

## **Ontario Teachers' Policy Leadership During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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## Ontario Teachers' Policy Leadership During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

In this article, we combine theories of teacher leadership, policy leadership, street-level leadership, and policy enactment to inform our novel conceptualization of teachers' policy leadership. We draw on data collected through a series of 3 focus group interviews with 31 secondary school teachers in Ontario between July 2020 and February 2021 to show how the dynamism of the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted this aspect of their work. Specifically, our findings show the influence of administrative support and the shifting external, situated, and spatial contexts on teachers' policy leadership. The findings also highlight the role of refusal and creative reinterpretation of educators who prioritized student well-being during the pandemic as schooling transitioned from more flexible emergency remote learning to a less flexible "business as usual" approach.

*Keywords:* policy leadership, teacher leadership, policy enactment

### Ontario Teachers' Policy Leadership During the COVID-19 Pandemic

How and when do teachers enact leadership? Dominant conceptions of teacher and policy leadership often serve the interests of neoliberal educational reforms and fail to recognize that teachers regularly exercise discretion as they translate formal policies into practice. The significance of this work – what we view as a kind of policy leadership – was highlighted during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic as teachers navigated a dynamic policy environment. In this article, we show how they exercised policy leadership during the crisis. In so doing, we highlight the role of refusal and creative reinterpretation of educators who prioritized student well-being during the pandemic that saw schooling transition from a more flexible emergency remote learning approach to a less flexible "business as usual" one.

We begin by reviewing the extant literature on teacher and policy leadership and theories of street-level leadership (Vinzant & Crothers, 1996) and policy enactment (Ball et al., 2012) that inform our novel conceptualization of teachers' policy leadership. Next, we present the context of Ontario teachers' policy leadership prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic before detailing our methodology. In our presentation and discussion of the study's findings, we weave illustrative examples of contextual influences on teachers' policy leadership into a chronological account of the unfolding crisis. Our findings illustrate the significance of administrative support and the external, situational, and, importantly, *spatial* contexts of teachers' policy leadership during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Teacher and Policy Leadership

Research focused on individual teachers as leaders began cohering in the 1980s. This scholarship was rooted in whole-school reform and work-redesign initiatives that focused on teacher empowerment, professionalism, and educators' role in expanding institutional capacity (Smylie, 1995; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). While studies initially began with a narrow view of teacher leadership as complementary to but not constitutive of the core of teachers' work, it has since developed to include leadership within and

beyond the classroom (Beachum & Dentith, 2004; D. Nguyen et al., 2020; Katzenmayer & Moller, 2001). Further, research on teacher leadership intersects with disjointed bodies of research on instructional leadership (Neumerski, 2013), accountability-related initiatives, and the impact of subject matter (Wenner & Campbell, 2017).

The definition and interpretation of teacher leadership has changed throughout the decades, depending on the context under which it is applied, including the emphasis of reform at the time (Little, 2003). However, research that names the neoliberal policy context of teacher leadership in the late 1980s and 1990s, which has focused on institutional agendas and high-stakes accountability mechanisms, is rare. Tracing the discursive shifts in leadership, Judith Warren Little (2003) concluded: “much of what proponents label ‘teacher leadership’ might more readily be defined simply as a division of managerial labour” (p. 416). The foundations upon which teacher leadership research has been built and proliferated must be examined for its assumptions, value systems, and ideology, and its political economy must also be studied and reported (Ellis et al., 2021).

In a 2020 review of literature, D. Nguyen et al. (2020) suggested there are four common hallmarks of teacher leadership: “teacher leadership is a process of influence; teacher leadership is exercised on the basis of reciprocal collaboration and trust; teacher leadership operates within and beyond the classroom; and teacher leadership aims to improve instructional quality, school effectiveness and student learning” (2020, p. 67). When it comes to teachers exercising leadership in relation to policy specifically, scholars and training programs tend to locate this work outside the classroom and suggest teachers should assume formal roles or assert influence in conventionally-defined policy processes, such as those of school boards or state/provincial and federal governments (Derrington & Anderson, 2020; Eckert et al., 2016; Heineke et al., 2015; Smylie & Eckert, 2018). These initiatives are grounded in traditional, rational understandings of the policy process wherein policy decisions are made by people in positions of authority (e.g., governments, school boards, administrators) and implemented by a different group of individuals (e.g., teachers, education assistants). They also reflect constructions of policy leadership as the purview of elected officials, community leaders, and within education, school and district administrators (e.g., Sullivan & Morrison, 2014).

