulled together and had a clothing drive…So I think it just pulled us back into why we do all of this.

Principals expressed high levels of commitment as well as gratitude for others when they recognized others and were able to name this care labor as the most important aspect of their work. Being there for students enabled leaders to find motivation to keep working on others' behalf.

Motivational displacement

Motivational displacement is characterized by prioritizing others' needs (Louis et al., 2016). Our findings indicate that one way leaders engaged in motivational displacement was prioritizing clear communication above all else. Many of the communication strategies were undertaken without guidance in the early weeks. Communication served both technical and relational needs of making contact and expressing care. Logan said he did not wait for the district: "We started putting content out on a website so that we could at least still be in

community with the children." Rachel explained how she threaded care into the district's safety-oriented emails:

> So I went to follow up on what the district puts out and try to give a sense of emotion or humanness behind it as well, knowing that we're just in such a unique situation and people need to feel a little bit of emotion about it.

Logan described how he started multiple means of communicating out, using his personal accounts to get around district messaging, so he could do read alouds to his kids:

> There were sometimes though, that like one principal reported me because I was reading aloud to children during the first 2 weeks, and she was like, You could get the district sued… "cause you're offering instruction." I was like, "No, I'm a public citizen reading out loud to kids, and I'm posting on my personal email or personal YouTube channel, and I'm sending it out to families."

Leaders communicated partially to gain a sense of control over a threat situation that was unfolding and lacked clear protocols or parameters. Communication was one tangible act they could perform to connect to their staff and students and offer reassurance. In this way, leaders had a strong sense of their own work and value that enabled them to act with confidence amidst uncertainty, placing student needs above their own personal career. Through communication efforts, leaders focused on the importance of maintaining relationships with staff, urging them to reach students in order to express care and concern. Leaders also modeled support for students not only by making themselves accessible, but also by explicitly offering it to teachers, acknowledging the different individual limitations or challenges. Logan expressed how relationship maintenance was their main work and that teachers needed to ask after their students and share back with him.

> I think the most important part was making sure that teachers were maintaining relationships with students and doing their due diligence to make sure that that occurred. So again, really focusing on how are the students feeling? How are they being supported? How are you managing that? And how can I support you? Because everybody had different circumstances, so one-size-fits-all approach was really challenging even given the resources that they gave.

Through constant communication, leaders prioritized the needs of their constituents at times over their own needs. By initially working to connect and share on an individual basis, they modeled prioritizing others' needs. They also quickly moved to mastering modes of shared communication like Zoom, which transformed outreach and connection into a shared experience. Whether it was employed for teachers to support each other and troubleshoot during a "PD in Pajamas" together online, or the act of organizing a driving parade at school so that students could see their teachers again, principals were laser-focused on acting for others' benefit. They used skill and creativity to recreate the relatedness that is fundamental to human reality and promotes the openness and receptivity that enable actions to become caring.

Situationality

As described above, situationality is adaptive and responsive to the unique contexts and conditions of leaders' work (Louis et al., 2016). During the shutdown in March 2020, principals served as the primary point of contact for families and staff. Each leader generally made themselves accessible to everyone at all times; this around-the-clock accessibility went beyond communication to include support and guidance. Bess indicated accessibility meant "being available 24–7 to respond" as they worked to set up routines for remote teaching and learning. Leaders expressed moving into a work mode that made it very hard for them to shut down the computer or phone. Most emphasized the need to be immediately available. Belinda said, "So it was really hard for me, but as I said before, I felt that need for families and students and, and staff to be very immediately accessible to them when they had a problem."

With regard to children, leaders also anticipated students' home environments based on their prior knowledge, in some cases handing out their own cell phone numbers to students they worried would not be safe, writing the nurses' and psychologists' numbers on sticky notes into backpacks so that children could reach out. As Kerri described, principals started responding and did not stop:

> We made a lot of just immediate actions that we took. I'm not one myself who ever waits for someone to tell me how to do. I just figure it out. That was where we were at. Once someone called because, again, I was the one in the main office. Someone called with a need, again, primarily for learning packets. But, if someone called and needed some other support from school, we were like, okay. Let's figure out what to do. We were just reacting. It was all very reactionary. I partnered with a neighborhood church, I knew someone who worked in that area, to support and lend a hand in that regard. Hands down, the technology. The digital divide that was real. So real.

