

FEMALE LEADERS' EXPERIENCES DURING
COVID-19: MOTHERING AND LEADING
IN TIMES OF PERIL

By

LISA CROSSLIN

Bachelor of Arts in History
Oklahoma Baptist University
Shawnee, Oklahoma
1992

Master of Education in Counseling
East Central University
Ada, Oklahoma
1998

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Dissertation Approved:

Dr. Lucy E. Bailey

Dissertation Adviser

Dr. Kathy Curry

Committee Chair

Dr. Jentre Olsen

Dr. Kerri Kearney

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always sacrifice the most, but you are equipped to do great things. I pray you find your place and your voice in this world because you matter – to me, to God, and to+ the world.

Remember, *Dear Girls*, I love you.

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Abstract:

This research began with my tearful reflections as an exasperated mother unsure how to mother and lead in the volatility and fear of a global health crisis. Overwhelmed with the uncertainty of constantly shifting leadership demands, designing new learning systems, and the burden of caring for students and teachers, I spent countless hours planning, collaborating, communicating, acting, and reacting. As intensive leadership consumed my days, I neglected all but the most basic care of my own young children. I toiled in isolation 15 feet away from them, yet unreachable, sequestered behind my home office door. My two daughters were left to fend for themselves in a lonely house, and they suffered. The early abuse and neglect from their biological parents changed their developing brains, so now felt safety is a constant negotiation. Consumed by the fear of failing at work, and failing the teachers, staff, and children for whom I felt responsible, I was completely unaware that I had failed my children during those intense months. I felt forced to choose my job over my girls, a “no choice choice” (Borda, 2021).

As I wrestled with both roles, I wondered how other mother/leaders were managing the cataclysmic changes to their mothering and leading roles. I invited 16 other mother/leaders to share their pandemic accounts, and as their stories encountered mine, our collective navigations coalesced to reveal themes about the cultures of mothering and leading that permeated our lives. Using narratives, images, photographs, collages, written, aural, and sensory data, this study interrogated the social norms of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) and intensive leadership (Baker, 2016) that mother/leaders encountered, reframed, and resisted during the precarity of COVID-19 (Dolman, 2018). This study created a space where the norms that constrain mother/leaders during crises can be assessed critically with the hopes that they can be dislodged and replaced with more matricentric sensitive policies and practices.

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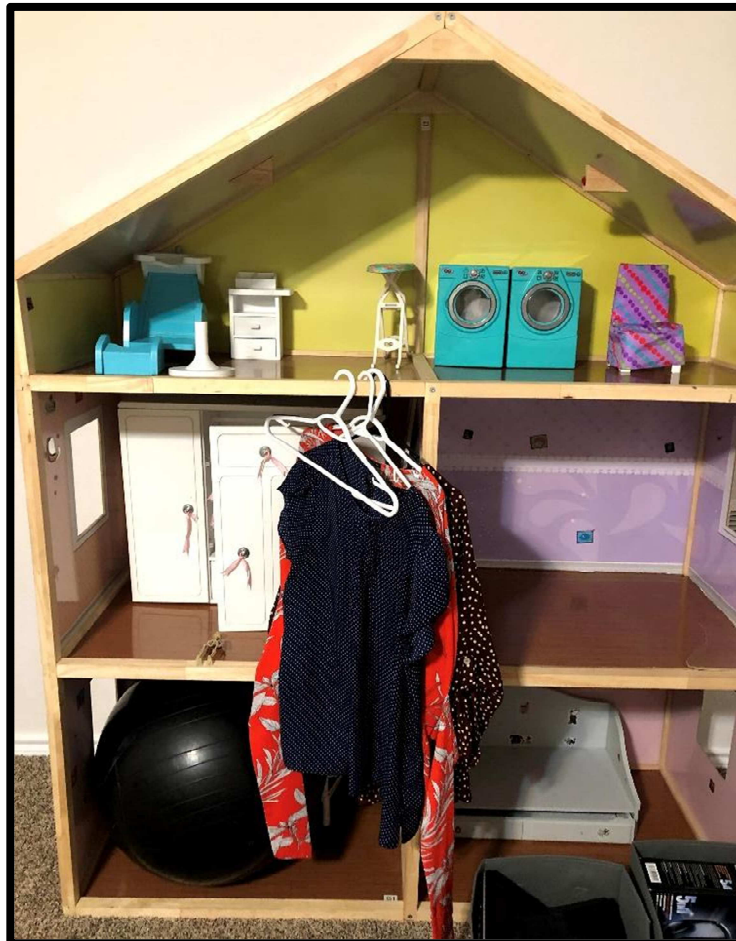
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Figure 1

Dollhouse Closet



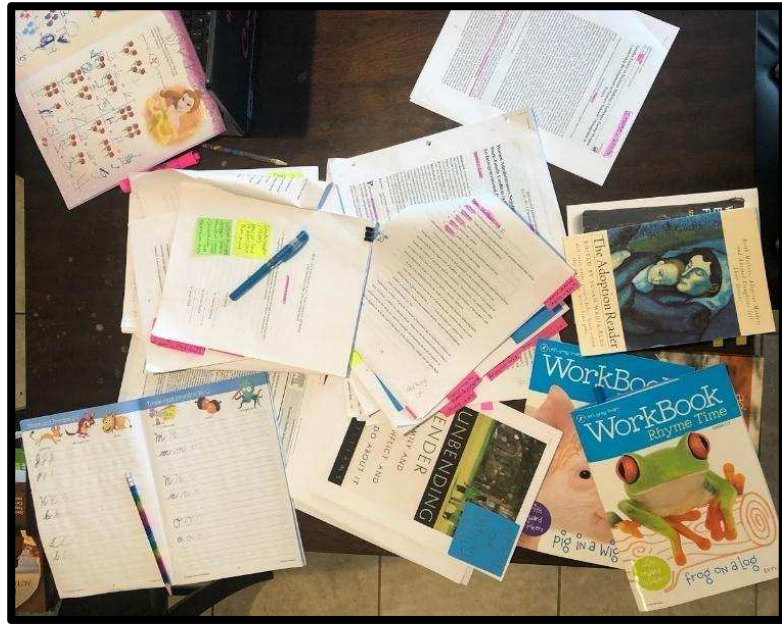
Interlude: I Have the Coronavirus

September 17, 2020

I wake from my first night of quarantine as a test-confirmed COVID-19 patient. I fold my bed linens and retract the sofa sleeper that Sunshine lovingly made for me last night, and I am reminded that my new bedroom/office/living space is actually a little girls' playroom. Beneath the sofa cushions, I find cheese cracker crumbs, a sock, a Doc McStuffins toy thermometer, a colorful mermaid bathing suit, part of a Halloween skeleton, and a ballpoint pen. I pause briefly, remembering the long day we all spent a few Saturdays ago packing away old toys. I am grateful for the whim that motivated us to purge the upstairs of the massive hoard of threadbare stuffed animals, broken dollhouse furniture, random game pieces, and dismembered dolls. Having to face that mess would have sent me right over the edge. I walk to the rarely used upstairs bathroom to ready myself for "work." I wince as what I assume is an earring post stabs the tender bottom of my foot. Unfortunately, my hand-sweep of the carpet fails to locate the perpetrator. I brush my teeth, put on makeup, and quickly tame my flyaway hair. I pick a floral blouse from the small collection of clothes hanging on the lip of the giant dollhouse (Figure 1), my makeshift closet. This top should go well with my incognito flannel pajama pants. I position the coffee table and organize my workspace in preparation for the superintendent's weekly meeting with principals. I have my computer, pens, notebook, and good lighting ready for the videoconference. Shortly before the 8:00 meeting, I notice the bare walls we never decorated after the move two years ago. Above the sofa I quickly hang a large canvas black and white photo of the girls—a delivery from Sunshine to decorate my new quarantine living space. Now, I'm ready.

Figure 2

Mothering and Leading with Blurred Boundaries



This study investigated the experiences of K-12 school mother/leaders (e.g. principals, assistant principals, and curriculum leaders) forced to navigate uncharted parenting and leading terrain during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in 2020 and 2021. In the wake of the seismic shift in our day-to-day embodied realities wrought by COVID-19, school leaders/mothers faced a range of challenges, including increased workloads and “blurred boundaries” between work and home. As the above photograph (Figure 2) represents—with its overlapping leadership readings and children’s workbooks—for me and many women, home spaces dissolved into workspaces and vice versa.

Although a long history of research on working mothers indicates the diverse conflicts and pressures they navigate (e.g. Castaneda & Isgro, 2013; Collins, 2019; Hochschild, 2012), and female school leaders negotiate particular issues unique to their roles (Baker, 2016; Loder, 2005; Lumby, 2015), pandemic conditions profoundly amplified and

altered these navigations. Moreover, current conditions shifted mother/leaders' leadership authority, embodied realities, workspaces, roles, daily tasks, and time boundaries. Such shifts invited new theorizing and visions of school leadership and the structural supports that enabled them. As mothering and schooling practices are re-imagined, so too, is leadership.

The global repercussions of the coronavirus created a demand for timely scholarship on its impact in a variety of disciplines. This demand provided an opportunity for my adviser and me to analyze pilot interview data for a collaborative manuscript (Crosslin & Bailey, 2021) published in the special COVID-19 edition of *Planning and Changing*. Pilot interviews with ten mother/leaders surfaced common themes that merited further exploration which I undertook in this study. These included mothers' gendered navigations as school leaders during COVID-19, the individual and/or structural supports available (or unavailable) to mother/leaders, the impact of the pandemic on differently positioned mother/leaders, and what these navigations revealed about the culture of school leadership.

The COVID-19 crisis that began in late 2019 but grew into a national and global crisis during the first three months of 2020 provided a unique context for researching mother/leaders' responses to what Dolman et al. (2018) call "precarity" in mothering. As a mother/leader, I struggled to make sense of and navigate the uncertainties introduced by COVID-19 that profoundly altered my mothering and leading work. My personal struggles managing both roles inspired me to explore the experiences of other mother/leaders in relation to my own. Using autoethnography as methodology, this study explored the ideologies of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) and intensive leadership (Baker, 2016) that impacted mothering and leading during a global health crisis. Using this exploration as a touchstone throughout the project, I invited other mother/leaders to share stories which

mingled with mine providing a broader understanding of this phenomenon of mothering/leading during COVID-19 as well as what it revealed about the prevailing culture of school leadership.

Ultimately, the individual and collective navigations of mothers leading schools during COVID-19 shed light on women's agential practices and constraints during an unprecedented time. Pilot interview data (Crosslin & Bailey, 2021) revealed some women's navigations pointing to new mothering and leading practices that emerged to respond to the dual pressures of both roles. Further, the study illuminated the cultural and social forces prevalent in school leadership that inform how women both mother and lead. The broader significance of this research, then, was understanding how women negotiated COVID conditions to mother and lead and how mother/leaders accepted, rejected, reframed, or resisted social pressures that tell them how to mother and lead. As the COVID-19 phenomenon challenged usual schooling, leading, and mothering practices, women were required to look anew at school leadership during a time of crisis.

Autoethnography explored the interplay between personal and cultural experiences that allowed the researcher to understand how the two are interconnected, in this case mother/leaders' experiences in precarity and the culture of school leadership. Salient for my project, Ellis (2004) provides a definition of autoethnography that illustrates how as a methodology it weaves together the personal and social:

It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness...Back and forth autoethnographers gaze: First they look through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable

self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations (p. 37).

In doing so, autoethnography embraces personal and cultural exploration—always interconnected—and researcher vulnerability, subjectivity, and thick description. These characteristics make autoethnography an ideal vehicle for inquiry into my, and other mother/leaders', negotiations in this dynamic context of personal and cultural fervor and its varied repercussions for women (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Ellis, 2004; Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013).

Mapping the Study

In what follows, I present the background to this inquiry and the intersections of personal and professional identities that paved the way for this research to take form as an autoethnographic project. I include a brief overview of the ongoing COVID-19 situation at this time of writing (Spring, 2022) and a review of the underlying social norms surrounding mothering and gendered school leadership that affect mother/leaders' responses to risk and peril. I conclude the first chapter with a combination of narrative vignettes that illustrate my entry into autoethnography as well as elements of conventional research design which include study purpose, questions for inquiry and reflection, and significance. Chapter two presents a review of existing literature related to leading and mothering in varied contexts of precarity. It also reviews scholarship on the effects of masculine school leadership norms on mother/leaders' constraint and agency as they manage dual roles.

Chapter three highlights the benefits of autoethnography as a methodology for projects that are characterized by intense emotion, uncertainty, and an intimate connection between the personal and the cultural (Ellis et al., 2011). It embraces a narrative style

common to autoethnography with descriptions of methodology, themes from pilot interviews, and research methods in a way that highlights the voice, experiences, and emotions of mother/leaders during COVID-19. It also articulates the study methods—personal narrative writing, text collaging, semi-structured interviews, and photo-elicitation with mother/leaders. Chapter three ends with an explanation of the normative social discourses at play during the pandemic, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

Chapter four illuminates the voices of mother/leaders as they navigated everchanging conditions during COVID-19. They experienced chaos, urgency, blurred boundaries, guilt, and failure, but these difficulties notwithstanding, they felt compelled to continue leading with compassion as they provided care for students, teachers, and their own families.

Women’s narratives, embodied experiences, metaphors, and photographs coalesce to provide insights into their experiences. Chapter five casts a vision for mothering and leading in a world changed by the virus and asks if our current expectations for mother/leaders are still relevant. Considering questions for inquiry and reflection and presenting the case for motherwork to be recognized as essential in times of normalcy and crisis, it calls for new matricentric policies and practices. For far too long, normative social discourses and systems have devalued the important labor and care provided by mothers (O’Reilly, 2021).

Background

Scholarship is replete with evidence about social and cultural pressures that shape motherhood and the lived experiences of working mothers in the United States and across the globe (Collins, 2019). While over 70% of mothers in the United States work outside the home and have enjoyed increasing access to paid employment over the past three decades (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020), processes within the home have remained mostly static.

As sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2012) notes in her classic research on *The Second Shift*, “The influx of women into the economy has not been accompanied by the cultural understanding of marriage and work that would make this transition smooth” (p. 12). The conditions shaping the second shift include American cultural norms and gender ideologies to which mothers themselves often adhere, whether intentionally or unconsciously, contributing to their own pressures. O’Reilly (2016) named an additional *third shift* – the mental and emotional labor of domestic care work – shouldered by mothers in times of normalcy and precarity. Her COVID-19 research unveiled yet another shift. The *fourth shift* emerged as global stay at home orders cloistered families inside their homes. The *fourth shift* – the education of children while simultaneously managing their own paid labor – like other shifts falls squarely on mothers (O’Reilly, 2021).