Jelmer Evers and René Kneyber worried that current definitions of teacher leadership, when oriented toward outcomes, can become “another tool for domestication: not an instrument for deregulation and professionalization, but an instrument for reregulation and deprofessionalization.” (2015, p. 6). They envision a process through which teachers are valued for their voice and contributions, where they are free to reflect on their work, and foster collective professional autonomy and trust with stakeholders in education. In combining insights from Lipsky’s street-level bureaucracy and Ball et al.’s (2012) theory of policy enactment, we align with this more expansive view of who teachers leaders are and where they exercise policy leadership.

## Theoretical Perspectives

Teachers inevitably engage with policy and, we argue, regularly exercise policy leadership. But just what constitutes *policy*? Indeed, policy has many meanings. Many people define policy narrowly as a decision of an authoritative body (e.g., government, school district) that is then written down in texts and given to others to implement. Our definition of policy is broader: we view policy as people’s decisions in and about practice in response to a social situation they perceive as a problem. Thus, policy includes but is not limited to government and other institutional decisions (which may be published in formal texts). It also includes people’s interpretations and translations of external policies into their practice.

Michael Lipsky (2010) shared our view that policy includes decisions, texts, and practices. Furthermore, he explained that public servants charged with enacting government policies in their work with members of the public are themselves policymakers because they exercise discretion when doing their jobs. He referred to these frontline workers – including teachers – as *street-level bureaucrats* (Lipsky, 2010). He recognized that discretion is a necessary and important part of their work as they perform in contexts that exceed the general circumstances policies anticipate, make judgements about the diverse range of people under their care, and operate outside the gaze of direct supervision. Their discretion is not boundless, however. It is limited in part by time, information, and available resources (Lipsky, 2010).

Drawing on Lipsky’s theory of street-level bureaucrats, Janet Vinzant and Lane Crothers argued

that frontline workers' policy work is appropriately viewed as *street-level leadership*. They point to five reasons why "leadership provides a useful and compelling framework for understanding the challenges of frontline public service" (Vinzant & Crothers, 1998, p. 72). First, leadership theory recognizes a wide range of behaviours. Second, it demands the consideration of accountability and values. Third, leadership theory provides standards by which frontline workers' decisions can be assessed. Fourth, viewing public servants' work as leadership positively and appropriately recognizes its complexity and larger context. Finally, leadership theory recognizes that frontline workers may exercise discretion over both processes (i.e., *how* a goal is accomplished) and outcome (i.e., the goal itself) in response to different situations.

The last two points highlight the significance of context on teachers' (and other public servants') leadership. Influences include citizens' expectations, their employer, colleagues, and supervisors, coordinating agencies, the media, legislation and policy, regulation, procedure, and situational variables that may change frequently; "[c]umulatively, these direct and indirect influences can be seen to regularly shape what workers do and how they do it" (Vinzant & Crothers, 1998, p. 17). Situations within which teachers act also vary, creating different challenges and opportunities for them to exercise leadership: "(a.) those involving no substantial discretion; (b.) those involving choices about process; (c.) those requiring decisions about outcomes; or (d.) those demanding choices about process and outcomes" (p. 91).

Like Lipsky (2010) and Vincent and Crothers (1996; 1998), Croll et al. (1994) suggested that teachers can be viewed as "teachers as policymakers [sic] in practice" (p. 341). This model derives from their recognition that teachers inevitably make choices about how to carry out their work due to the nature of teaching. Croll et al. (1994) explained that when "teachers interpret and prioritize policy changes in consistent ways, then the outcomes of these individual actions will have a systematic effect on the practical outcomes of policy" (p. 342).

While the notion of street-level bureaucracy comes from the rational tradition of policy analysis, many critically-oriented scholars also recognize teachers as policymakers (e.g., Ball et al., 2012; Levinson et al., 2009; Ozga, 2000). Bowe et al.'s (1992) policy cycle highlighted three interconnected contexts of policymaking: the context of influence, the context of text production, and the context of practice. The context of influence is where public policy debates often begin, key policy concepts and discourses are established, and actors struggle over policy meanings. Texts that attempt to control how policies are understood are produced in the context of text production. The third context, the context of practice, is the arena that activities in the other contexts, including the production of policy texts, attempt to address. Importantly, "policy is not simply received and implemented within this arena rather it is subject to interpretation and then 'recreated'" (Bowe et al., 1992, p. 22). Bowe et al. (2012) explained:

Policies will be interpreted differently as the histories, experiences, values, purposes and interests which make up any arena differ. The simple point is that policy writers cannot control the meanings of their texts. Parts of texts will be rejected, selected out, ignored, deliberately misunderstood, responses may be frivolous, etc. Furthermore, yet again, interpretation is a matter of struggle. (p. 22).