Principals described reacting to varied situations without clear protocols and working without their usual physical interactions, reaching out to partners and filling multiple work roles as clerk, copy person, and tech delivery. As a result, being more responsive was one way they coped with the lack of rules and proximity. At first, leaders knew they could offer their voice as presence, cognizant that it was a large, layered constituency. Rachel said:

> And I think that's the hardest part of working from your dining room is at work, I can put my eyes on 425 kids, 50 staff members, parents that come in…Specialist support staff that are there. I can physically see them and you can feel emotions, you can see how people are behaving and know who you need to check in on, who you need to support, and here in my dining room, I'm like, You know I…What do I do? So I think it's just letting people know that we're here and we can help.

Leaders also thought that their responsiveness fostered learning and established new routines for collaboration. In general, leaders set zero boundaries on their availability. Only one principal in the data set began to shut down his computer after 3:30, and this stood out as counter to other practices. He also explained this boundary as both self-care and the realization that teachers needed a break; he was not getting emails because teachers were not on their computers at night. Here, Logan describes how his selfless overwork enabled others to collaborate and grow:

> I think collaboration was at its highest because of need and people needed to learn how to do things. My teachers were holding their own Google meets because somebody knew how to do something and they showed it to everybody else, so that was incredible. The learning that came out of that was incredible. I learned that I am not a person that should work at home, that that is really not good for my well-being because I will overwork at any chance given…

The way that caring leadership adapts in context means that it is not rule-bound or driven, but dynamic and innovative. Through situationality, leaders kept in touch with the variations in staff work and learned of early successes, encouraging growth, which engendered more work. They also expressed care for teachers' workloads, desiring to work more so others could focus on students. Because leaders were the central communicator and expressed constant availability, their workload intensified, losing any sense of being done. When meeting routines were disrupted, leaders both took initiative to be proactive about communication out to others and repeated that work individually, due to the changed nature of work. Many leaders also described how the work directives changed rapidly. Logan said:

> It was up early running meetings, professional development, keeping up with abundance of emails that were coming through because of the lack of being able to see you in the school or ask you a question on the side, all that now became channeled into emails. Right. And then from there, I was working probably more hours than I should have because it was really hard to make the distinction of work time is done. And there was a lot that I was curating on my own because I didn't wanna put anything on the teachers on top of what they were already trying to figure out. So managing social media sites, managing constant communication with family, making sure teachers knew what the expectations were for the week ahead, because the expectations from district literally changed almost every week along the way.

Although this work now describes the earliest pandemic phase, before schools embarked on the 2020–2021 year under various conditions, principals did not express ambivalence or regret for their work choices or second-guess these efforts to serve as caring leaders in terms of decision-making and connecting on behalf of others.

Mutuality

By virtue of their position, leaders' caring meant absorbing high levels of community stress, but they worked to institute positive social interactions to help alleviate those conditions. Many leaders expressed how scary the shutdown was, noting how high staff and community stress levels climbed, particularly when staff members contracted the virus or when job loss and food insecurity were present. Alex described the daily work challenges as being buffeted by ocean waves:

> Since there were so many changes, so many pivots, each time there was a pivot, it created all of those new questions and-and concerns that people would have, and so when things kind of settled down, then there was a new change that prompted more questions, a need for more response and support, and then when those things settled down, there was another pivot, you know. So it felt like that. In some ways like, you're in the ocean and you're, you know, getting caught by one wave after another.