For working mothers who are also school leaders, the pressures of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) and intensive leading (Baker, 2016) are sources of conflict as mother/leaders negotiate their identities in both roles, sometimes subverting one to the other (Bradbury & Gunter, 2006; Clark, 2000; Jordan, 2012). Baker (2016) explains the conundrum:

As mamas we often do not have a place where this part of ourselves can be shared openly with others, a place that recognizes the expectations and challenges we face, as mamas. One would think that schools would be a place that leadingmamas could more fully integrate their identities; however, even schools do not allow leadingmamas to fully integrate our identities. This part of our identity is not to be brought into the school workplace, even though schools are places for children and families” (p. 155).

The demanding culture of school leadership, as well as their responsibility for the lion's share of domestic labor, ensures mother/leaders in the current culture of school leadership are working longer hours and with fewer benefits and more challenges than their male counterparts (Choge, 2015; Kruger et al., 2005; Loder, 2005; Lumby, 2015; Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2015; Shakeshaft, 1986).

Additionally, current research on pre-COVID public school contexts in the United States indicates the demands of school leadership and the pace of rapid change have contributed to a climate of turbulence and risk in public schools (Burke et al., 2012; Grimm et al., 2008; Hameiri et al., 2014; Reed & Blaine, 2015). In their study, Hameiri et al. (2014) found that uncertainty and risk “are relevant and significant characteristics of public school environment [sic]” (p. 48). Leaders in these challenging school contexts, then, have an increased need for resilient leadership (Reed & Blaine, 2015), transformational skills, soft power bases (Hameiri et al., 2014), and high levels of technical and adaptive expertise (Burke et al., 2012; Grimm et al., 2008). The required leadership skills needed in profoundly perilous situations are correspondingly more intense.

Early COVID-19 research indicated that the challenges of leading in a global health crisis could result in principals leaving the profession in droves (Zalaznick, 2021), despite pre-COVID scholarship showing large numbers of women flocking to educational leadership roles (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Shakeshaft et al., 2007). By integrating their roles (Boldur, 2009; Bradbury & Gunter, 2006; Choge, 2015; Lumby & Azola, 2014; Jordan, 2016), reframing gender expectations (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Christopher, 2012; Hochschild, 2012), leveraging their positions as mothers (Bradbury & Gunter, 2006), and enlisting support through familial networks (Christopher, 2012; Finley, 2019), support groups, and

mentors (Baker, 2016; Boldur, 2009; Shakeshaft et al., 2007), mother/leaders tapped into their strength and agency as they negotiated dual roles. However, the question remained whether these well-practiced strategies would be sufficient for leading and mothering as pandemic conditions continued to oppress women.

In the best of times, mother/leaders manage unreasonable maternal and professional expectations which frequently generate feelings of guilt and inadequacy (Baker, 2016; Jordan, 2012; O'Reilly, 2016). Uncertain COVID-19 conditions and stringent leadership demands amplified these insecurities and introduced new challenges for working mothers. As Kitchener (2020) suggested of COVID-19, "It's an impossible situation for caregivers who...now work from home. There is not enough time to do everything" (p. 5). O'Reilly's (2020) exploration of mothers' social media comments during the initial wave of COVID-19 confirmed the amplified workload and stress that accompanied mothering, as well as the blatant disregard by governments, media outlets, and society in general of this valuable maternal care work. "We need to ask and address why motherwork, even during a pandemic when it is so crucial, remains so devalued and invisible" (O'Reilly, 2020, p. 12).

COVID-19

As of the culmination of this study in spring 2022, just over two years since the World Health Organization first became aware of a new coronavirus, the world continued to battle the COVID-19 novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2). Since its discovery in Wuhan, Hubei, China in late December 2019, it had infected over 290 million and killed almost 5.5 million people worldwide (World Health Organization. (n.d.). Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard. Retrieved January 4, 2022, from <https://covid19.who.int/>). Experts concluded that the virus likely originated in bats and was transmitted to humans at a live animal market

in Wuhan. Although the virus began in animals, person-to-person spread was the most frequent cause of COVID-19 infection. The highly contagious nature of this coronavirus as well as the likelihood that up to 45% of infected people remain asymptomatic had a compounding effect on global rates of infection (World Health Organization (n.d.). Coronavirus. Retrieved September 4, 2021, from https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1). As of July 4, 2020, the number of new COVID-19 cases worldwide surpassed 200,000 per day for the first time. Slightly over three months later, on October 17, 2020, the number of new daily infections had doubled to 400,000 before reaching 1 million new infections daily on December 19, 2020. While global infections gradually decreased throughout spring and early summer 2021, the Delta variant, more than twice as contagious as the Alpha virus, caused COVID infections to spike again by July 2021. The Omicron variant, which drove infections to record highs in January 2022, promised to become more insidious than previous versions. With 1.8 million new cases, January 1, 2022, marked a 70% increase in new daily infections compared to December 31, 2021. As the pandemic passed the two-year mark, there was little evidence that it is close to over (World Health Organization. (n.d.). Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard. Retrieved January 4, 2022, from <https://covid19.who.int/>).

The United States reported its first COVID-19 case on January 20, 2020, and the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a “public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC)” eight days later. However, on March 8, 2020, when my family boarded a jet for a spring break vacation to Orlando and the Bahamas, I had scarcely heard of the virus. By the time the WHO declared a “pandemic” on March 11, 2020, I was in vacation mode and enjoying all the fun the Sunshine State had to offer. My work as an elementary school

principal seemed a world away (World Health Organization (n.d.). Coronavirus (COVID-19). Retrieved July 5, 2020, from <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>).

Mother/Leaders

This autoethnographic study explored my and other female school leaders' experiences during COVID-19 as they negotiated mothering and leading. Situating the self (*auto*) alongside others who shared my leadership role (*ethno*) within the U.S. schooling and cultural contexts of this historical moment (*ethno*) was thus central to this study. I wrote through these components as efforts to understand and explore (*graphy*) the connections between the cultural and the personal. My cogitations began as an attempt to make sense of my own uncertain negotiations as a mother of two girls and principal with 13 years' school leadership experience. However, alongside my reflections, as I turned my gaze outward, I recognized facets that represented not only my experiences but those of others who shared the roles of mother/leader. Through writing and reflecting, the auto and ethno crystallized (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) to provide a unique way of understanding mothering and leading in uncertain conditions.

In times of stability, mother/leaders find themselves in constant tension as they grapple with demanding cultural expectations (both maternal and professional), their own gender ideologies, and actual lived experiences (Shakeshaft et al., 2007). It's tenuous at best, like standing in high heels on the fulcrum of a seesaw barely managing both roles. This balancing act requires constant attention to minor changes on each end of the seesaw as I adjust to the daily nuances that accompany each role. Though challenging, I and other

mother/leaders are cognizant of strategies that can provide equilibrium and balance in our routinely busy lives.

As a mother/leader from 2020 to 2022, I experienced intense uncertainty and insecurity. Working in COVID-19 conditions meant sometimes working from home while caring for and trying to teach my two special-needs daughters, navigating constant intrusions in workspaces both at home and school, and overwhelming workloads and anxiety. The delicate seesaw balancing act became impossible to manage. As the ground shifted beneath my feet, the seesaw collapsed, leaving me to grapple with and reimagine both roles. Although initially terrifying, the opportunity to rethink and redefine my motherwork and leadership through writing served as a source of empowerment. Similarly, I listened to and watched my colleagues recall their chaotic experiences and wondered if there was a different, better way to mother and lead in a world forever changed by a virus.

Mothering in the 21st Century

In addition to long hours spent leading schools and managing home life, mother/leaders in America—in fact, all working mothers—find themselves in an impossible sprint to meet the expectations of the socially-constructed image of the *ideal mother*. This ideal mother is expected to work long hours, and then come home to nurture her children with care and compassion, prepare nutritious meals, cultivate artistic and athletic talent, and ensure academic success—all while maintaining her lipsticked good looks. This child-centric view of mothering nourishes unhealthy guilt in working mothers who lack the necessary resources and skills to live up to this unrealistic image. Hays (1996) used the term *intensive mothering* to describe the societal expectation for mothers to possess professional-grade skills in all aspects of child-rearing. This ideal shapes mothers' experiences, despite its

impossibility. It is unrealistic for any mother to meet this expectation, much less the principal who spends exceedingly long hours meeting the demands of her career (Bradbury & Gunter, 2006; Clark, 2000; Hays, 1996; Jordan 2012; Loder, 2005; Lumby, 2015).

Mothering in Times of Peril

As this study paralleled the unfolding pandemic, the paucity of research on mothering in COVID-19 was not surprising. Early inquiry and press reports made it clear, however, that mothers felt its reverberations intensely. By examining discussions on a special Facebook group, *Mothers and COVID-19*, which was active for two weeks in May 2020, renowned feminist mothering scholar Andrea O'Reilly (2020), documented its effects on mothers. Her Facebook project propelled the later publication of her edited volume *Mothers, Mothering, and COVID-19: Dispatches from a Pandemic* (O'Reilly & Green, 2021), an anthology of scholarship from differently positioned mothers living through COVID. O'Reilly's (2020; 2021) early interrogation and her edited collection revealed amplified stress, increased domestic and professional workloads, the disintegration of boundaries between home and work, emotional breakdowns, and an inability to manage the overwhelming and disparate tasks that surfaced during the pandemic. Despite the unrelenting pressure mothers faced, O'Reilly (2020) also recognized the increased labor and material (although invisible) agency of mothers. O'Reilly (2020) proclaimed:

I would suggest that it is [...] mothers who are most impacted by the pandemic because it is mothers who are doing the necessary and arduous carework to sustain their families and communities. However, no one is recognizing let alone supporting mothers as frontline workers or acknowledging and appreciating what mother are

managing and accomplishing in their homes under unimaginable circumstances (p. 12).

Preliminary findings from pilot interviews for this study found that during COVID-19 mother/leaders experienced intensified stress, limited self-care, increased emotionality and crying, and what one participant called “blurred boundaries” (Crosslin & Bailey, 2021, p. 165). Mother/leaders also demonstrated agency as they made lightning-speed decisions in constantly changing circumstances, what we called triage leadership. “The term triage leadership describes leading within uncertainty and constantly shifting priorities and giving way as waves of demands ebb and flow” (Crosslin & Bailey, 2021, p. 172). Leading from home or school, mother/leaders demonstrated a commitment to action, care work in aiding teachers, and reprioritizing (Crosslin & Bailey, 2021). We interpreted these shifts as evidence of mother/leaders’ adaptability and resilience (Burke et al., 2012; Grimmett et al., 2008; Reed & Blaine, 2015). Additionally, and notably, we observed that mother/leaders framed their experiences almost exclusively in terms of their individual labor and responsibility, rather than needing structural supports, surfacing possible issues of gender inequity in the culture of school leadership and women’s absorption of beliefs they were in it alone (Crosslin & Bailey, 2021).

This study’s pilot data (Crosslin & Bailey, 2021), O’Reilly’s (2020) focused Facebook exploration, and her edited volume on COVID-19 mothering (O’Reilly, 2021) pointed to the broader scholarship on mothering in crisis. As we sought to make sense of our unexpected and unpredictable circumstances, the limited body of research related to the gendered experiences of women and mothers during crisis, conflict, and disaster provided insight and guidance.

The study of disasters as profoundly social rather than strictly natural phenomena is a relatively new framework for understanding the impacts of natural disasters on society. The semantics of the word *natural* implicate the catastrophic event as the cause of disaster instead of interrogating the social constructs that render said events disastrous. Perry (2007) looks historically at how the study of disaster has evolved from focusing on the event to studying how social structures and those within them are impacted by disasters:

This emphasis reinforces the traditional notion that in defining and studying disasters, one should look first at social systems, since they (not the agent) are the real source of vulnerability. To the extent that the researchers in a hazard-disaster tradition are moving in this direction, they are converging with sociological researchers to place people and social relationships at the core of disaster study (Perry, 2007, p. 9).

This shift towards understanding disasters as primarily social experiences opened the door to understanding the particular ways dominant social ideologies that marginalize women and mothers during times of normalcy make them particularly vulnerable during times of hazard. Fothergill (1996) conducted a review of the research related to gender differences in the primary domains of the disaster cycle—risk, preparedness, impact, and recovery. Her synthesis of the limited data found that traditional gender roles and experiences—such as caregiving, domesticity, discrimination, and poverty—influenced how women and mothers experience disasters differently than men (Fothergill, 1996).

Interlude: My Journey into Autoethnography

One day you finally knew
What you had to do, and began,
Though the voices around you
Kept shouting
Their bad advice—
Though the whole house began to tremble

And you felt the old tug
At your ankles.
“Mend my life!”
each voice cried.
But you didn’t stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do —
determined to save
the only life you could save.

(Oliver, 2020, p. 349)

In pre-pandemic 2018, I scramble around the house searching for the narrative resources that I used in fall 2015. What dusty box contains the binders, books, and sketches from our Saturday morning considerations in the second-floor conference room of Willard Hall? In the stacks of moving boxes in the garage, I finally find the box marked, “narrative.” I sit crisscross applesauce on the dusty pavement in the garage and mill through the contents of the box. I find texts, notes, drawings, and musings from this course that felt more like a think tank, book club, or critical friends’ group than a research class. Having spent two years

immersed in researching research, I enjoyed the *story* and the *self* that this Saturday morning narrative and visual inquiry class highlighted (Adams et al., 2015). Research became a living, evolving entity that provided rich explanations for lived experiences inside culture, not just discovering and explaining sanitized facts. I enjoyed finding myself inside the research, not separate from it (Adams et al., 2015). Bochner (2014) describes this intimate relationship between the embodied inquirer and the quest for new knowledge:

When I say I know something, I necessarily implicate myself in the knowledge claim. I am the one who knows. What I know is a complex system of perception, codification, and translation passing through me. Thus, the relationship between the knower and the known is of prime importance (p. 84).

The idea that I could become part of the focus of the research was liberating and empowering. Instead of approaching the study with the idea I was making allowances for my impact on the study, this methodology allowed me to foreground and intertwine my experiences with others' and with scholarship as meaning was constructed layer by layer in an evolutionary process. My knowing was unique in the world, and I could contribute to others' knowledge of the world. I loved how autoethnography created space for my personal experiences to mingle with cultural experiences elevating my and others' understanding of both. As Ellis et al. (2011) described, "Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze [through writing] (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)" (p. 273).