Ball et al. (2012) called the work of interpreting and translating formal policy directives into practice *policy enactment*. This aspect of teachers' work "is a creative and sophisticated and complex process" (p. 8) impacted by a wide variety of enabling and constraining factors, including administrators. The concept of policy enactment differs from the idea of implementation grounded in the rational model of policy in important ways: it acknowledges teachers' agency in their policy work while recognizing that policies also shape teachers through discourse and power. That is, when teachers engage with policy, "they change it, in some ways, and it changes them" (Ball et al., 2012, p. 48).

The notion of policy enactment also gives primacy to the impact of context on teachers' interpretation and translation processes. In particular, Ball et al. (2012) highlighted four contexts of a school that impact how people within it enact policy: its situated context, material context, professional culture, and external context. A school's situated context includes its history, student demographics, location, and institutional stories. Its professional culture includes teachers' values and attitudes, as well as where and the others with whom they work. A school's material context includes its physical buildings, staffing, budget, and infrastructure. Finally, a school's external context includes policies and discourses outside

the school, its reputation, relationships with other institutions, and its broader cultural, economic, and political contexts. Research on teachers' policy enactment during crisis, including our own study of teachers in Alberta, Canada, has captured the dynamic external context of educational policy during COVID-19 pandemic, teachers' frustration with policies that contradicted their values, and variations of policy enactment (Cooper et al., 2021; Farhadi & Winton, 2021).

In sum, we assert that teachers' policy leadership – one of many possible kinds of teacher leadership – may be enacted in various sites. Outside their classrooms, teachers might take on formal policymaking roles or aim to influence decision-makers through individual or collective efforts (e.g., lobbying, bargaining, protesting). Teachers, as street-level bureaucrats, also enact policy leadership inside their classrooms as they negotiate and translate external directives into action. Grounded in Vinzant and Crothers' (1996; 1998) notion of street-level leadership, Croll et al.'s (1994) model of teachers as policymakers in practice, Bowe et al.'s (1992) continuous policy cycle, and Ball et al.'s (2012) theory of policy enactment, we view teachers' interpretation and translation of authoritative policy decisions into practice (i.e., their policy enactment) in their classrooms as a form of policy leadership that they regularly carry out in their work.

In the discussion that follows, we describe the external context teachers in Ontario faced prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, inclusive of closures in Spring 2020 and school reopening in 2020-2021.

### **External Contexts of Ontario Teachers' Policy Leadership Before and During COVID-19 (Spring 2020 – Spring 2021)**

In Canada, public education is decentralized, and across its 13 provinces and territories, there is variation in how schooling is funded, administered, and assessed. Like many other countries, provinces have adopted policies that create markets in education, promote values and practices of the private sector (e.g., competition), and shift responsibility for governance, funding, and delivery of education from governments to private and civil society actors (Hedges et al., 2020; Yoon & Winton, 2019). In the 1990s, Ontario saw sweeping neoliberal educational reforms under Conservative Premier Mike Harris. Changes included the creation of the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) to administer and manage standardized testing; a new centralized approach to funding public education; funding reductions; and a new process for collective bargaining that separated contract negotiations between teachers and administrators (Anderson & Jaafar, 2003; Basu, 2004; Gidney, 1999). Scholars have researched and documented the impacts of these reforms, which include an increased burden on families to fundraise (Winton, 2018, 2019), the erosion of equity in programming (Bedard & Lawion, 2008; Parekh et al., 2011), increased managerialism in education (Miller, 2007), and the corrosion of professional autonomy (Bocking, 2020). Despite this evidence, subsequent governments have not sufficiently reversed the trend.