Because they were subject to the collective stress, leaders worked hard to create spaces to share and moments for positive interaction and feeling: some called it joy, teacher appreciation, cheerleading, fun things, dumb little things, intentionals, or being a lighthouse. Leaders expressed appreciation for how their staff worked in difficult circumstances; at the same time, leaders expressed high levels of commitment to restoring their own energy so they could be present. Many relied on networks with other principals doing the same work. As Kerri expressed:

> The principalship can be so incredibly isolating. It was good to know that there were a group of other people who were going through what I was going through and we could talk about it. I've definitely come to value and appreciate the importance of connection and relationships and education. It's not just about what we teach them, it's how do we do it, and those relationships matter a lot.

Working on relationships was one of the main ways leaders tried to foster connection. John spent two evenings calling every teacher's inbox so they would receive an encouraging message to their voice and email when they arrived "at work" in the morning. He explained, "So I tried to do a lot of that stuff to just remind them of their 'why' because it was hard. People struggled with it." Leaders recognized this work as care and did not shy from recognizing that each individual was responsible for shared success.

For the most part, leaders created space online for teachers to share, staging events they might have held at school, but naming it "pancakes in pajamas," doing online trivia games and Cahoots. Several principals routinely filmed fun, light-hearted videos from school for students to watch. Elias saw himself as a cheerleader:

> It may sound corny. Instilling hope, keeping morale up, helping, and this is beyond just the school building. I felt like even with the parents seeing the bigger picture, and people are dying, kids family members could be hospitalized and we have no idea, turning a D into a C is not the end of the world, stuff like that. And, yeah, I felt myself needing to be a cheerleader, an even louder cheerleader than I typically am.

John organized a drive-through for students with teachers present holding signs and playing music, because kids said they missed being at the building. Noting that 250 cars showed up, he was surprised at the large response and the emotion he experienced. "But I think that was really emotional because it was–we physically saw kids and we realized that I saw so many connections that I did not realize were there." Educators' experiences of the mutuality of caring became powerful drivers of doing care. Although school communities were separated, even isolated, leaders understood that morale work and

relational work using creative tools both revealed and maintained previous bonds.

Leaders also expressed commitment to self-care. Most built on practices they had already established as a way of handling the intensive encounters leadership required. Rachel expressed it this way: "If I do not take care of myself, I cannot take care of others." One principal rode her bike outside every day, and another said she began reading novels again. One leader practiced meditation and made art with his teenage daughter; one took a long, daily walk around his city. One principal saw his therapist every week and relied on an equity coach to support his in-school relational work.

Leaders were explicit about confronting their feelings of powerlessness and failure, acknowledging that in the circumstances, they could not reach all children or help everyone. Alex spoke of gaps he could not "close:"

> This work is humanistic. It's not technological, right? I mean, there are some technical aspects to education, of course, but it's really a humanistic experience and, kind of letting go of those kind of common, everyday experiences of walking the hall and-and, you know, popping in and, um, talking to kids and-and teachers in that way is just, you know, it couldn't happen that way. And then I think, you know…and I don't know that I did reach out with this, but just kind of forgiving yourself for not doing everything that you feel like you needed to do or even being able to support people in the way that you think that they deserve to be supported.

By modeling care and responsiveness, leaders saw their own staff collaborate and contribute to morale. They recognized the work as valuable in terms of creating care and reciprocating connection. Belinda felt both validated and inspired by the work her staff had put in by being willing to support others, accepting leadership roles:

> To make it through this has been really inspiring. Like just all those little things that people were willing and able to do to go above and beyond that would help people get through a difficult time and bring a smile to their face, I think is, is really important. And the message that I was really clear throughout this whole thing with our staff, was really how I saw their role was to be a lighthouse and to be that, that positive point that people look to when there is rocky waters. And I, I feel like they accomplish that in an amazing degree.

Throughout their work, principals supported staff through specific acts of playful morale building to encourage joy and positivity, but they also communicated to staff their expectation that they each serve an important role by caring for and collaborating with others. In this way, they consciously tried to extend the caring capacity of the organization and cultivate more powerful, sustaining webs of caring.