I remember how I devoured those texts in fall 2015, especially Art Bochner's *Coming to Narrative* (2014). It was freeing to follow his awakening to the idea that he "could build an academic life around questions and issues that really mattered to me personally" (Bochner,

2014, p. 76.) What mattered to me personally in the fall of 2015 was my daughter's August 5th adoption. I reread my major paper from the narrative and visual inquiry class "Narrating Sunshine" which chronicled the adoption of my first child. It was the best essay of my lengthy educational career (this study excluded). I was working from passion, experience, and heart, what autoethnographers call "insider knowledge" (Jones et al., 2013, p. 33; Adams et al., 2015). "Working from insider knowledge, autoethnographers use *personal* experience to create nuanced and detailed 'thick descriptions' of *cultural* experience in order to facilitate understanding of those experiences (Geertz, 1973)," (Jones et al., 2013, p. 33).

My voice in "Narrating Sunshine" was raw, passionate, and hopeful. The stories still move me to tears – loving, angry, tender, and sad tears. I wrote differently - more evocatively - because the story was mine. Autoethnographers argue that "autoethnography is more authentic than traditional research approaches, precisely because of the researcher's use of self, the voice of the insider being more true than that of the outsider" (Wall, 2006, p. 155). The rereading of my daughter's adoption narrative convinces me that this is true. Many people know the facts of my daughter's adoption story, but they do not know how it feels to live this story. The earnest hopes and agonizing fears of fostering to adopt expose the vulnerabilities of individuals who feel small and powerless compared to the massive bureaucratic goliath that is the foster care system. By sharing my vulnerability as a mother through adoption, I hoped to give a voice to other mothers whose stories lie outside the bounds of the traditional family in research (Jones et al., 2013) and to illuminate the shared cultural conditions of fostering processes. "The goal of autoethnographic projects is to embrace the vulnerability of asking and answering questions about experience so that we as

researchers, as well as our collaborators and readers, might understand these experiences and the emotions they generate” (Adams et al., 2015, p. 39).

I remember sharing my autoethnography with the class. By the end of the semester, we had developed a rapport, a sort of camaraderie. There were only about eight or nine of us plus our professor in the Saturday morning research brunch bunch. Still, reading my work aloud was terrifying. As I read, I felt as though I were naked before the group. I wasn’t reading a paper; I was reading my life. Ellis and Bochner (2000) describe the vulnerability of the autoethnographer. “There’s the vulnerability of revealing yourself, not being able to take back what you’ve written or having any control over how readers interpret it. It’s hard not to feel your life is being critiqued as well as your work” (p. 738). The vulnerability of autoethnography is challenging, but it is precisely this challenge that causes us to investigate, question, retell, and dig deep to know (Adams et al., 2015; Chang, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). “This kind of vulnerable writing and research may not be for everyone, but surely it’s for someone” (Bochner, 2014, p. 269). I think it just might be for me.

Prior to COVID-19, I spent a couple of years in graduate school Purgatory. I fumbled around with autoethnography for a couple of semesters, storying my experiences as a mom and school principal. I was drawn to evocative topics about which I felt an emotional connection—early trauma, adoption, teachers on strike, punitive education policy, and inequity—but I never fully abandoned traditional research notions. Straddling a methodological fence held me back from diving head-first into the exciting, murky waters of autoethnography. When my adviser of two semesters left the university in January 2020, I was at a crossroads. In desperation, I reached out to the contemplative willowy professor who hosted our morning narrative sessions for advice. I had no idea that within a few weeks, the

COVID-19 phenomenon would turn the world (and *my* world) upside down. The convergence of stalled doctoral progress, a rekindling of my interest in narrative scholarship, reflecting on my mothering journey, reconnecting with my narrative mentor, AND a global pandemic would literally startle me awake at 3 am and deliver me a topic about which I was passionate—mothering and leading in times of peril. As Figure 3 below represents, peril encircles and bleeds into all mothering norms and blurs boundaries for mother/leaders regardless of their positions.

Figure 3

Mothering Norms in Peril



Although autoethnographies rarely use research “problems” as do projects following traditional research designs, this project is important for both scholarship and practice. As of the completion of this research, few studies on mothering, and even fewer on mothering leaders, existed. The limited scholarship on mother/leaders’ pandemic experiences confirmed

their invisible, undervalued work. I and other women's voices underscored the importance of women's care work during times of precarity. Consequently, I hoped this study would make visible the oppressive cultural norms of mothering and school leadership that women encountered during times of relative certainty but were intensified during times of crisis.

Purpose

Utilizing the methodology of autoethnography, I explored and analyzed my lived experiences as a mother/leader during the phenomenon of COVID-19 (*auto*) in order to understand how I negotiated these dual roles during a time of uncertainty and risk. This analysis was a touchstone to also explore the experiences of other differently positioned mother/leaders to comprehend how their experiences were situated relative to mine and what our experiences revealed about the social norms surrounding mothering and leading. Employing writing as a method of inquiry (*graphy*), I wrote to create meaning and reflect the culture of school leadership (*ethno*), not to predict and explain events. Through writing, the researcher is both the "site and subject of these [embodied and] discursive struggles" which provided a unique way of knowing about the self and culture (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 38). Writing became a way of "processing painful, confusing, angering, and uncertain cultural experiences" (Ellis et al., 2013, p. 35), so the researcher could understand her experience, the experiences of others that shared her similar positioning, and the culture of mothering/leading they illuminate.

Theoretical Framework

Feminism

This qualitative research study is grounded in feminist theory which postulates that women and those gendered feminine are positioned in patriarchal social structures that shape

their experiences in varied ways. While there is vast heterogeneity within feminist scholarship—ranging from revolutionary Marxist feminism to liberal feminism considered more mainstream (Crotty, 1998; Saraswati, 2018)—all branches of feminism assert that women encounter and navigate often androcentric, oppressive, and discriminatory structures in personal, social, economic, and/or professional life. Feminist scholars of educational leadership argue that schools are traditional institutions that mirror the ideals of the larger society, and as such educational systems are inherently masculine (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Shakeshaft, 1986; Shakeshaft et al., 2007) and reproduce rather than interrupt existing social and economic patterns (Collins, 2009). Though women have enjoyed greater access to leadership positions in recent decades (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Shakeshaft et al., 2007), schools continue to operate primarily as patriarchal organizations that not only shape the culture of leadership governing schools but provide greater access to leadership positions for men than women. Considering that 75% of teachers are women, the leadership discrepancy in schools is even more striking.

Despite a body of research indicating women possess stronger interpersonal and transformational leadership skills, educational organizations continue to reinforce masculinity in leadership, and men continue to outnumber women in leadership positions. In their book *Women and Educational Leadership*, noted feminist educational researchers, Margaret Grogan and Charol Shakeshaft (2011), illuminate five distinctly feminine leadership skills that focus on collective rather than individual leadership skills. These include, “relational leadership, leadership for social justice, leadership for learning, spiritual leadership, and balanced leadership” (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011, p. 6). Other studies have shown that women demonstrate greater leadership resilience (Reed & Blaine, 2015), superior

transformational leadership skills (Hallinger et al., 2016; Kruger et al., 2005; Lamm et al., 2020; Lumby, 2015; Lumby & Azaola, 2014; Shaed, 2018), and the ability to successfully integrate their personal and professional roles (Baker, 2016; Bradbury & Gunter, 2006; Choge, 2015).

Nevertheless, within educational environments, pervasive gender discrimination and sex-role stereotyping remain pillars of organizational socialization that continue to limit opportunities for women in educational leadership (Shakeshaft et al., 2007), especially at the highest levels of leadership (Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2015). As women toil within masculinist cultures, feminism invites them to resist patriarchal subjugation and the multitude of gender-based injustices inflicted on women through the binary social construction of male/female, biological essentialism, gender stereotypes, and all forms of unjust gendered power relations (Crotty, 1998). Feminism as a theoretical orientation embraces a critical stance toward taken-for-granted assumptions about the social world and social norms, including gendered prescriptions and ideals, a socially just orientation, and emancipatory aims (O'Reilly & Hallstein, 2012).

Matricentric Feminism

Matricentric feminism is a specific vein of feminist theory that identifies mothering as the primary source and site of subjugation in patriarchal society. Influential scholar and mothering advocate, O'Reilly (2016), acknowledges, "Most women mother in the patriarchal institution of motherhood, in which women's mothering is defined and controlled by the larger patriarchal society in which they live. Mothers do not make the rules" (p. 14). She argues that the roles of mothers and the role of women are distinct; mothers bear profound social, personal and economic consequences for their roles in social reproduction, a concept

that captures the labor involved in cultivating children's lives (O'Reilly, 2016). Nevertheless, the current social discourse on mothering silences their voices.

Mother/leaders encounter gender-based prejudice and discrimination in the predominantly masculine culture of school leadership. This leadership culture presents as gender-neutral but is riddled with male-centric norms and practices which limit mothers' opportunities and create gender-based inequalities (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Shakeshaft et al., 2007; Shakeshaft, 1986). As care work remains predominantly women's responsibility, reproductive labor is an additional source of oppression for working mothers (Collins, 2019; Hochschild, 2012). For example, the U.S. remains the only developed nation that does not provide paid family maternity leave for employees (Rubin, 2016). The confluence of male-centric organizational socialization and the invisibility of motherwork within the mainstream social discourse continues to restrict mother/leaders' access to educational leadership roles.

Questions for Inquiry and Reflection

1. How do mothers/leaders describe their dual roles during COVID-19?
2. How have mother/leaders' navigated COVID conditions?
3. What strategies have mother/leaders used to negotiate their roles during COVID-19?
How do these align with or differ from the literature on working mothers' negotiations of social mothering norms?
4. What do women's narratives of their mothering and leading lives during COVID reveal about structural and/or personal supports?
5. What do mother/leaders' negotiations reveal about the culture of school leadership?
6. How do mother/leaders' negotiations during COVID-19 offer new conceptualizations of mothering and leading?

Practicing Autoethnography

Throughout the process of writing to inquire about my experiences as a mother/leader during these unsettling times, I explored mothering from many perspectives. One day in July 2020 during my writing practice, I found myself weary of the expository writing of the literature review, so I took up the practice of text collaging. Collaging is an arts-based research (ABR) practice that combines different texts, photographs, or artifacts into a new product that conceptualizes, refines, illustrates, or expands an idea or theme in research (Gerstenblatt et al., 2013). Qualitative researchers can use this approach as a tool of data collection, such as a collective activity during a focus group, a prompt for individual interviewing and discussion, a method of researcher reflection and analysis, and a way of representing findings.

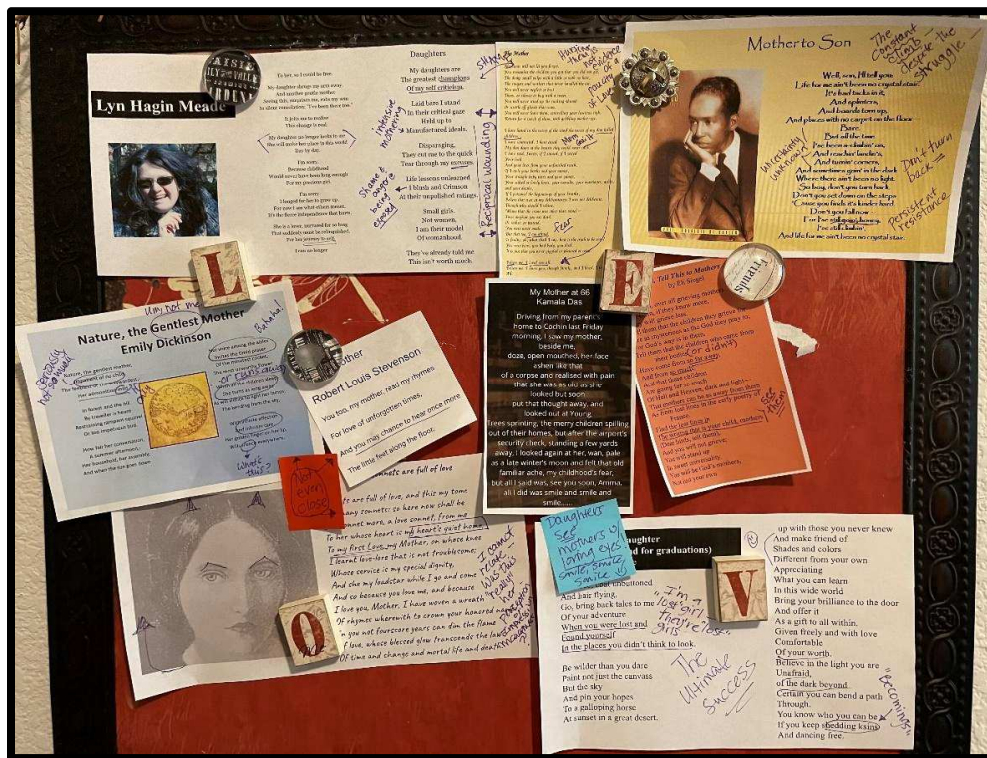
Methodologically, collaging “serves as a corollary to postmodern thought that challenges objectivity and a singular reality” (Gerstenblatt et al., 2013, p. 295). Collaging is both theoretically and literally constructionist. Researchers piece together bits and fragments from multiple sources to explore and surface insights about an experience. Gerstenblatt et al. (2013) explains, “a collage fragments space and repurposes objects to contextualize multiple realities” (p. 295). As a tool for inquiry, how I used it in this circumstance, collaging allows researchers to reflect, elicit feelings, make comparisons, identify contradictions, and conceptualize ideas. According to Gerstenblatt et al. (2013), collaging is a “research tool to blend images and text to create a reality and find meaning” (Gerstenblatt et al., 2013, p. 295).

Scholars can also use collaging as a method of data analysis, adding layers of meaning to qualitative studies. Researchers can use collages to weave together data from

other traditional qualitative sources (e.g. interviews, photographs, journals) contributing to a deeper understanding of the data. Describing how the process and product of collaging contribute to data analysis, Gerstenblatt et al. (2013) explains, “An informant sharing a memory has meaning, a photograph from an informant’s collection means something, and the combination can reveal meaning greater than the simple sum of its parts” (p. 302).

Figure 4

Mothering Poems Collage



I began the collaging process by searching for a variety of texts related to my study that spoke to me. As I read, I noticed words, phrases, themes, and ideas and began to group them in ways that made sense—creating collages. These texts became touchstones for me as I grappled with fear, guilt, and uncertainty, especially related to my perceived failures as a mother. As Adams, Jones, and Ellis (2015) explain, “Over time, your collaging will develop into an internal through-line or logic...as you continue to develop your writing project” (p.

73). As I read and annotated poems about mothers and mothering (Figure 4), I noticed the juxtaposition of the romantic poets' depictions of mothers compared to more realistic, yet still loving, depictions, like that of Langston Hughes (1994) in his poem *Mother to Son*.

*Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor —
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on*

As I read poems, collaged, and wrote, I considered my mothering work from the perspective of my daughters who spent the months from March to July 2020 watching me flounder as I clumsily negotiated mothering and leading during the early days of the pandemic. Certainly, they would not romanticize “coronavirus mom.” That said, there is something deeply moving about how a child sees her mom, despite her flaws, as lovely.

My girls used games to entice me away from work, as if the lure of *Exploding Kittens* was as irresistible to me as it was to them. The tension between work and play as I negotiated leading from home and deciding when, or if, I can play set up the tension in the poem below. I grappled with the myriad ways I hide to work while they sought me to mother them, or I got lost and they always found me. It reminded me of how one mother in my pilot study (Crosslin & Bailey, 2021) described sneaking around the house, hiding her work from her husband. She said it felt like she was “cheating” on him with work. This daily tension was recursive, ongoing—*around, around, around*—as we negotiated mothering and leading in compressed physical spaces with amplified pressure during COVID-19. At the end of the day, their seeking me, finding me was a plea for *me* to see *them*. All five mother/leaders of

young children (ages 10 and younger) who participated in pilot interviews expressed a similar sense of regret and failure in their motherwork as the demands of school leadership intensified and sometimes consumed them. The individual navigations of mother/leaders revealed relevant gender-biased norms that exist within the culture of school leadership.

I see you.
Mommy.
Work, play.
Hide, seek.
Lost, found.
Merry-go-round
And around
And around.
See me.
Mommy.

Significance of the Study

The pandemic disrupted daily rhythms across the entire world. However, mother/leader navigations provided a worthy lens for investigating its unique gendered reverberations for intersecting roles already marked as intense and sometimes conflicting (Baker, 2016; Bradbury & Gunter, 2006; Brown & Wynn, 2004; Clark, 2017; Jordan, 2012; Litmanovitz, 2010; Loder, 2005; Lumby, 2015; Lumby & Azaola, 2014). Philosophical reflections indicated that mothers endured most economic and domestic hardships resulting from the COVID-19 disaster (Kitchener, 2020; O'Reilly, 2020). Furthermore, as school environments were re-envisioned and restructured, school leadership demands compounded pressure on mother/leaders.

There is little empirical scholarship yet published on mothers' experiences leading schools and parenting during COVID-19 (Crosslin & Bailey, 2021 & Rodriguez et al., 2021 are exceptions). The small amount of existing literature on school leadership during times of crisis is focused primarily on systems and operations. For example, research in the wake of

Hurricane Katrina illustrates how the disaster precipitated a massive overhaul of the public schools in New Orleans. Additionally, the school systems in neighboring states experienced a variety of issues including overcrowding, funding shortages, and a lack of resources due to large numbers of displaced students. The research on post-Katrina education points to the need for crisis planning for school leaders that will prepare them to manage precarious circumstances (Alzahrani, 2018; Tanner & McLeod, 2007). However, Katrina-related educational research is devoid of any mention of the gendered experiences of mother/leaders during “precarious times” (Dolman et al., 2018).

While this study was not concerned explicitly about damaged school buildings, displacement and the details of working/living physical spaces were essential to understanding how women negotiated their leading and motherwork during the COVID-19 crisis. Just as school leaders had to reimagine and recreate schooling circumstances after Hurricane Katrina, this study reimaged the spaces, constrained environments, and physical conditions of leading and mothering during a pandemic. Exploring these experiences contributes to knowledge about mother/leaders’ professional and maternal work and the gendered culture of school leadership that contributes to the oppression of women who are mothers.

This study provided a community of understanding for mother/leaders, which supported them in negotiating their roles. As these social realities impacted women in school leadership in unique and challenging ways, research on mothers’ navigations of their dual roles in precarity was crucial for informing praxis and policy decisions. The existing literature makes clear that mothers in school leadership experience stereotypes, sexism, and inequitable gendered expectations as part of their daily lived realities as mothers/leaders

(Choge, 2015; Kruger et al., 2005; Loder, 2005; Lumby, 2015; Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2015; Shakeshaft, 1986). These constraints, amplified by the pandemic, introduced the possibility that mother/leaders suffered additional stressors from their dual roles as they encountered increasingly overt manifestations of patriarchy in school leadership culture. Conversely, “triage leadership” (Crosslin & Bailey, 2021) revealed how acting in uncertainty reflected mother/leaders’ agency and responsiveness, which has the potential for dislodging norms and spurring new conceptions of leadership/mothering theory and practice.

This study was both timely and necessary. It aimed to provide support for women who found themselves up against the ideologies of intensive mothering and intensive leading during the COVID-19 crisis. My hope was that exploring and representing mother/leader work during COVID-19 would aid women under study, including me, in processing and analyzing our experiences. Further, such exploration surfaced information that could enable governments, schools, communities, families, and individuals to better address the challenges and opportunities faced by mother/leaders. Structural, institutional, and family support remained in short supply, based on the perspectives of women in my study. In turn, this autoethnography prompted new theorizing about school leadership norms, not only in times of crisis, but also in times of certainty. O’Reilly (2020) in her critique of society’s ignorance of the weight COVID-19 has placed squarely on the backs of mothers proclaims we must “make visible what has been made invisible and render audible what has been silenced – the labour of motherwork under COVID-19 - in order to inform, support, and empower mothers through and after this pandemic” (p. 8). It is my hope that this work has contributed to this goal.

CHAPTER II

SITUATING THE STUDY WITH THE LITERATURE

This literature review will examine the scholarship on feminism, and particularly matricentric feminism, as it has evolved over my lifetime. Within the body of knowledge that is feminism, feminist mothering theory is a distinct segment of broader feminist ideology that interrogates the social construction of *motherhood* which conserves patriarchal oppression while also recognizing the strength *mothering* holds to resist patriarchy and empower mothers. Arguably, researchers steadily undervalue and frequently ignore matricentric feminism within the normative social constructs that govern how women carry out their varied labor (O'Reilly, 2016). Next, I review the literature on the current social norms of mothering, including the binaries of “good” and “bad” mothering as well as the ideology of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996). Finally, I discuss the existing scholarship on mothers in educational leadership, exploring how mothering and leading coalesce and collide for mother/leaders in educational environments and how gendered cultural norms in school leadership constrain mothers. While autoethnographies often weave in literature throughout the creative elements, I am separating them here to provide a clear conceptual framework upon which the narratives, photos, and other artistic data can rest.

Feminist Mothering

I was born in the 1970s during a vocal period of the women's liberation movement. As a child, I held an overly simplistic understanding of feminism limited to the idea of man-hating, bra-burning middle-class White women demanding reproductive rights. Feminism's first impression left me with nothing more than confusion about despising boys and how abortion conflicted with my family's Christian values. Forty years later as I take a scholarly look at feminism, I recognize the feminist activism I witnessed in my youth as a passionate rejection of gendered social norms that tell women they are second-class citizens. I understand better how feminism interrogates the ideologies that oppress women (and men and trans* folk) who occupy spaces both inside and outside the White, heterosexual middle-class patriarchy of American life.

As a fifty-year old working mother with children who have special needs, I recognize that my position as a mother creates an additional source of oppression for me. A fierce advocate for mothers, O'Reilly (2016) argues for the centrality of mothering within feminist thought, theory, and politics. She suggests that feminism's rejection of *motherhood*—a social institution designed to oppress women—has obscured the significance of *mothering*—the experience and practice (unrelated to gender or biology) of maternity—as a source of agency and liberation (O'Reilly, 2019). “The disavowal of motherhood in academic feminism is the result of a larger and pervasive feminist discomfort with all things maternal and, more specifically, the result of confusing the institution of motherhood with the experience of mothering” (O'Reilly, 2019, p. 21). O'Reilly (2019) describes how some feminists' hyper-focus on motherhood as an oppressive social construction limits it as an avenue for their self-actualization. By

fixating on the oppression of *motherhood* and ignoring the empowerment of *mothering*, feminists have essentially thrown the baby out with the bathwater.

As I inquired and explored my identity as a mother, I experienced the emotion and enlightenment that Andrea O'Reilly (2017) describes when she first encountered *Of Woman Born* (Rich, 1976). O'Reilly describes:

Reading Rich, I was forced to see and name my oppression as a mother; it gave me permission to be angry. I also remember feeling a huge sense of relief: I was not the only woman who raged against motherhood, and at times, her children (p. 728).

Rich (1976) acknowledged how institutional motherhood girds patriarchal hegemony and oppresses mothers, but she also introduced the idea of mothering as a source of women's empowerment, agency, and resistance. Rich, then, opened the door for understanding mothering as a complex, embodied, and at times constraining and empowering phenomenon that exists within the confines of the socially constructed institution of motherhood prominent in a given time period and location (O'Reilly, 2017; Rich, 1976).

As feminism has evolved, it has opened the door to exploring the diversity of mothering experiences, such as foster and adoption, networks of kinship, blended families, and surrogacy, among others. It has also explored marginalized women—lesbian, impoverished, immigrant, disabled, minority, etc.... (Collins, 2019; Dolman et al., 2018). Mothering scholarship has underscored the ways in which multiple identities intersect and position women differently in society and within/against the idealized norms of mothering (Collins, 2019; O'Reilly, 2016). As she deliberates on her position straddling the second and third waves of feminism, Hallstein (2012) argues for an

alliance in understanding between the centrality of gender espoused by the second wave and the intersectionality embraced by the third wave of feminism. She explains:

In arguing that maternity constrains all women's lives, I acknowledge that different women's lives are constrained differently in relation to their social location. So, for example, women have very different concerns and real material constraints depending on how women are located in and constituted by racial, class, sexual, and national dynamics in the context of maternity. Even so, as I have [argued], women as a group share gender oppression in the context of maternity, while some of that oppression is different based on any particular woman's social location (p. 389).

The context of mothering in which this study is situated recognizes the shared oppression that accompanies maternity as well as the intersections that create unique experiences for differently positioned mothers.

Cultural Norms: Mothering

Good Enough Mothering

In the 1970s, psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott (1973) coined the term *good enough mothering* to describe a healthy mothering style that is initially child-centric but over time becomes less intensely focused on the child. The attuned mother, whose initial preoccupation with meeting her dependent newborn's every need, gradually espouses a developmentally appropriate, less child-centric mothering practice. This incremental, empathetic shift away from the all-consuming focus on her child allows the child to develop a sense of the world apart from the dyad of child and mother. The *good enough mother* provides necessary care and attention without ascribing to a completely child-

centric mothering style that continues through maturation. The *good enough mother* is neither thoroughly enmeshed in her child nor is she emotionally detached. She is just that, good enough (Winnicott, 1973).

Intensive Mothering

In the decades since the notion of *good enough mothering* appeared, social mothering norms have taken a dramatic child-centric turn. Today's mothers are expected to raise smart, kind, cultured, artistic, athletic, spiritual, empathetic, patriotic, sensitive, resilient children in order to be considered a good mom. Even mothers privileged by the dominant culture to work as fulltime homemakers are not likely to have the expertise to meet the expectations of the current mothering ideology known as *intensive mothering* (Aching & Granato, 2016; Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006). The demanding, child-centered nature of intensive mothering makes it extremely challenging for any mother to succeed in achieving the ideal norm. Therefore, working mothers do not stand a chance. In her seminal book on mothering expectations in western society, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, Hays (1996) describes an unrealistic, yet commonly held belief that socially appropriate "good" mothers engage in "intensive mothering" (Hays, 1996).

Hays (1996) developed the ideology of *intensive mothering* as the result of her investigation of the lives of 38 working mothers with young children. She explored the mothers' notions of what appropriate mothering looks like within social contexts. Additionally, she analyzed prominent how-to manuals on mothering that promote a child-centric approach to mothering and family life. Hays (1996) describes the impossible and intensive mothering ideal as requiring unlimited resources, time, knowledge, and energy:

Not only is the home life centered on children, but child rearing is guided by them. The child (whose needs are interpreted by experts) is now to train the parent. It is at this point, and within this ideological framework, that the recommended methods of child rearing become fully intensified not only have they become expert-guided and child-centered, they are also more emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive than ever before. All this money, time, and attention has as its goal not economic productivity or the nation's greatness but the protection and perseverance of the child's natural innocence, affection, purity, and goodness (p. 45-46).

The demands of intensive mothering as the norm for modern women set the bar so high that it is virtually impossible to reach. Today's mothers are required to demonstrate professional-grade skills in every aspect of child rearing to be considered a *good* mother (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hays, 1996). Mothers absorb and resist these norms, often never noticing or questioning them because they permeate the air women breathe. This study revealed the grip intensive mothering has on working women. As the pandemic amplified their paid and domestic workloads, women in this study increased their maternal efforts. Ultimately, however, they were unable to shoulder the burden of intensive mothering, leaving them with overwhelming "mom guilt" and a sense of "failure."

Bad Parent

Another body of scholarship that connects to my study is the social construction of the working mother as a bad parent. Not only do working mothers find themselves constrained by the ideal of the good mother, but they must also in some instances battle

the “bad parent” (Okimoto & Heilman, 2012, p. 704) assumption. In a series of studies of working mothers, Okimoto and Heilman (2012) found that working women encountered gender stereotypes suggesting their status as workers was synonymous with “bad parents” (p. 704). The findings indicate that gender stereotyping is most prevalent for successful working mothers in male-centric fields (Okimoto & Heilman, 2012), such as school leadership (Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2015). Notably, working mothers were seen as less committed to family but also inferior workers compared to men:

Gender stereotypes and reactions to stereotype-inconsistent behavior can impact not only how working mothers are viewed as workers but also how they are viewed as parents, adding the burden of having to combat assumptions about their personal life as well as their work life (Okimoto & Heilman, 2012, p. 722).

New Momism

Douglas and Michaels (2004) present a contemporary view of intensive mothering in their philosophy of *new momism*. *New momism* suggests that modern mothers, under the guise of choice and empowerment, embrace extreme child-centric mothering as a logical, fulfilling choice for the hip modern woman. Although she is capable of a professional career, she eschews a career for a better choice, full-time mothering. Matricentric feminism recognizes this notion as a thinly-disguised version of traditional patriarchy—a myth that undermines women as holistic beings with multidimensional lives while claiming to empower them (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; O'Reilly, 2016). “The new momism not only enacts and reinforces the essentialization, normalization, and idealization of patriarchal motherhood, but it also distorts and disguises it as an empowered, or in their words “enlightened,” mothering (O'Reilly, 2016, p. 61).