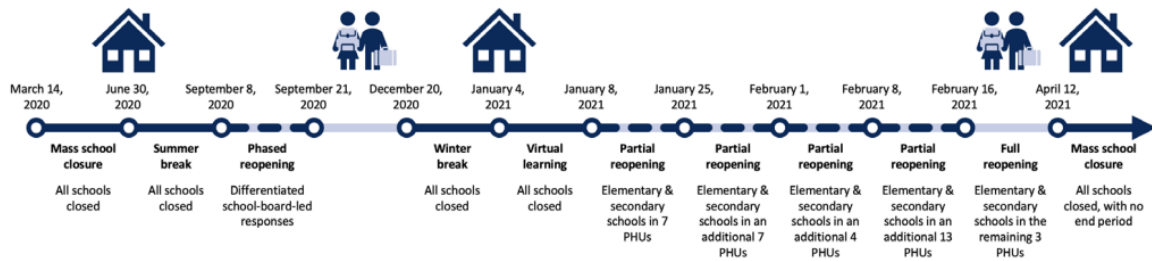
Education closures have often taken place in the context of war, natural disasters, and the outbreak of communicable diseases, such as influenza, but understanding the scale and speed at which school-aged children and their education were impacted in the first year of the pandemic is only beginning to emerge. In Ontario, a state of emergency was declared in March 2020 to limit the spread of COVID-19, during which time schools closed and students were required to learn from home. This health crisis coincided with historic contract negotiations between the provincial government under Conservative Premier Doug Ford and every teacher union in Ontario, including the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF), who at the time were fighting proposed policies that would further cut investments in programming, increase class sizes, and require students to learn online as a graduation requirement. Both sides settled quickly in April 2020, and the OSSTF absorbed further cuts to education in an environment that had suddenly changed the terms of negotiation. Journalist Steve Paikin (2020), in an article titled "Why Stephen Lecce is the luckiest politician in Ontario today," referenced an interview with the Minister of Education in which he asks: "Do you not see the irony that, without this awful pandemic, you'd still be in the midst of a terrible education crisis?"

It was within this external context that teachers were called to enact policy leadership as the COVID-19 crisis unfolded in Ontario, a province which has, more than any other in Canada, leveraged online learning as part of its response to the pandemic and beyond (CBC News, 2021; People for Education, 2021). The graphic below (Figure 1) depicts the variation in in-person and online (virtual) learning between March 2020 and April 2021:



**Figure 1**

*Ontario-Level School Closures and Reopening Policy Tracing, from March 2020 to April 2021*  
(Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021, p. 5)



Policy/Program Memorandum (PPM) 164 (issued in August 2020) introduced the requirement that school boards offer a full-time remote learning option to students that includes 300 minutes of a combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning activities in which the teachers “must be available to students at all times during the teachers’ assigned teaching timetables, as they would be if they were face-to-face in a classroom setting” (Ontario, 2020). PPM 164 also introduced a minimum daily requirement of synchronous instruction for students home more than three days a week, which at the secondary level includes 225 minutes per day for a full course schedule (Ontario, 2020b). Without adequate funding to maintain virtual schools, some school boards adopted a model that requires teachers to deliver instruction to students online and in person simultaneously. In Ontario, this approach is often called the hybrid learning model.

## Methodology

This paper discusses findings from our case study of teachers’ policy enactment in Ontario during the COVID-19 pandemic. Adopting a critical orientation to studying policy (Simons et al., 2009), we examine teachers’ policy leadership within a provincial policy framework shaped by a dual crisis in health and education. Data was collected through a series of three 1-hour long focus groups with 4-5 teachers in each group (31 teachers in total) from 10 English-language public district school boards, the majority of which served students in Southern Ontario, with one in Central and one in Northern Ontario. The same teachers were interviewed in July and November 2020, and February 2021, though the composition of each focus group varied due to participants’ scheduling constraints. Participants’ teaching subject areas ranged in secondary schools, with most concentrated in English and Social Sciences, followed by the Arts, Math and Science. There was representation from adult education, education in congregate settings (e.g., in group homes), rural communities, and Intensive Support Programs serving students living with autism, and physical, developmental, and learning disabilities. Participants’ prior online teaching experiences varied from none at all, to a rudimentary use of online platforms, to a sophisticated level of competency both in the theory and practice of online education. This paper is not intended to generalize their experiences but rather to signal the range of contexts within which teachers exercised policy leadership.