Authenticity

In caring for others, leaders worked to provide tangible aid directly to students in the form of food, money, technology, and social services. In order to do so, however, principals both had to possess

high levels of community knowledge before closure and be able to reach families during closure. Most leaders quickly developed a system through teachers and by using their own accessibility routines for collecting need. At the same time, leaders did not wait to be contacted; they also reached out. Logan built a spreadsheet of students in need and called it a roll call:

> We would spread it out on the spreadsheet and delegate who was gonna make a point of contact that was much more personal for certain kids, if the teacher hadn't been successful in doing so. I specifically have called those families, email those families, the social workers been out to those families. We always start with, How can we help? What do you need?"

In identifying needs, leaders also engaged in coupling actions with stakeholders outside, reaching out to other agencies when they could not make connections on their own. Not only did leaders establish connections for caring, they instituted systems to maintain care and close supervision over student safety.

School leaders drew on community agencies and school communities themselves as resources. In terms of inequality, leaders were positioned to be familiar with their stakeholders, to listen to expressed needs, and act to coordinate care, requesting and redistributing material resources. In some cases, leaders knew more about children's communities and home environments than their teachers. Leaders did not express surprise about the varying levels of need but responded consistently with empathy and worked to marshal aid. Edward describes asking families do donate funds to support another school family:

> One girl in particular, emailed and said virtual school, basically, she's saying, it's un-attendable, and I'm not the only one who feels this. So we reached out to her and the counselors did, turns out her dad works at one of the low-end grocery stores in Vista, mom lives in Tijuana and he's an essential worker, and he didn't want her home for a 10-hour shift all by herself. So he sent her down. Internet sucks, she got disconnected on her phone call with the counselor three times because reception issues in Mexico. So just those type of things flared up. So depending on the need, we did a fundraising drive at school for gift cards to Walmart and grocery stores, and so I communicated with people, if you're able, if you need help or if you're able to help, contact us. These are ways to do that. So we gather, I think about $4000 worth gift cards that we were able to handout to families.

Because they had high levels of information about students outside of school and positioned the school as a place to find assistance, leaders made the virtual principalship into a site of care. Leaders were uniquely connected to both social agencies and school community resources to collect and distribute aid in terms of navigating inequalities within their schools.

Discussion

During the COVID-19 crisis, school leaders intentionally embraced caring leadership with foresight, energy, and courage, almost without reservation. Leaders worked hard to see others and

make them feel that their work was important. They also worked to identify risk and reduce harms. They leveraged relationships with their staff and knowledge of their school community in order to organize and direct care.

Through explicit acts of caring, leaders embraced the elements of caring leadership (Louis et al., 2016): attentiveness, motivational displacement, situationality, mutuality, and authenticity in order to provide emotional, social, and academic support to their schools. As authentic leaders, principals created platforms for supporting connection and social–emotional health, starting new clubs and other activities to keep people virtually together. They prioritized communication above all else, acting as information conduits and forging new forms of communicating, especially through video and social media. They were available around the clock, going beyond traditional school hours to problem-solve, support, and connect. They stepped in as social workers, finding food and technology for families who lacked connection to vital services. Finally, they drew on community agencies and the school community to ensure safety and bridge the needs of their families.

By practicing this ethic of care, leaders could use their concern as a resource and motivation that in turn validated the energy and emotion they invested. Although they were explicit about the risks, engaging in self-care practices to maintain their capacity, what seems evident is that caring in action became powerfully generative for caring. The work of doing care, the extension of self in at times extreme ways, generated for them a power that kept them doing more. Because they were fighting for their kids, and their community, the leaders here found meaning and satisfaction. Amidst the fear and stress, they seem to be thriving as caring leaders.

In this study, we sought to explicate what caring leadership looks like in action, especially during a crisis. Building on the deeply theoretical work of Smylie et al. (2016) and Louis et al. (2016), we have attempted to distinguish acts of caring as discrete elements of leadership. In response to research indicating a need for more consensus on the core features of caring leadership (Ryu et al., 2022), we drew on elementary principals' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic to shed light on these features. Such work is essential to deepening caring as a foundation to other forms of leading (Smylie et al., 2016).