Impression Management in Mothering

Goffman's (1959) concept of impression management captures people's labor in social interactions to shape others' impressions of them. Just as the *new momism* attempts to put a modern, empowered spin on traditional gender stereotypes, some mothers employ impression management in order to construct a good mother identity within the culture of intensive mothering. Impression management is the purposeful and controlled presentation of the self that individuals use to influence the impressions others have of them. Impression management (Goffman, 1959) constitutes both the presentation and concealment of traits to create a desired image to others in face-to-face interactions. This concept proved to be salient in my experience, and in my study, as mother/leaders sometimes tried to manage others' impressions of them as "in control," and "doing fine," aligned with the expectations of good mothers and leaders. Impression management was also indicative of the care work in which mothers engaged as they attempted to comfort others during the intense uncertainty of COVID-19.

In her study of mothers who use their children as tools for impression management, Collett (2005), found that some mothers used designer clothing to bolster their self-concept and confirm their identities as good mothers in everyday social interactions. Children, then, served as props for these mothers attempting to present themselves to others as good mothers. Despite spending large amounts of time and money to manage their children's physical appearances, these mothers' attempts at impression management were more focused on themselves than their children (Collett, 2005). Impression management appeared in this study as women sought to maintain

professional appearances while they juggled motherwork and leadership during Zoom meetings, hushing rambunctious children or shooing them offscreen.

Andrea O'Reilly (2016) critiques all forms of intensive mothering declaring them an attack on mothers who are already burdened by oppressive social norms. Further, she argues that motherwork is invisible and taken for granted within mainstream social discourse as well as within the body of feminist scholarship. Although mothering scholarship and theory has appeared in feminist work for decades, it became a sustained body of feminist inquiry through O'Reilly's work to establish a journal, encyclopedias, and strand of publishing focused on motherhood in its full complexity. O'Reilly (2016) presents an alternative to the damaging concept of intensive mothering:

Although sacrificial motherhood, and in particular intensive mothering, requires the denial of the mother's own selfhood in positioning the children's needs as always before her own, there are other ways to mother— ways that do not deny a mother her agency, autonomy, authenticity, and authority, and allow her both her selfhood and power (p. 61).

The Second Shift

The existing literature clearly indicates how male-centered social norms of mothering continue to place primary responsibility for child rearing and homemaking on women while men in heterosexual households assume the role of primary breadwinner (Hays, 1996; Hochschild, 2012; Lumby, 2015; McNamara, 2009; O'Reilly, 2016). The dilemma this presents, among a host of others, is that in the last half-century, women have entered the workplace in large numbers. In fact, women have enjoyed revolutionary access to paid employment in recent decades (Hochschild, 2012). Furthermore, a large

majority of working women—even those in low-paying jobs—feel a sense of pride, accomplishment, and personal satisfaction as a result of their work outside the home (Hochschild, 2012). That said, early research indicated COVID-19’s devastating effect on women in the paid labor force (Borda, 2021; Dias et al., 2020; Kitchener, 2020; O’Reilly, 2021; Friedman & Satterthwaite, 2021). Friedman and Satterthwaite (2021) declared the pandemic-induced recession has been dubbed a “shesession” (p. 57), and O’Reilly (2021) suggested COVID-19 reversed 25 years of gender equity in the workplace, signifying “the death of the working mother” (p. 22).

Despite the increasing number of women working outside the home prior to the pandemic, the division of labor inside the home has remained unchanged. Hochschild (2012) calls this additional domestic work the “second shift.” A working mother completes her first shift at a formal outside-the-home job before clocking-in to her second shift, managing the family (Hochschild, 2012). Women’s burgeoning access to paid employment coupled with continued responsibility for the second shift has created a “stalled revolution” (Hochschild, 2012), dramatically intensifying the workload on women and mothers, whether single or partnered. In fact, the research indicates that the increased burden on women in households with partners amounts to fifteen additional work hours per week compared to men. This is the equivalent of one month of 24-hour days over the course of a year. Hochschild (2012) exposes the subtle manifestations of patriarchy for the modern woman:

Patriarchy has not disappeared, it’s changed form. [...] In the new form, women are free with an overall unequal setup. In the old form, women were limited to the

home but economically maintained there. In the new form, women earn the bacon and cook it too (p. 246).

Expanding on Hochschild's (2012) blue collar labor metaphor, O'Reilly (2021) identified a *third shift*, "the emotional and intellectual labour of motherwork" (p. 46). As mothers plan and implement the majority of domestic duties, they also attend to the social-emotional wellbeing of their families. So, mothers not only complete the physical labor of the second shift, they ensure their care work results in happy and well-adjusted family members.

Good Mother/Ideal Worker Dilemma

Scholarship reveals the contradictions between the *good mother* and *ideal worker* as defined by cultural norms. The dominant social discourse of *intensive mothering* demands that mothers live to serve the needs of their children at all costs. Likewise, the cultural norm of the *ideal worker* demands that committed workers put in extra hours, subjugate the personal in favor of the professional, and put the company first. Academic mothering scholars Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2006) describe the dilemma for mothers, "Ideal workers are dedicated to the job, meaning they are not supposed to take into consideration things that are non-job related (i.e., family)" (p. 12).

Society's ongoing gendered construction of domestic responsibilities ensures that working mothers face persistent challenges negotiating their experiences as workers and mothers. Caught in a bind between the social constructions of intensive mothering and the ideal worker, working mothers must negotiate and justify both roles (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hays, 1996; Williams, 2000). O'Reilly (2016) explains how working moms rationalize their labor:

Intensive mothering, as practiced in the evenings and weekends, is the way a working mother, consciously or otherwise, compensates for her time away from her children; it bespeaks the ambivalence and guilt contemporary working mothers may feel about working and enjoying the work that they do (p. 52).

If a “good” mother is expected to sacrificially give of herself to attend to all of her child’s wants and needs, how then can she live up to the expectations of the company-centric, ideal worker? (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hays, 1996; Williams, 2000).

Reframing Dominant Mothering Ideology

Gender Strategies

Several researchers have explored how working mothers construct identities and develop strategies to integrate their lives as mothers and workers. Hochschild (2012) discusses how mothers use gender strategies to negotiate the second shift. These gender strategies allow women to reconcile their lived experiences as working mothers and their gender ideologies. Hochschild (2012) identifies three different gender ideologies in marital roles—traditional, transitional, and egalitarian. The traditional role mirrors the dominant cultural norms of a patriarchal view of motherhood. The mother is responsible for all aspects of domestic life—homemaking, cooking, and childrearing—while the husband maintains the traditional role of working outside the home to provide financially for the family. The transitional gender ideology allows both men and women to identify with domesticity and wage earning. However, transitional women retain primary control over the home while transitional men are primary income earners. The husband assists in domestic chores, but under the direction and supervision of the wife, who is free to work outside the home in a supportive role. Men and women in egalitarian marriages,

uncommon in Western culture, share equally the work of home and career (Hochschild, 2012). Consistent with Hochschild's (2012) research, traditional and transitional gender ideologies appeared in my study as women described retaining primary responsibility for reproductive labor, even though several spouses experienced significantly decreased working hours. I will return to the presence of these gender ideologies and mother/leaders' strategies in chapter 5.

In her study of working families, Hochschild (2012) discovered that individuals often experience conflict between their professed gender ideologies, their feelings about gender ideologies, and their lived realities. This is partly due to the dynamic, constructed nature of gender ideologies. Gender strategies provide a means to ameliorate these discrepancies. For example, an egalitarian working mother in a traditional marriage may employ a *supermom* gender strategy — the empowered, strong woman who juggles career and parenting with grace and ease. This supermom persona allows her to cover up the strain of managing both first and second shifts in a traditional gendered relationship (Hochschild, 2012). The supermom persona turned up in women's interviews from this study. One participant used the metaphor of "supermom" to describe the socially constructed, yet self-imposed, expectations she had of herself. Other women's narratives referenced this strategy more subtly as they described "juggling" productive and reproductive labor during the pandemic.

While the ideologies of intensive mothering and the ideal worker seem to be binary constructions, research indicates that working mothers have employed strategies to integrate and navigate the disparate roles. "Both at-home and employed mothers have internalized [intensive mothering], but they find a variety of ways to position themselves

within these ideological expectations” (Johnston & Swanson, 2006, p. 510). Several researchers found that working mothers develop gender strategies to accommodate, without necessarily rejecting, societal norms of intensive mothering and the ideal worker. Johnston and Swanson (2006) found that employed mothers, instead of shunning intensive mothering, constructed versions of the ideal mother based on their work status. They noted, “Construction of mothering ideology most likely reflects both processes—mothers choose a work status based partly on their mothering ideology, and their mothering ideology emerges in part to fit their lived experience with a particular employment decision” (Johnston & Swanson, 2006, p. 517). The give-and-take of working mothers requires them to engage in an ongoing process of role navigations and identity construction that at times prioritizes the good mother and at other times the ideal worker. “Full-time employed mothers alternatively focus and excel in one sphere and then in the other” (Johnston & Swanson, 2006, p. 517). The reframing of identities, then, is continuously at play but provides working mothers a schema whereby they reconcile the cultural expectations of them as workers and mothers. The women in this study narrated recursive pre-pandemic systems negotiations that allowed them to align their identities as mothers and workers. When COVID-19 decimated these systems, mother/leaders attempted to modify their strategies in support of their preexisting individual gender ideologies. Over time, however, they were unable to maintain chosen gender strategies, resulting in decreased confidence in both roles.

Extensive Mothering

Christopher (2012) explores “how mothers navigate the ideals of intensive mothering and the ideal worker—and the nuances and complexities in how they define

good mothering in the context of these frameworks” (p. 78). Christopher (2012) uses the term “extensive mothering” (p. 91) to describe how working mothers reframe intensive mothering to accommodate the contradictory ideals of working mother and good mother. The extensive mother, like the intensive mother, retains primary responsibility for her children – planning their activities, orchestrating childcare, and spending non-working hours tending to their needs. Extensive mothers, however, differ from intensive mothers by delegating mothering tasks to a network of supports, such as nannies, daycares, spouses, or family. Additionally, extensive mothers approach careers with reasonable limits – most limiting long hours at the office – that allow them to balance both home and career. While rejecting the time demands of both intensive mothers and ideal workers, extensive mothering nevertheless subtly reinforces the dominant paradigm of patriarchal mothering ideology (Christopher, 2012).

Extensive mothering provides ambitious working mothers with a framework for integrating their dual roles. In her examination of 50 powerful executives who are also mothers, Grzelakowski (2005) highlights how these successful leaders welcomed motherhood and became better leaders. By embracing the challenges of motherhood and practicing extensive mothering, intensely driven corporate leaders enriched both their working and domestic identities.

Children provide even the most ambitious, driven women with a selfless patience, helping them understand and support others. Such transformations are profound. They become softer, yet stronger; more confident, yet more humble; more directed, yet more tolerant. All in all, children not only give them a greater

capacity to lead, but they stimulate a greater capacity to love. Leadership, coupled with love, is very powerful (Grzelakowski, 2005, p. xv).

Like the executive mothers in Grzelakowski's (2005) study, some mother/leaders in my research described how they found satisfaction in both roles by meticulously managing and delegating mothering tasks while retaining ultimate control over them. Pandemic responses – state-mandated and self-imposed – eliminated women's access to networks of support, leaving them overworked and fatigued.

The Good Working Mother

Similar to extensive mothering, 'good' working mothers reframe traditional patriarchal ideologies to ameliorate tension between mothering norms and their lived experiences working outside the home. Buzzanell et al. (2005) explored the experience of 11 managerial working mothers using interviews and thematic analysis to discover how they negotiate professional and family life. "We found that our participants re-framed the good mother image into a good *working* mother role that fit their lifestyles and interests" (Buzzanell et al., 2005, p. 266). Good *working* mothers use three strategies to resolve the tension between societal expectations and their lived realities. "(a) good working mothers arrange quality childcare; (b) good working mothers are (un)equal partners; and (c) good working mothers feel pleasure in their working mother role" (Buzzanell et al., 2005, p. 266).

Through the process of arranging childcare for their children, these good *working* mothers maintained primary responsibility and control over their children's lives. Similar to the delegator roles Christopher (2012) identified, good *working* mothers in this study took pride in procuring adequate childcare, which for all 11 women was a complex

process that took extensive planning. The mothers' discourse regarding childcare arrangements indicated that they alone were responsible for this painstaking task. The researchers concluded this process constituted a significant aspect of their identity construction (Buzzanell et al., 2005). Similarly, the mother/leaders in this study retained responsibility for arranging childcare, a challenging task before COVID-19 and an impossible one during the pandemic.

In making sense of her working mother role, the good *working* mother in Buzzanell et al.'s (2005) study engages in a recursive dialog between her professed egalitarian gender ideology and her traditional/transitional gender reality (Hochschild, 2012). Seemingly unaware of the contradiction, good working mothers espouse a desire for a 50-50 split but ironically retain control over the second shift (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Hochschild, 2012). Buzzanell (2005) et al. use the example of Julie to illustrate their point:

To construct a sensible course of action, Julie acts out her belief that women and men should participate equally in work and family realms through consistent efforts to engage her husband in childcare that *she* arranges or manages. Yet, ironically, in these acts she recreates her husband as childlike and in need of her direction, thus reinforcing their gendered familial roles and her own shouldering of most childcare work (p. 270).

Several of the mother/leaders in my study struggled to relinquish control of reproductive labor to their partners. When, out of sheer necessity, some took a step back, they generally described disappointment in their spouse's management of the second shift. By controlling but delegating childcare tasks, these women have developed gender strategies

to manage the duality of good mother and ideal worker. At the same time, Julie, and others, perpetuate their unequal roles in the household's second shift reproducing patriarchal mothering norms. My discoveries, discussed further in the final chapters of this study, indicated that women are often active but unwitting participants in their lived gendered inequities..

Reframing Reinforces Social Norms

The idea of reframing appears in various forms in the literature as women retain traditional gender ideologies but tweak them to fit their lived experiences. This means that mother/leaders accept the ideologies of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) and intensive leading (Baker, 2016), but negotiate allowances in each role that enable them to successfully navigate them. Researchers recognize the slippery slope that accompanies reframing gender ideologies to align with the dominant discourse of working mothers. Johnston and Swanson (2006) warn, “mothers are ironically constructing their mothering identity in ways that *constrain* their range of choices” (p. 517).