We interviewed participants via open-source video conferencing software. The first round of interviews focused on the experience of participants teaching online before school closures and equity concerns they had as they transitioned to emergency remote learning in Spring 2020. We discussed policies and directives specific to their context, the value systems and standards against which they measured expectations, and their interpretations and translations of policies into practice. In subsequent interviews, we reviewed policy developments and discussed participants’ perceptions of their impact on students’ and teachers’ mental health and wellness. Participants were also asked to share how their experiences online and in-person aligned with and/or contradicted their teaching philosophies and practice and to identify provincial and school board policies they hoped to see continued and/or reevaluated.

Details from our interviews were cross-referenced with policy texts from school boards, provincial and federal governments, relevant reports by professional organizations, such as teacher unions, public health units, and advocacy groups, as well as news media. Using an inductive approach, we coded and categorized transcripts from the interviews using both *a priori* and open coding (Lichtman, 2013) to identify dominant patterns in the data. *A priori* codes were derived from policy enactment theory (Ball

et al., 2012), including situated context, such as school demographics and history; professional culture, such as values, autonomy, and policy management in departments and schools; material context, such as budgets and staffing, technology and infrastructure; and external context, such as standardized assessments and provincial policies. Open codes included varying modalities and designs of instruction (e.g., asynchronous, synchronous), in-person safety and cohorts, and configurations of school terms (e.g., quadmester or octomester, hybrid and/or adapted). We use pseudonym initials for participants, and we have not identified their school boards to maintain anonymity.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Spring 2020: Situated Responses*

As the pandemic unfolded in the Spring of 2020, procedures once routine were abruptly altered, and teachers were called to exercise policy leadership in a dynamic and highly uncertain external context. Our participants highlighted their decisions about student assessment as an example. While teachers normally have some discretion over how they assess students, there are established routines in schools and departments (e.g., final exams or culminating assignments) and expectations for determining final grades (e.g., 30% of a final grade based on a final evaluation) (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) that guide their work. In the first spring of the pandemic, however, Ontario's Ministry of Education cancelled final exams, and some school boards determined early on that students' grades could only increase or stay the same as they were when schools closed on March 13, 2020. Other boards waited for direction from the government about final grades, creating confusion. Teachers were called to interpret and translate these directives into new assessment practices with limited guidance. One participant explained:

RL: The messages that really stand out are the problematic messages around grading and the lack of definition of how we were to calculate grades, or what the point of the grading was [...] So, for us it was all just professional judgement and wide open. And there was no indication about how to weight [them], if there was to be consideration of the six weeks, having more or less weight than the rest of the course. So, we all just sort of were making that up as we went. (July 2020)

The impact of these changes to formerly routinized assessment procedures affected our participants differently according to their situated contexts. Adult educators who worked in schools organized into quadesters and teachers of students taking half-credit Civics or Careers courses, for example, had no prior student work to consider when determining final grades. One of these teachers, SR, described how he enacted the policy:

SR: The Ministry of Ed came up with the words, "Some evidence of learning," which to me was very freeing [...] We had a meeting with all the Civics and Careers teachers with our Admin, and we were like, "Well, what does some mean?" does that mean one thing and then we can give them a credit? Does it mean there has to be a fair number of things for that credit?"

I was able to justify it because I had my students...I saw them and knew them for the six weeks before the closure and they all obtained my credit. And I go, "Well if I had seen them... those students who were really, really struggling, I had to make these assumptions and kind of go, "Alright, well they did some evidence of learning. They obtained their Careers credit with the first semester. (July 2020)

While Ontario's Minister of Education promised that his Ministry would "not allow any student to fall through the cracks during this unprecedented time" and promised that educators would be equipped with "the tools and supports they need to maximize the opportunities and achievements of all learners in the province in an online setting" (Ontario, 2020a), our participants explained that this was impossible for many students. Some did not have access to technology or the internet. As CO explains:

CO: So there were a lot of things about going to remote learning that didn't sit well with me because I had students with no internet, or very poor internet and students who didn't have Tech at home, or that come from homes where there's a number of children and that had, you know, one laptop. I had a number of students that solely used their phones, cause that's all they had. (July 2020)

Teaching students enrolled in special education programming brought unique challenges for some educators. KM, a teacher of students with autism, explained what happened when schools closed:

KM: I tried to do the best that I could, but remote learning for my kids doesn't exist... it's just...it's just not a thing. I'm part of a bigger unit. I have six kids that I deal with all day. We have 30 kids in the unit total, and every teacher and every EA that I worked with, all had the same story. Basically, school stopped on the 13th of March. It didn't matter how much we sent home; the kids don't have the capacity to work through it on their own. The parents don't have the time to work through it with them, and there was just complete chaos at most of the houses, because their schedules were completely done...they were...the parents, were exhausted constantly. (July 2020)