As discussed above, caring leadership may seem tautological; there is perhaps a built-in assumption that school principals are caring almost by design. Caring leadership is often seen as a precursor to high quality school leadership rather than as an independent theoretical framework driven by empirically supported claims of the actions and dispositions of caring leaders. However, a distinction is essential in looking retrospectively at how leaders worked during the COVID-19 crisis.

Caring leaders are boundary spanners; they frequently maneuver between the instructional aims of the organization, the policy aims of the state, and the varied interests of their stakeholders (Noddings, 2006; Ryu et al., 2022). Caring is ingrained in their work but importantly, it is also an antecedent. While Louis et al. (2016) find that we still know little about the creation of "resilient cultures" of caring within schools or the kinds of contexts in which caring might deteriorate, these particular conditions enabled principals to do care with urgency, collaboration, and competence, suggesting that they were working from a culture of caring they had established and

FIGURE 1
Working model of caring leadership.
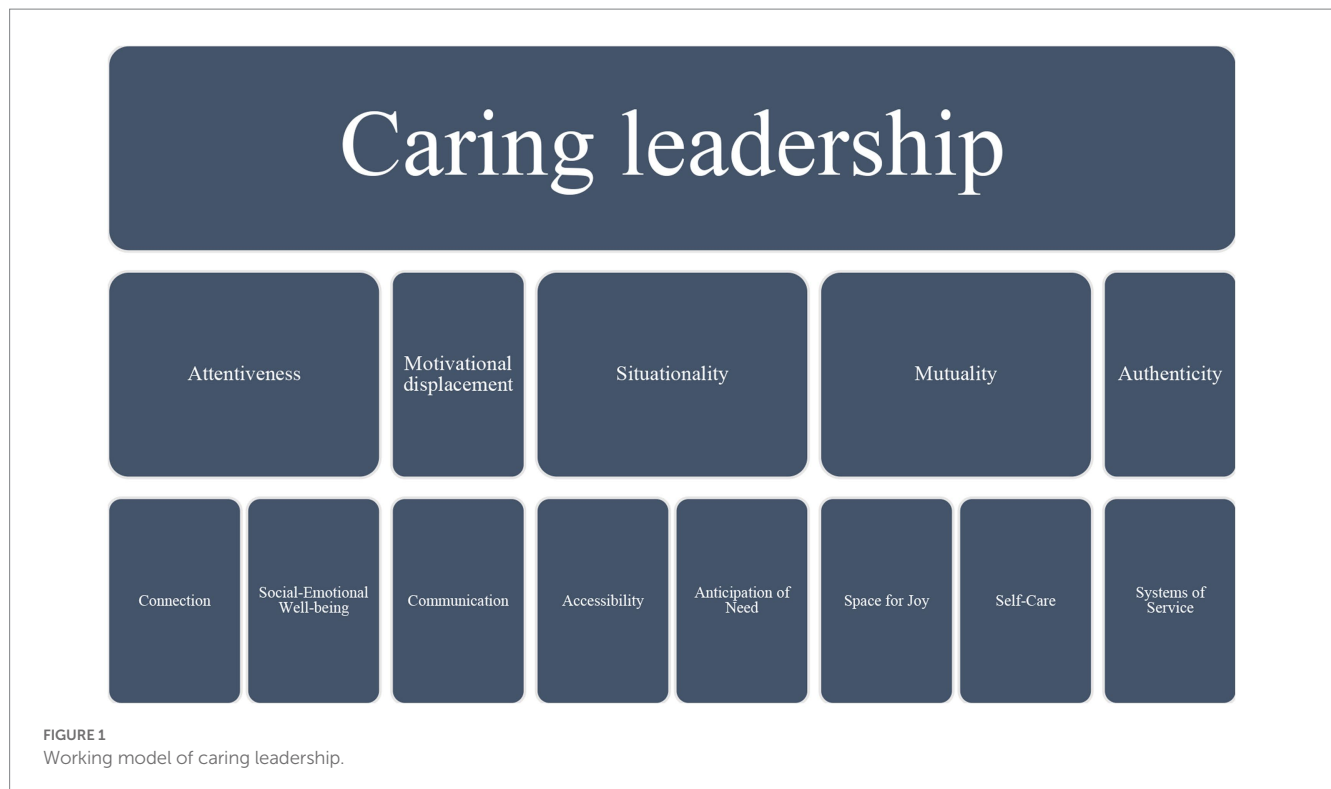
recognized a threat to the resilience of these caring cultures in their practice (p. 338).