Buzzanell et al. (2005) identify three distinct ironies in the working mothers' sensemaking of their lived experiences in relation to dominant societal ideologies surrounding mothering and working. First, women in the study excluded fathers entirely from their reframing scenarios, thereby underscoring that it is solely the woman's responsibility to negotiate the conflicts between domestic labor and paid employment. Second, working mothers defined themselves in ways that foster ongoing conflict between working mother and stay-at-home mother identity construction. Prodded by the ideology of *new momism* (Douglas & Michaels, 2004), which requires mothers to embrace extreme child-centric parenting while perfectly juggling all other lifestyle

choices, working mothers are forced to accept an unrealistic ideology that says they can do it all and have it all! The supermom ideal, while more palatable to working mothers' reframing, still propagates the subjugation of women by keeping them in traditional gendered roles (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hochschild, 2012; Hallstein, 2012). Finally, working mothers felt compelled to justify their employment decisions and the benefits their paid work outside the home offers their children. Men, on the other hand, are not compelled to justify working outside the home. This justification as part of their identity reframing provides evidence of the pressure the good mother ideal exerts on working mothers (Buzzanell et al., 2005):

Their sensemaking indicates that the good working mother image is a very fragile construction. It can be altered or shattered easily by beliefs that their children are not getting good quality child care, by finding out that they failed to fulfill some need on the parts of their families, or by learning that the quality time they have with children and partners is insufficient for their families' needs and desires (Buzzanell et al., 2005, p. 276).

The unwillingness of working mothers to jettison completely the dominant cultural ideals of the good mother and ideal worker illustrates the ubiquitous hold traditional gender ideologies have on all women but especially mothers. As a result, working mothers find themselves toiling *inside* the dominant framework to manipulate or reconstruct their understanding of cultural norms to fit their lived experiences. By simultaneously resisting and embracing patriarchal ideals of mothering and working, working mothers walk a thin line between their dual identities (Buzzanell et al., 2005). This study highlighted just how thin the line between mothering and leading identities is for women in school leadership.

While their initial responses to the pandemic indicated gallant attempts to operate at least partially within the confines of preexisting social norms, it became apparent as conditions persisted that traditional gender ideologies were a round hole into which the square peg of their material lived experiences would not fit.

While the acceptance of women in the workforce seems to indicate a shift in gendered cultural expectations, the continued marginalization of working mothers and persistent view of women as primarily suited to caregiving indicates that the ideology of domesticity remains firmly entrenched. “Domesticity did not die; it mutated” (Williams, 2000, p. 3). Prior to women entering the formal workplace, they were framed as existing *outside* the economy. Socialist feminists (Tong, 2018) remind us that this use of “outside” is a construction, given that the household is an economic unit that also enables other economic sites like income-generating labor in workplaces. Now that more women than ever labor in the formal workforce, lower wages, the second shift, and patriarchal work environments continue to constrain them to traditional or transitional gender roles (Hochschild, 2012). As new conditions emerge, working mothers must reimagine their roles and navigations in novel circumstances.

Mothering in Perilous Circumstances

The current context of COVID-19

COVID-19 intensified pressures on mothers (O’Reilly, 2020) as they navigated uncertainties and the discourses (e.g. intensive mothering, extensive mothering, good enough mother, good mother, bad mother, new momism, impression management, ideal worker) that shape mothering realities. As of early 2022, mothers continued to find themselves in uncertain and uneasy times. News reports abound on the stressors that

COVID-19 wrought on working mothers in various positions. Headlines read, “COVID-19 forced working mothers to take time off work—rather than fathers” (Albrecht, 2020), “I had to choose being a mother: With no child care or summer camps, women are being edged out of the workforce” (Kitchener, 2020), and “COVID-19 shock hits working mothers hard” (Cortez, 2020), to name a few.

While as of this writing there was scant scholarship on educational mother/leaders’ experiences, early research on mothering in general in the first wave of COVID-19 indicated mothers experienced an amplification of care work. Martinez and Ortiz (2021) describe how the hegemony of masculinity devalued the reproductive work of mothers. “The patriarchal system justifies women’s free labour as a selfless expression of love” (p. 163). Moreover, according to census data, working women experienced a disproportionate number of coronavirus-related lay-offs causing them to shoulder the bulk of the financial burden (Dias et al., 2020). In her article on mothers forced out of the workforce, Kitchener (2020) discussed the strain that school and daycare closures have put almost exclusively on mothers. Working from home while caring for and trying to teach their children saddled women with an unrealistic workload. The demands of working and mothering during the pandemic (Kitchener, 2020) were intensified by the continued lurking pressure of traditional gendered expectations for homemaking and the ideology of intensive mothering that shapes women’s experiences (Hays, 1996; Hochschild, 2012). “Early studies suggest that, while fathers are picking up more domestic labor than before the coronavirus, mothers still do the majority of housework and care of young children” (Kitchener, 2020, p. 5).

Noted matricentric feminist researcher and author Andrea O'Reilly (2020) portended COVID-19 would have devastating effects on mothers. As she collected initial stories of maternal sacrifice and struggle on her Facebook Page and later coedited the first published collection of women's pandemic mothering experiences, *Mothers, Mothering, and COVID-19: Dispatches from a Pandemic* (2021), O'Reilly sounded the alarm about the inequitable burden faced by all mothers and working mothers in particular. O'Reilly and Green (2021) reported, "The unequal distribution of unpaid work in the home and the increased burden of care throughout the pandemic has been particularly detrimental for mothers in the paid labour force" (p.21). The disparate burden placed on mothers was documented in other early COVID research as well. Cummins and Brannon (2021) recognized how the pre-COVID struggles working mothers faced – time, balance, discipline, and isolation – were amplified. They reported:

We argue the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the demands of intensive motherhood on mothers. From suddenly becoming at-home educators to the difficulties of managing a family in quarantine, mothers during the pandemic are experiencing added stressors, affecting every aspect of their lives (p. 211).

The research shows that during COVID-19 mothers retained primary responsibility for domestic labor (Borda, 2021; Bromwich, 2021; Cummins & Brannon, 2021; Friedman & Satterthwaite, 2021; Hayden & Hallstein, 2021; O'Reilly, 2021; O'Reilly & Green, 2021; Staneva, 2021). Friedman and Satterthwaite (2021) point out how preexisting mothering norms created an impossible situation for mothers during COVID-19:

Although parents of all genders have been overwhelmed by school closures, the multiplicity of roles, and the anxieties of the present situation, there are unique

implications for mothers who often disproportionately shoulder the burden of household responsibilities as well as the labour and emotional impact of decision making and planning. In part, this reality is due to the historic inequality posed by the patriarchal institution of motherhood. The different expectations placed on mothers and fathers allow for different responsibilities in this present moment. [...] The differing expectations and responsibilities for mothers have deep effects on self-esteem, stress, and mental health. Fathers who pitch in at this moment are valorized and celebrated; mothers may only be reminded of the ways they fall short (p. 55).

Cummins and Brannon (2021) explain how impossible neoliberal mothering norms hold mothers exclusively responsible for reproductive labor, “Intensive motherhood charges mothers as the primary caretakers of their children – an individualizing experience keeping mothers so focused on private concerns that they have no time or energy to spend in collective reimagining” (p. 213).

O’Reilly & Green (2021) assert that the care work mothers provided in COVID-19 was akin to frontline work, such as that provided by healthcare workers. Sadly, while the justifiable accolades poured forth for essential workers, the unpaid work of mothers went mostly ignored. They questioned the blatant disregard of maternal labor:

This collection asks questions still largely ignored in public policy, social research, and media coverage. Why are most forms of frontline work being acknowledged and appreciated while motherwork is not? Why is no one asking how they are managing as is regularly done with other frontline workers? Why are our governments not discussing, let alone implementing, public policies to

support motherwork? Why is the care and crisis of mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic being completely ignored? (O'Reilly & Green, 2021, p. 23).

Most women in my study echoed this sentiment, primarily through their silence. A few acknowledged the overt absence of support for mother/leaders, and one remarked, "Nobody has asked how I'm doing."

Furthermore, even as COVID-19 conditions persisted, impression management (Goffman, 1959) remained in full force. Social media was the playing field for what one mother called, "the new Olympics for being a perfect mom" (Kitchener, 2020, p. 9). With the pressure to be the best teacher and provide enriching social-emotional opportunities for children during remote learning, the ideology of intensive mothering demoralized working mothers more than ever (Kitchener, 2020). O'Reilly (2016) noted, "The current discourse of intensive mothering gives rise to self-doubt or, more specifically, a guilt that immobilizes women and robs them of their confidence as both workers and mothers" (p. 58). Likewise, in her exploration of blame and responsibility in COVID-19, Staneva (2021) agreed, "Mothers blame themselves for not coping with the increased demands of parenting during a lockdown – not their partners. Regrettably, internalized self-blame is not new to mothering, as much research has explored maternal guilt" (p. 420). Moreover, mother/leaders in this study carried the amplified pressure of the pandemic and blamed themselves for domestic shortcomings.

The pandemic has highlighted gender discrimination in higher education. Willey (2020) notes, "Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these inequities in our workplace" (p. 201). It has resulted in deleterious effects on academic mothers' research productivity, stress, and physical and mental health (Hayden & Hallstein, 2021; Martinez

& Ortiz, 2021). Hayden and Hallstein (2021) interviewed academic mothers with minor children at home during the mandatory shutdown. Their findings described academic mothers' extreme, existential exhaustion as they managed childcare, work demands, and domestic labor in overlapping spaces. They noted, "The increase in family work was exacerbated by the loss of any sense of clear boundaries between their professional work, their mothering, and their children's schools" (p. 172).

The existing literature on mothering in peril

Mothering from different contexts created additional sites of oppression for some women. As research on mothering in COVID-19 slowly emerged, the small body of literature surrounding mothering in turbulent times provided an additional framework for understanding the lived experiences of mother/leaders during the pandemic. Research on gender differentiation during disasters indicates the ways in which mothers negotiate their lives before, during, and immediately after a disaster. Women take proactive measures in disaster preparedness and work behind the scenes through informal leadership channels enacting care work throughout disaster and recovery. Recent studies of Hurricane Katrina, Hurricane Andrew, and the Red River Valley Flood in the United States found that women's disaster experiences differ from those of men. For the most part, disasters introduce additional stressors and challenges that amplify the pre-existing marginalization of women and mothers (Alway et al., 1998; Enarson, 1998, 2001; Fothergill, 1996; Peek & Fothergill, 2008). In addition to gender considerations in disaster research, studies of mothers' experiences during war, political violence, ethnic cleansing, and colonization provided a backdrop to help frame mothering experiences

during a global health crisis (Aiello, 2016; Damousi, 2017; Finley, 2019; Peteet, 1997; Robertson & Duckett, 2007; Sousa et al., 2020; Woolner et al., 2019).

Finally, patrimony, social stratification, and exclusion have a severe impact on some groups of women whose positioning as mothers puts them not only outside, but completely at odds with, the dominant social discourse. Understanding how mothers who are negotiating extreme vulnerability and risk during non-pandemic circumstances provides a unique lens for exploring mothering in the precarity of COVID-19. While incarcerated, drug-addicted, homeless, and welfare mothers navigate overtly hostile social environments, differently-positioned mothers—disabled mothers, mothers raising children with unique needs, mothers through adoption terminally ill mothers, and single mothers—are sidelined with a cool sympathy that both patronizes and degrades them. Their marginalization during times of normalcy (that is, normalcy for those enfranchised by the dominant social order) creates fear and uncertainty for women mothering on the fringes of society. Vulnerable mothers' lived experiences in non-pandemic times can shed light on how mother/leaders experience uncertainty and fear during COVID-19.

Mothering in disasters

The current paradigm for understanding disasters has taken a sociological turn over the course of the past four decades. “There is an emphasis on defining disasters in social time and space rather than physical time and space” (Perry, 2007, p. 13). Classical research of natural disasters and environmental hazards failed to recognize the uniqueness of women's experiences throughout the cycle of disaster. However, as researchers began to understand disasters as primarily social phenomena rooted in social systems, they were required to contend with the dominant social constructions at play

(including gender stratification) prior to the occasion of the disaster. As Perry (2007) explains, “It is not the hurricane wind or storm surge that makes the disaster; these are the source of damage. The disaster is the impact on individual coping patterns and the inputs and outputs of social systems” (p. 12). Because disaster is more sociological than ecological, disaster research explores how social systems position marginalized people in vulnerable circumstances. These circumstances, in turn, increase the marginalization or agency of individuals and groups depending on their positioning within the social milieu (Enarson, 1998, 2001; Fothergill, 1996; Peek & Fothergill, 2008; Perry, 2007).

Feminist research on gender and mothering makes abundantly clear that masculine cultural norms continue to render invisible the labor of mothers in America and subjugate mothers in all aspects of their lives—at home and work, and in public and private. This study of pandemic mothering confirmed what disaster researchers have discovered – the gendered expectations that marginalize and make women vulnerable in non-crisis times are played out in gendered roles during disaster (Enarson, 1998, 2001; Fothergill, 1996; Peek & Fothergill, 2008). Nevertheless, as disaster researchers have discovered, women and mothers demonstrate tangential agency as they lead care work for children, kinship networks, and community through informal leadership channels (Enarson, 2001; Finley, 2019; Peek & Fothergill, 2008). My study contributes an additional layer of understanding to disaster research as mother/leaders leveraged their formal leadership roles to enact care work for staff and students through physical, emotional, and kinship labor.

In her groundbreaking synthesis of gender differences in disaster research, Fothergill (1996) found clear differences in how women and men responded to natural

disasters in three essential domains—preparedness, impact, and recovery. Traditional gender ideology places the onus of domesticity on women, holds them responsible for childcare, provides limited access to social networks, and places them at risk of poverty. Thus, gender inequality and discrimination jointly position women at risk in times of disaster. During natural and human-made disasters, women suffer disproportionate losses compared to men, and their subordinate position within the dominant social discourse limits mothers' access to necessary disaster resources, such as childcare in this study (Fothergill, 1996).

As disasters unfold, women continue to lead their families as they take responsibility for feeding, protecting, and in this study, schooling their children. Although they are mostly excluded from the male-centric realm of formal disaster response management, women demonstrate leadership in grassroots recovery movements that extend their traditional caretaking roles to others within the community. These actions were apparent in mother/leaders in my study who described working around the clock to provide food, technology, and other resources to students and families during the shutdown. In the Red River Valley Flood, Enarson (2001) found that due to their secondary status many women participated in disaster response efforts behind the scenes instead of through formal channels. Therefore, their activities were less apparent. “When we cannot see or appreciate the significance of ‘what women do’ in disasters, we cannot capitalize on the skills, resources, and local knowledge of women and women’s community-based organizations” (Enarson, 2001, p. 16).

As agents of recovery, mothers during Hurricane Katrina exercised resilience and resistance, creating leadership opportunities for them to promote recovery. In this

manner, women worked within the disaster to exercise agency and contest patriarchal leadership controls that have kept them on the sidelines of formal disaster response (Peek & Fothergill, 2008). Women in my study enacted both formal and informal leadership responses to the pandemic. On one hand, as school leaders, they participated in formal COVID disaster planning, but on the other hand, they led behind the scenes, delivering resources and providing emotional support, often with a baby on the hip or children underfoot.