KM nevertheless tried to support students' learning by posting websites and other materials online. When directed to teach synchronously, KM explained what he did in response:

KM: We were asked to try and move to synchronous learning, but again, it doesn't work with my kids, as I had said, you know, 15 different ways already. Um, so we more or less ignored it and just kept doing what we were doing. (July 2020)

As evident in KM's quote above, in some cases exercising leadership meant ignoring directives teachers did not think were workable or in their students' best interest. For example, participant WL described her decision not to give assessments normally used in her board:

WL: In September, I was being told, "We have these assessments. We have a choice board. Please make sure you do your best. Of course, there's no curriculum police, but if you don't get to everything, that's fine. But you should do these assessments because this is what we do." I was like, "What, what the hell is this? No. Um, so, that's not happening." [Laughs] I'm going to do what I think makes sense with the time and the flow and the way things are going with the kids. Like, I'm not going to add a choice board and have dates for big assessments. It's just not happening. So, I pretended I was doing it, but I didn't do it. (February 2021)

These refusals, like all policy decisions, raise questions about legitimacy. Vincent and Crothers (1998) explained that street-level leaders' decisions are legitimate when they are based on the interests, values, and needs of the people to whom they are accountable. Teachers, like all public servants, are accountable to many groups (e.g., citizens, administrators, parents, teachers) whose desires and beliefs may conflict. The teachers we spoke to prioritized the needs of students. AF provided an illustrative example:

AF: I have the flexibility to basically do whatever I want. So, if they want us to make it about content-heavy curriculum, I'm just going to reject that completely. Because I'm sorry, we're not going to make this course content heavy, not during a pandemic, not where students can't access Tech, not where half my kids are popping in and out and maybe they miss an entire lesson. ...So, um, for that particular thing, I'm willing to put myself even in the firing line for administrative kind of, you know, disapproval or whatever. (February 2021)

Teachers we spoke with highlighted exceptional challenges with online learning experienced by



English Language Learners, international students, Black students, trans students, students with special education needs, students from low-income families, rural students, students experiencing mental illness, and students living on reserve. For example, SL told us:

SL: I had a few students, uh, who identify as Black, who had already been disengaged in the course at the beginning. And I was worried I was going to lose them completely, especially with the amount of anti-Black racism that's been happening. (July 2020)

### *Spatial and Shifting Contexts: 2020-2021 Reopening*

In August 2020, the Ontario government introduced new and different rules for school boards for the upcoming school year. Twenty-four were deemed “designated” boards with altered timetables that saw students attend school in-person for half the day and online for the other half. “Non-designated” boards, often in smaller towns, opened at full capacity. Students across the province either took one course at a time (octomester) or two at a time (quadmester). All school boards had to offer remote learning, which was taken up at varying rates, with designated boards seeing higher enrollment than non-designated boards. Designated boards also had a greater concentration of lower-income and racialized students living in communities most impacted by COVID-19. While most school boards created fully virtual schools, some implemented a hybrid model that required teachers to teach students online and in-person simultaneously.

Our participants’ reflections on the challenges of these new configurations highlighted the significance of the *spatial context* of teaching that includes the virtual and physical sites where teachers do their work as well as social relations shaped by a sense of place (Massey, 2005). The most significant transformation influencing teachers’ policy enactment in this context was the design and modality of the schooling experience (i.e., in-person, synchronous, asynchronous, hybrid). For example, GL, teaching in a school with an altered timetable, explains how his relationships and work with students differed when classes were held in-person and online:

GL: In comparison to last Spring when we went online...[it has] advantages, because I can check in with them more, when we just kind of posted work with them, you know, it was kind of anyone’s guess how anyone’s doing. You had to, you know, call home. Here at least every day, I can make some kind of contact with them. I have a better sense I feel like, of where they’re at and how I can support them. (February 2021)

Some teachers in boards that adopted a hybrid learning model said the approach made it challenging to meet students’ needs. KG, for example, said that a handful of students who opted to come in-person eventually stopped coming because they had to go online to interact with the majority of students who joined remotely.