In our study, we see this version of caring through myriad acts; principals served disparate needs and diverse constituents and moved their energy and attention between teachers, students, and parents and families. In each school, caring for all meant hundreds of students and staff; many principals did not have assistant principals to work with. We expected some leaders to express more frustration with the unbounded nature of their work or its intensity; express emotional weariness of serving many, diverse, and intense needs in the crisis context; or express unwillingness to engage in the light-hearted and sometimes silly acts of morale building. We found that surprisingly no leaders expressed these notions; all seemed highly committed to and engaged in their practice of caring as professional work. Potentially, schools were already positioned as caring organizations and sites of social welfare in such a way that principals automatically understood their leadership as care, and there was no question of their role. However, research on leadership practices frequently emphasizes professional work as relational and interactive to achieve instructional goals without acknowledging that much of the contemporary leaders' work both centers on and draws strength from mutual, authentic caring for others to accomplish work. Thus, this investigation enhances research on leadership in education to recognize the caring work that principals perform and the value they ascribe to caring.

From our work, we have developed a working model of caring leadership in action (Figure 1).

This model draws on leaders' experiences during the pandemic but is not limited to crisis leadership; indeed, much of what we witnessed during that period of time was strong leadership that transcends context. These acts of caring involve self-care, school-care,

and community-care, further demonstrating the essential role that a caring leader plays in improving outcomes both in and outside the school. While only a beginning model, our findings provide a basis to develop a more theoretically and empirically rich model of caring leadership.

Implications

Our findings highlight the actions that caring leaders take, building on existing frameworks of caring leadership. As noted at the beginning, surprisingly little research to date has taken up this question. This study has several implications. First and foremost, our findings provide support for in-service and pre-service development for school leaders. School leaders need to learn to navigate the complexities of care within a larger accountability context. The pandemic offered a moment in time where many of these considerations were removed; for example, there was no mandated teacher evaluation or state standardized testing in many places. As norms revert back to pre-pandemic states, it is vital for leaders to keep the priorities of care as central to their leadership work, not at the expense of other forms of leadership, but equally alongside.

Second, our findings demonstrate the challenges of leadership as care. The pandemic has taken a devastating toll on the ranks of teachers and school administrators. Caring does not come without a cost. Principals report high amounts of stress and overwork, due to the time, emotional energy, and selflessness required to fulfill the role (DeMatthews et al., 2023). These working conditions put them at risk for burnout, a factor that increases turnover and reduces their effectiveness (DeMatthews et al., 2021). District leaders who oversee building leaders must ensure that principals are provided the same

level care as they offer to their own stakeholders. This could take several forms, like offering clinical support in the form of counseling (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Districts can also invest in training for leaders on topics of burnout and well-being, redevelop workload expectations, and adopt policies that enable leaders to take time for health consultations. Finally, districts and proactively create networks of peer support to help principals engage in care for each other.

In times of change, this shift to caring leadership opens a portal into understanding how leadership can supersede traditional forms of instructional leadership to embrace equity, relationships, and attentiveness—or, as our study shows, the foundational elements of caring leadership. The work is needed to keep leaders in their roles, teachers growing, and students learning.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material; further inquiries can be directed to the authors.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by University of Pennsylvania. Written informed consent for participation was not required for this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Author contributions

Conflict of interest

Publisher's note

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