Mothering in war and political violence

Research is clear that war creates a constraining environment hostile to mothering. However, despite severely constricted choices, mothers persevere in resilience and agency in war conditions. Whether during acute periods of civil violence or over decades of ongoing political and racial conflict, mothering in wartime introduces fear and uncertainty as well as dramatic shifts in the embodied experiences of mothers. The onset of the pandemic in spring 2020 ushered in similar feelings of anxiety and chaos as well as material changes to their embodied spaces as women were cloistered at home for months to work and parent. However, even in the most turbulent circumstances, motherwork and caregiving labor continue to be vehicles for mother resistance and empowerment (Damousi, 2017; Peteet, 1997; Robertson & Duckett, 2007; Sousa et al., 2020; Woolner et al., 2018). This review of mothering during times of cultural violence includes wartime mothering experiences from countries across the world. These experiences lasted from a few months to decades. In Rwanda, the intensely violent and deadly 1994 genocide of ethnic Tutsis lasted slightly over 100 days (Woolner et al., 2018) while the midcentury Greek Civil War (Damousi, 2017) and more recent Bosnian War (Robertson & Duckett,

2007) both lasted less than three years. Palestinian and Israeli conflicts in the Middle East have been ongoing for decades with varying degrees of violence as land disputes and spatial constraints have created conflict (Peteet, 1997; Sousa et al., 2020).

Robertson and Duckett (2007) studied the experiences of a group of fourteen Muslim mothers in the wake of the ethnic cleansing that resulted in the slaughter of nearly 8,000 men in Srebrenica, Bosnia. As the refugee women worked to protect their children while evading enemy soldiers, their ongoing embodied caregiving experiences demonstrated fortitude and agency. Daily, they found themselves hiding in desolate areas, sleeping in the forest, and migrating from village to village. One participant even reported a woman giving birth on a pile of leaves in the forest and immediately continuing the trek to the next village (Robertson & Duckett, 2007). War disrupts economies, markets, and food supplies, often leaving mothers, an already vulnerable population, struggling to feed themselves and their children. For food, Bosnian mothers begged for scraps, boiled tree leaves, and scavenged the woods for bugs. Despite their desperate circumstances, Bosnian mothers demonstrated agency in caretaking their children. “Although participants certainly were victimized, they were not helpless victims of a bad war” (Robertson & Duckett, 2007, p. 477). Like the women leading and caretaking during COVID-19, they were too busy doing to entertain a victim mentality.

During Rwanda’s genocide in 1994, Tutsi women were brutalized, murdered, mutilated, and raped. An ethnic minority prior to the genocide, Tutsi women had long experienced extreme oppression, discrimination, and intermittent violence at the hands of the Hutu ethnic majority in Rwanda. During the genocide, however, their gendered victimization was intensified as sexual violence was endorsed as a war strategy and

wartime propaganda encouraged attacks on Tutsi women. Woolner et al. (2018) explain how combatants use conflict-related sexual violence during war to propagate social, racial, and gender oppression:

During war and genocide, conceptualizations of nationalism and group identity are often intertwined with reproductive politics within the family structure... In this context, sexual violence against women can be understood as an effective tool of war that threatens a community's sense of cohesion, belonging, and longevity, especially across ethnic lines (p. 705).

In their discussion of mothering after the Rwandan genocide, mothers of children born from genocidal rape experienced challenges negotiating their mothering identities. Often, they internalized the stigmatization, shame, and anger heaped upon them by those within and outside their families and communities, but they also exercised agency and resilience in the face of extreme marginalization. "Post-genocide Rwanda provides some of the most moving and powerful examples of the resilience, strength, and challenges faced by these women" (Woolner et al., 2018, p. 704).

In Palestine, ongoing political violence has created an environment in which mothering—for the protection and survival of children—has empowered women to resist the oppression of war. Palestinian mothering requires women to "manage the tension between cultural sentiments of maternal practice and nurturance and a political situation that gives them little choice but to see some of their children die early and violent deaths" (Peteet, 1997, p. 109). Sousa et al. (2020) identified the ongoing power negotiations in which Palestinian mothers engage, vacillating between agency and constraint:

Within oppressive contexts, motherhood is a highly dialectical process wherein women constantly move between power and powerlessness. Reflecting this dynamic, our findings demonstrate how women continually experience and then respond to the subversion of maternal power as they reassert their agency and maternal role within considerable precarity (p. 234).

In this study, mother/leaders' navigations mirrored similar movements between agency and powerlessness.

Despite varied contexts and cultures, women are constrained during times of conflict and violence in ways that are more precarious than during peacetime, causing increased stress, fear, hopelessness, anger, guilt, and diminished support. Regardless of the intensity or duration of the upheaval, however, research reveals how women within violent, wartime environments demonstrate courage and agency as they persevere, resist, and act (Damousi, 2017; Peteet, 1997; Robertson & Duckett, 2007; Sousa et al., 2020; Woolner et al., 2018).

Mothering from the fringes

Some mothers exist on the fringes of society in times of normative calm. Feminist mothering scholarship has long explored these varied positionings. In the best of circumstances, the prevalent social discourse is at odds with the economic or spatial conditions of their maternal lives (Coll et al., 1998; Dolman, 2018; Latchford, 2012). As a result, incarcerated (Aiello, 2016; Coll et al., 1998), homeless (Koch et al., 1998), and welfare mothers (Sparks, 1998) are often openly ostracized and vilified. Other fringe mothers—mothers through adoption (Latchford, 2012; Smith et al., 1998), ill mothers (Wyche, 1998), or those parenting special needs children (Greenspan, 1998)—are pitied

and cast aside as lesser mothers. Women who mother from positions of extreme marginalization become the most vulnerable in perilous times.

Incarcerated (Aiello, 2016; Coll et al., 1998), homeless (Koch et al., 1998), and welfare mothers (Sparks, 1998) exist on the fringes of mothering norms and struggle to integrate their lived experiences with socially-constructed mothering expectations. In the neoliberal, capitalist culture that values rugged individualism and industry, these marginalized women are seen as deficient—unable or unwilling to provide the care demanded by the ideology of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996). Blamed for their circumstances, which are attributed to individual shortcomings rather than discriminatory social systems, these mothers often internalize shame and guilt. At the same time, motherhood remains central to their identity (Aiello, 2016; Coll et al., 1998; Koch et al., 1998; Sparks, 1998). “Americans’ ideas about poverty remain singularly resistant to facts. Repeated polls and surveys have shown that we, unlike citizens of other industrialized nations, blame poverty on the poor themselves” (Koch et al., 1998, p. 61).

Ill mothers (Wyche, 1998), mothers through adoption (Latchford, 2012; Smith et al., 1998), and mothers of special needs children (Greenspan, 1998) are also positioned as inferior per dominant mothering norms. The stigmatizing language used socially and professionally to discuss these mothering identities degrades them as *second best* compared to *normal*, healthy, or biological mothers. Scholarship reveals these mothers’ feelings of exclusion and inferiority (Greenspan, 1998; Latchfield, 2012; Smith et al., 1998; Wyche, 1998). Mothers and/or children identified as unwanted, unwell, or disabled (physically, emotionally, or cognitively) may seem inferior or flawed in a society or

within institutions that value independence, meritocracy, and physical health and fortitude (Greenspan, 1998; Kearney & Bailey, 2012; Smith et al., 1998; Wyche, 1998).

Mothers through adoption need only attend to the normative vocabulary of mothering to find themselves excluded and invisible. Mothering discourse is loaded with language that prioritizes biology in mothering. Society elevates “real” mothers, pregnancy and birth stories, mother/child pre and postnatal bonding, physical resemblance, cultural sameness, and the primacy of the nuclear family, ostracizing different mothers. Adoption is too often seen as a last resort for infertile, inferior women and abandoned orphans, images that undermine and censor the identities of families formed through adoption (Smith et al., 1998).

As a mother through adoption, I am sensitive to this framing and wish to elevate the experiences of mother/leaders honored to have adopted their children. To prevent further marginalization of families, it is imperative to attend carefully to linguistics, avoiding language that prioritizes biology in family construction. I resisted using overtly judgmental language, such as “real” or “natural” to identify mothers through biology. However, with guidance from my committee member, Dr. Kearney, I developed a more nuanced understanding of the importance of word choice. For example, the careless use of “adoptive” as an adjective for children and mothers contributes to their marginalization. Describing an individual as *adopted* references her identity, rather than the event that occurred when she joined her family. An essential goal of this research was to promote belonging and inclusivity for all mother/leaders. I crafted my words with sensitivity, balancing the importance of exposing oppressive circumstances without overprioritizing them.

Maternal feminist scholarship has worked to reframe these problematic constructions and expand understanding of mothering in all its forms (Coll et al., 1998; Latchford, 2012). As Smith et al. (1998) noted, “We believe that one of the greatest sources of resistance and empowerment for adoptive mothers is the recognition and analysis of the power of cultural marginalization and psychological pathologizing of their experience and that of their children” (p. 199). As mothers resist the dominant cultural beliefs surrounding constructs of family, they can shift the discourse away from blame, sympathy, and inferiority to inclusion, support, and acceptance (Smith et al., 1998).

For mothers of children with unique emotional, behavioral, or health needs, “exceptional mothering in a normal world” (Greenspan, 1998, p. 46) establishes binary categories that sort people in ways that elevate some and disenfranchise others. Marginalization of those whose physical, mental, or emotional strength falls short of the heroic, masculine ideal oppresses those seen as different, lower, or abnormal. Mothers of children whose special needs are physically evident are oppressed by the pity and sympathy that skews society’s view of them and their children. Conversely, mothering children whose exceptionalities are not physically apparent, like my two children, presents a different set of challenges in non-pandemic conditions. Although they don’t ‘look’ different, my children need to be mothered in ways that resist both the authoritarian principles of my familial culture as well as the ideology of intensive mothering, inviting scrutiny and unsolicited parenting advice from friends and family. As others question their agency, mothers may employ impression management to soothe their guilt. When precarity arrived, exceptional mothering in a chaotic world compounded the difficulties for mothers. Still, the ideology of intensive mothering (Hays,

1996), which suggests good mothers sacrifice without complaining, silences mothers of exceptional children. “Anything less than a serene or stoic attitude to the difficulties of raising our children [with special needs] may be counted as a failure of ‘good mothering’” (Greenspan, 1998, p. 44).

In their discussion of the challenges associated with mothering within the context of the staunch male-centric hegemony of academic life and her battle with post-partum depression (PPD), Kearney and Bailey (2012) describe the isolation Kearney’s experience with PPD created as she fought to stay on tenure track with minimal institutional support. The intersection of PPD, intensive mothering of three small children, and the rigid, patriarchal demands of tenure-track academic life created a perfect storm that disrupted her mothering/professional roles. As the authors reflect, “PPD not only violates cultural prescriptions concerning women’s roles and motherhood (which perhaps evokes fear and hinders other academic mothers’ support and feelings of affinity), it also violates the professional academic workplace” (Kearney & Bailey, 2012, p. 93). The literature makes clear the challenges and demands placed on professional working mothers as they navigate varied unrealistic cultural expectations. When mothers experience illness—physical or emotional—the potential for isolation and oppression is magnified exponentially.

While this review of the literature of the varied conditions in which mothers mother established a foundation for understanding the current climate of COVID-19, researchers must avoid generalizations that ignore the unique positioning of mothers in a range of contexts. There are innumerable circumstances that shape women’s lived experiences and can threaten mothers’ agency. Racism, poverty, abuse, and addiction

often mingle with other mothering experiences to complicate discursive struggles, structural positioning, and forms of agency. Mothers' positions within COVID-19 varied tremendously. Some had abundant supports, which provided relief as they worked to bring order to the pandemic upheaval. Others had few or no supports, experienced economic strain, or struggled to meet their own physical, emotional, and mental health needs as well as those of their own children. This review served to illustrate that for some, mothering occurs from the fringes, and peril can intensify differently positioned mothers' struggles.

Cultural Norms: School Leadership

Changing Role of the Principal

The existing literature overwhelmingly indicates that as school principals' responsibilities have increased dramatically over the past several years, their job has become exceedingly more complex. In addition, the accountability demands have changed the focus of school leadership from managerial to instructional while extensive mandates and compliance policies have constrained their capacity to lead effectively. The job complexity and heavy workload have impacted principals' attitudes, stress, job satisfaction, and recruitment.

Beginning in the 1980s with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (NCEE, 1983) and continuing into the current century with *No Child Left Behind* and *ESSA*, public education in the United States has been rumbling for decades with accountability, curriculum reforms, state and federal mandates, school restructuring, privatization, safety and security, changing demographics, and increased scrutiny. These shifts occurred as

state and federal departments of education became increasingly more politicized and intrusive. Portin (1997) describes the changing public education landscape:

Perhaps beginning with *A Nation at Risk* (1983), but certainly extending well beyond it, the education policy environment can best be described as turbulent. By “turbulent”, I mean that education policy, particularly as developed in the state and federal arena, are characterized by increased pace of change and conflict of purpose for educational practitioners (p. 4).

The turbulence engulfing public education in the last four decades has had a profound impact on the role of the school leader (Fullan, 2002; Hallinger, 2005; Kruger et al., 2005; Portin, 1997). Numerous studies of school leadership indicate principal roles have become significantly more varied, complex, and time-consuming. Williamson and Hudson (2003) explain:

Educational leaders face an increasingly complex work environment, characterized by difficult and often contentious issues. Adoption of curricular standards and accompanying accountability standards, the changing demography of schools, the need for strengthened family and community support, and the competition for resources from an aging electorate characterize the milieu in which school leaders work (p. 2).

As principals have moved from managers to instructional leaders, they have become responsible for creating a comprehensive school environment focused on teaching and learning. The Wallace Foundation (2013) advocates for principals, “the central source of leadership influence” (p. 6), to assume the role of instructional leader over compliance manager. “[Principals] can no longer function simply as building

managers, tasked with adhering to district rules, carrying out regulations and avoiding mistakes. They have to be (or become) leaders of learning who can develop a team delivering effective instruction” (Wallace Foundation, 2013, p. 6). As Van Vooren (2018) suggests, “The concept of the principal as a building manager has given way to a model in which the principal is an aspirational leader, a team builder, a coach, and an agent of visionary change” (p. 47). Ediger (2014) emphasizes the elevated intellectual and morally superior role of the principal as instructional leader compared to site manager. The modern romantic view of the instructional leader, who will sweep in with superhero strength to save the day, is both inspiring and daunting for school principals who wonder if they have the skills, ability, or fortitude to lead schools while navigating “a global tsunami of educational reform” (Hallinger, 2005, p. 230).