Participants also pointed to isolation from other teachers resulting from new working arrangements as a constraint on their ability to exercise policy leadership. LB, for example, described:

LB: When you’re in a building with a bunch of your colleagues, it’s a lot easier to talk to each other about what you’re doing and share ideas. When you’re all working from home and you’re all exhausted from being on camera for six hours a day, it’s a lot harder to talk to each other and be like, “Oh yeah. Like, I’m not doing exam. This is an idea for an assessment I’m doing,” and share that with people and get their feedback and allow those ideas to filter through. (February 2021)

In LB’s case, the isolation was a result of working from home. But even teachers working in buildings reported this experience, as NM explained:

NM: ...even inside the same building, now that we’re back, like the isolation is very real. Um, people have these masks. They have everything. They stay inside their classrooms. Um, we don’t mix on purpose, to keep everyone safe, but it also means like we are very much on our

own, very much on our own. It's an extraordinary amount of effort to connect with somebody else. (February 2021)

In addition to the influence of the spatial context of their work, teachers highlighted the significance of administrators on their policy leadership. Some administrators played a key enabling role, as RL expressed:

RL: Um, we...my, my principal says to me all the time, do what you need to do to make it work. And she says that to everyone on staff. And she does not mean that lightly or in an off-handed way. She backs us up. If we make a decision, she'll stand behind us for that. I've made a huge shift in my assessment policy this year, because I feel like I have complete, um, freedom to do so. Because everything is so different that why bother trying to do anything the same way that we did before... (February 2021)

DS also identified support from administration as an important influence:

DS: I do think that my admin is quite supportive. And I think that my principal...as long as I'm demonstrating that I'm coming from a place of compassion, and that's the heavier weight, and I'm still trying to have some integrity with the courses, then I feel like they are behind me. (February 2021)

Administrators sometimes made it more difficult for teachers to enact policy leadership, however. For example, KM discussed the pressure they felt from their administrator on their ability to maintain credit integrity:

KM: ...for us, it's, it's just full-on credit fairy. Like, we're just handing out credits like Tic-Tacs. There's no expectations required. If you have, uh, any sense or, or semblance of standards for your students, it's like you're killing puppies. .... Like, you, you are against children and you're, you're not really an educator. And this is a message that keeps coming out.... So, I'm now just saying, "Look," directly, "If you want me to give them the credit, I will give them a 50%. You don't even have to argue with me. I don't care. If that is what you want, just say that is what you want." But of course, they won't put anything like that in writing, because, you know, that's obviously educationally not sound. But that's really the situation where we're at. (February 2021)

Despite some challenges of the on-going health crisis and some supportive school-based administrators, our participants reported a shift in their boards' approach in the 2020-2021 school year that they characterized as pressure to return to "business as usual". As LB explained in February 2021:

LB: There just also seems to be this lack of willingness, um, more so, I think, on the Ministry side and administration, in terms of flexibility, right, of like how we're doing online learning. And there's this emphasis on synchronous learning and business-as-usual. And it just feels like, you know, we're almost a year into this pandemic now, but we're just being told, "Yeah. It's online, but you should still just be running your class as you normally would be." (February 2021)

As LB suggests, the changed expectations of government and board officials in Winter 2021 restricted teachers' ability to exercise discretion. DS highlighted differences between March 2020 and February 2021:

DS: Last March, it was very much "just do what you can", right? And, I didn't think...I didn't really feel like there was a lot of pressure on me. And I didn't put a lot of pressure on the kids. And that was – we were just all going to sort of make it up as we went along and I had

determined what was the one thing I really needed to have them demonstrate so that I could, you know, with some sense of integrity, grant them a credit, right?

.... But now the idea that it's like two different messages is you know, "Well, you have to be very compassionate, and you have to make sure that you're there to support them...but here's all the IST forms. And have you read the IEPs? And are you providing accommodations? And fill out the notepads, every time you had contact and followed up with a student?" That's all normal administrivia that isn't taking into account what we're living through, as well. (February 2021)

Teachers' perceptions of the government's and some administrators' expectations of a return to "business as usual" approach in the 2020-2021 school year was accompanied by a change in their desire for explicit directives from these same bodies. When we first spoke with participants in July 2020, many expressed frustration with what they viewed as a lack of clear, consistent, and timely direction from Ontario's Ministry of Education and school boards. PL, for example, said; "one thing that I found really frustrating in terms of Ministry directives, is that it felt like the bar constantly kept moving as to what it was that we were expected to do." Our participants' frustration was shared by other educators in the province (e.g., Cooper et al., 2021).

In February 2021, however, some teachers in our study expressed concerns about *too little flexibility*, as the quotes by LB and DS above illustrate. This change may in part be explained by the duration of the crisis at that point. As disaster researchers explain, people look to leaders to "do something" during a crisis and facilitate a return to normality (Boin & Hart, 2003, p. 544). Many months later, the teachers in our study reported feeling tired and burnt out as the pandemic continued. Emerging research shows teachers' burnout during the pandemic can be attributed in part to anxiety related to teaching and COVID-19, parent communication, and administrative support (Pressley, 2021).

## **Conclusion: Teachers' Policy Leadership During COVID-19 and Beyond**

On one hand, street-level leaders are bureaucrats in that they work for bureaucratic organizations and their actions are constrained by them. But they are also policymakers, implementers, power wielders, professionals, problem solvers, and professional actors. (Vinzant & Crothers, 1998, p. 150).

While the need to interpret and translate official policy directives into practice – that is, to exercise policy leadership – always exists for teachers (Ball et al., 2012; Croll et al., 1994; Lipsky, 2010; McLaughlin, 1987; Vincent & Crothers, 1998), our findings show how the dynamism of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted this aspect of their work. Ball et al.'s (2012) theory of policy enactment, developed during non-pandemic times, described how overlapping contextual dimensions impact street-level leadership. Specifically, it explains that a school's professional cultures and external, situated, and material contexts impact educators' interpretations and translations of policy. Our participants highlighted the significance of the shifting external and situated contexts as well as the spatial context on their policy leadership during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. They explained that it is easier to maintain relationships that inform decisions about how to meet students' needs when working in person compared to online. They also explained that being physically apart from colleagues impacted their practice. These findings demonstrate the need to consider spatial context as part of a broader theory of policy enactment. Further, given that education technologies are known to alter power relations within schools, shape flexible and mobile entrepreneurial subjects, and participate in processes of social reproduction (Cohen, 2022; McCreary et al., 2013), future research should examine how online learning during the pandemic impacted these transformations during and following the pandemic.

While inevitable and necessary, teachers' policy leadership in classrooms, like street-level leadership more generally, is "a tool, not a panacea, in the struggle to solve public problems" (Vinzant & Crothers, 1998, p. 161). Thus, teachers must be recognized as part of a complex system of social and political life and important leaders in that system. Indeed, our participants expressed a desire to be involved in

policy processes outside the classroom. DS suggested that the early days of emergency remote learning “would have been better if teachers and education workers were more involved in the process from the beginning”. And, looking ahead to the future, AC explained:

AC: I’m just so impressed with how resourceful people have been... there are teachers that have never created a Google Classroom that managed to do it, and created really sort of inventive lessons and connected with students and all of this stuff that happened, sort of on the turn of a dime. And, I wish there was some way that, you know, the Board and the Ministry were like trying to, you know, talk to teachers and look at the best practice things of what happened. Because clearly, this is going to be part of our life, remote, in some shape or form for a while. (July 2020)

In a letter to the Minister of Education, The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) called on the province to convene a Return-to-School Partnership Table “to provide advice, input and expertise on implementing plans for Ontario’s students, educators and school boards from the perspective of Code-protected groups.” (OHRC, 2020) They also set out actions governments could take to manage the COVID-19 pandemic consistent with a rights-based approach that include a right to education, standard of living, work and housing (OHRC, n.d.). Similarly, a prominent education advocacy organization, People for Education, called for convening leaders from major education organizations, including Teachers’ Federations. The Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation at this time had already convened a Distance-Learning Advisory Work Group that drew from the expertise of their membership, including teachers, to lead discussions about distance-learning solutions during school closures:

In order to tap into that expertise, the Provincial Executive is creating a distance-learning advisory work group made up of ten (10) front-line members with knowledge and experience in innovative approaches to curriculum delivery. The work group will provide advice to the Provincial Executive on the development of a Continuous Learning strategy that could be proposed to the Ministry of Education for implementation while schools are closed. The work group will have representation from a cross section of subject areas, including special education and adult education. (OSSTF/FEESO, 2020)

While we encourage more structured engagement with teachers, such as this work group to advise formal authority, we want to highlight the importance of teachers’ policy leadership within informal spaces where they exercise discretion as they translate formal policy in complex and often unforeseen contexts.

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