Studies of principal perceptions of changing roles affirm the stress and frustration that come with massive job demands and complex leadership roles (Alvoid & Black Jr., 2014; Harris, 2016; Lyons & Algozzine, 2006; Markow et al., 2013; Van Vooren, 2018). In a nationwide survey of school principals, Markow et al. (2013) found that seven in 10 principals felt their responsibilities had changed compared to the previous five years. In low-performing schools, that number climbed to eight in ten. Additionally, 75% of principals reported that the job had become too complex. Increasing principal job demands and accountability and decreasing resources and authority have combined to create an environment of tension and frustration—even before COVID-19. Van Vooren (2018) found “school leaders are often overwhelmed by the possibility of having to do it all” (p. 49). In his study of principal role changes, Portin (1997) found that 73% of participants reported amplified frustration and 64% reported dwindling enthusiasm

accompanying changes in job expectations. In their report on the changing role of school principals, Alvoid and Black Jr. (2014) note, “The breadth of the job has left many principals feeling like the work is unmanageable, and this perception is causing attrition within the ranks of school leadership and discouraging capable teachers from aspiring to become leaders” (p. 8).

In their study of the impact of accountability on North Carolina principals’ roles, Lyons and Algozzine (2006), indicated that intensified responsibilities for principals in the era of accountability triggered mixed feelings. While most elementary, middle, and high school principals in the study held a favorable view of the *ideals* of accountability, they perceived the *practices* associated with increased accountability with skepticism. In particular, school leaders lamented that standardized accountability practices ignore educational contexts in which principals practice school leadership, leaving principals in at-risk, economically disadvantaged, and urban schools more vulnerable to punitive action (Alvoid & Black Jr., 2014; Harris, 2016; Lyons & Algozzine, 2006).

Mothers in School Leadership

Historically, schools have been protectors of the dominant gendered norms espoused by western culture. Even as the perception of teaching shifted at the turn of the twentieth century into a more traditionally feminine profession, male hegemony persisted in the hierarchy of school leadership and administration (Blount, 2000). Although women comprise the vast majority of school employees and have enjoyed increasing access to school leadership positions in recent decades, they continue to be woefully under-represented in upper leadership. While approximately 50% of principals are women, they are overwhelmingly hired to lead elementary schools (Shakeshaft et al., 2007). Currently,

two-thirds of the American school workforce is female, but less than 25% of secondary principals (Shakeshaft et al., 2007) and only 22% of superintendents are women (Litmanovitz, 2010; Pascopella, 2008). The obvious gender divide between elementary and secondary school leadership reveals the permeations of traditional gender norms and stereotypes that exist within the culture of schooling. In her study of early childhood educators, Galili (2020) explains that women in education experience “blurred” (p. 184) boundaries between their personal and public spheres because “the public views the [elementary] teaching profession as an extension of the private sphere because of its requirement for so-called feminine skills” (p. 184).

Researchers ascribe the gender gap in school leadership to similar factors familiar in other fields of work: male-centric attitudes, discriminatory hiring practices, and traditional gender ideologies surrounding domesticity (Blount, 2000; Litmanovitz, 2010). In their qualitative study of aspiring school leaders, Williamson and Hudson (2003) identified work and time demands, conflicts between home and work, and school contextual features as key factors in female administrators’ decisions to exit leadership roles prior to retirement. Brown and Wynn (2004) identified reasons leadership-skilled female teachers choose not to pursue administrative positions as “a complex mix of choice and constraint” (p. 705). Although not explicitly addressed in the study, traditional gender ideology was prevalent in Brown and Wynn’s (2004) summary of findings. “Participants in this study underscored their belief, at least in the eyes of society, teaching is a more acceptable profession for women, while school administration is more suitable for men” (Brown & Wynn, 2004, p. 699). Participants also indicated that their responsibility for the bulk of domestic tasks and the stereotypical perceptions of teaching

and administration deterred them from seeking positions in school leadership (Brown & Wynn, 2004). Similarly, Smith (2011) found in her life history study of female teachers in England that participants' perceptions of their agency in career decisions mingled with the reality of gendered constraints in the patriarchal educational context. This intermingling of agency and external control created a complex analysis of teacher career paths.

For mother/leaders in education, scholarship has found three significant factors that influence how mothers experience the turbulence of school leadership and negotiate the dual roles of mothering and leadership. 1) The staunch patriarchal norms of educational institutions create obstacles for mothers in leadership careers. 2) As women negotiate gender ideologies within these systems, they experience both agency and constraint in relation to work-home balance. 3) Some mother/leader border crossers successfully navigate their challenges by integrating their identities and establishing clear boundaries regarding both roles. I outline each of these themes below.

Patriarchal Norms

Gendered expectations continue to shape the way in which women in school leadership make career decisions (Lumby, 2015; Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2006). Although the number of women leaders has grown substantially in recent decades, entrenched perceptions of leadership as predominantly male work limit opportunities for women within educational leadership (Kruger et al., 2005; Lumby, 2015). Furthermore, as women struggle to navigate the particularities of leading in patriarchal institutions, impression management (Goffman, 1959) and gender role expectations collide (Hays, 1996; Hochschild, 2012). As they seek to present themselves in ways that further their

professional goals within their own gender role expectations, mother/leaders often find these gendered negotiations unproductive. The conundrum is that the same male-centric impression management tactics men successfully use for promotion backfire when women use them. Employers punish women who embrace stereotypical male impression management tactics for violating cultural gender expectations. Therefore, women find themselves in organizations in the double bind of managing professional aspirations while attending to gender expectations (Guadagno & Cialdini, 2007; Johansson, 2007; Singh et al., 2002).

Even though patriarchy within educational, government, and corporate institutions impinges upon women's access to leadership positions, research on gender and leadership indicate women possess some superior leadership skills compared to men. These feminine leadership proficiencies include collaboration, relationships, empathy, caring, optimism, communication, problem-solving, task completion, innovation, trust, and service (Sachs & Blackmore, 1998; Campbell, 2010; Coleman, 2003; Eagly et al., 2003). In their meta-analysis of 45 leadership studies, Eagly et al. (2003) found that women manifest stronger transformational leadership skills and more frequent transactional leadership and contingent rewards behaviors than men. In fact, in 36 of 44 case comparisons, feminine leadership skills were deemed superior to masculine leadership traits (Eagly et al., 2003). Moreover, Reed and Blaine (2015) found in their study of resilience in educational leadership that women demonstrated greater leadership resilience than men. Scholarship on educational institutions confirms that women's leadership competencies exceed those of men (Bradbury & Gunter, 2006; Campbell, 2010; Coleman, 2003; Choge, 2015; Hallinger et al., 2016; Kruger et al., 2005; Lumby,

2015; Lumby & Azaola, 2014). Despite possessing superlative leadership skills, mother/leaders find themselves continuously adapting their leadership behaviors to fit in with a school culture ruled by masculine values, language, and practices (Campbell, 2010; Coleman, 2003). Lumby and Azaola (2014) articulate the conundrum gender stereotypes create for mothers in school leadership. “Women taking up a school principal role may [...] face persistent and prescriptive stereotypes which mean, whether competent or not, nurturing or not, they will be transgressing one prescription or another, as woman or leader” (p. 33).

Agency and Constraint

Another nuance of school leadership scholarship indicates mother/leaders experience both agency and constraint in relation to work-life balance as they negotiate gender ideologies—institutional as well as personal. Research shows that school leaders and academic mothers, like other working mothers, retain primary responsibility for child-rearing and domestic work (Baker, 2016; Bradbury & Gunter, 2006; Brown & Wynn, 2004; Clark, 2017; Jordan, 2012; Litmanovitz, 2010; Loder, 2005; Lumby, 2015; Lumby & Azaola, 2014). In addition, school leaders encounter unique professional demands. Mirroring the ideology of *intensive mothering* (Hays, 1996), which requires good mothers to expertly cater to the needs of the child no matter the cost, Baker (2016) uses the term *intensive leadership* to describe the role of the school principal. Intensive leadership “advises leaders to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money leading their schools” (p. 140). The unrealistic demands of both home and professional work create a dilemma for mother/leaders as they experience feelings of guilt and inadequacy while seeking the elusive balance between their sometimes competing roles

(Baker, 2016; Bradbury & Gunter, 2006; Choge, 2015; Jordan, 2012; Loder, 2005; Lumby, 2015; Lumby & Azaola, 2014).

Bradbury and Gunter (2006) found that, at times, mother/leaders in English primary schools accept the imbalance that comes from a demanding career as well as their complicity and guilt for allowing the imbalance to usurp family commitments (constraint). At other times, mother/leaders leverage their gendered positions to challenge dominant social narratives of mother/leaders (agency). The ongoing, cyclical nature of mother/leaders' negotiations indicates the challenges women encounter when they transgress dominant cultural ideals – and their own encultured gender ideologies—related to mothering and leadership. The context in which women navigate these complexities, such as mothering during “precarious times” (Dolman et al., 2018), is salient for understanding the contours of these navigations.

Border-Crossers

A third theme in mother/leader scholarship indicates that some women successfully navigate the challenges of mothering and leading by integrating their identities and establishing acceptable boundaries. Jordan (2012) describes mother/leaders as *border crossers* who experience significant permeability between the domains of mothering and school. She found:

There are complementary factors as well as competing factors when one is a headteacher and a mother, revealing the interplay between agency and structure as women negotiate both roles (p. 17).

The most successful mother/leaders maintain a firm sense of personal agency, strong boundaries, and a belief that integrating work and home life provide them the greatest personal and professional satisfaction (Jordan, 2012).

Research on academic mothering reveals that despite the staunch patriarchy pervasive in higher education, some mothers have found ways to integrate parenting and academia. Revealing the border permeations that exist for academic mothers, Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2006) describe how mothers in the academy lead “linked lives” (p.19), referencing the integration of their personal and professional identities. Similarly, Goodier’s (2012) study of academic mothers, whom she calls “double agents” (p. 73), found that “professor/mothers” (p. 73) felt their dual roles were more easily integrated than bifurcated. “These women were not seeking to maintain their double agent status or conceal their identities as professor/mothers. Instead, they actively sought strategies for construing integrated, coherent narratives of selves as professor/mothers in ways that made each role stronger” (Goodier, 2012, p. 73).

Correspondingly, studies of K-12 school leaders reveal the perceived benefits mothers experience when they can integrate rather than segregate their personal and professional lives. Two different studies of mother/leaders in Kenya indicated that, despite an oppressive male hegemony in school leadership, integration of mothering and leading identities led to principals’ greater satisfaction in both roles (Choge, 2015; Lumby & Azola, 2014;). Bradbury and Gunter’s (2006) qualitative study of English primary school headteachers found that successful school leaders integrated their mother and leader identities. In some cases, leveraging their border crossings as both leader and mother enhanced their professional credibility allowing them to win the confidence of

stakeholders. Regardless of the ongoing negotiations, mother/leaders in this study were confident in their dual roles and found their interactions mutually beneficial to them as mothers and headteachers (Bradbury & Gunter, 2006). These studies reveal that while negotiating the intense roles of mothering and leading can sometimes be challenging, mother/leaders who integrated their roles found satisfaction and fulfillment in both.

Prior to COVID-19, mothering for me was exhausting, challenging, and consuming. However, moments of joy and triumph were interwoven with the struggle, like crossing the finish line of the four-year adoption marathon with my youngest, Sunflower. Similarly, my leadership journey as a school principal was marked by mostly wins with the occasional setback. Overall, I considered myself successful in both mothering and leading. In the spring of 2020, COVID-19 exploded, shattering everything I thought or knew about mothering and leading, leaving me feeling like a “failure on all fronts” (Kearney & Bailey, 2012).

This study confirms what the research has shown, that precarity amplifies the stress and intensity associated with mothering and educational leadership within existing patriarchal norms. Mother/leaders, like other working mothers in the research, retain responsibility for domestic labor in times of crisis, creating impossible working conditions for women. Additionally, this project illuminates the ways in which precarity constrains women but also provides opportunities for them to demonstrate agency as they persevere with care work, domesticity, and paid labor.

While the research indicates that integration of mothering and leading roles sometimes benefits working mothers, for most of the women in this study, the dissolution of boundaries between paid work and home, especially in the early months of the

pandemic, prevented healthy integration of mothering and leading roles. The intensity of competing demands for mother/leaders in confined, overlapping spaces further inhibited mother/leaders' role integration. This research reveals the intense emotional toll that both roles, in a time of uncertainty, take on women. As Hayden and Hallstein (2021) report, "Pandemic fatigue is real" (p. 178). The futility and lack of productivity of mother/leaders' navigations not only created intense anxiety and deep existential exhaustion, but it also shook women's confidence in themselves as mothers and leaders. At some point during their interviews, all mother/leaders expressed a sense of failure in both roles. This study of mother/leaders' negotiations during precarity, focused equally on their individual navigations as well as socially-constructed norms and the culture of school leadership that ignores and undermines mother/leaders during turbulent and uncertain times.

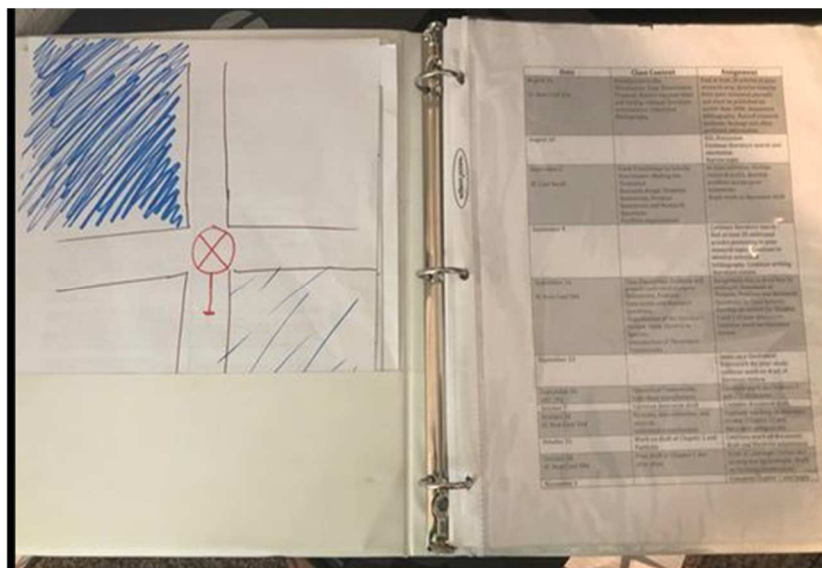
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY: THE ART OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Interlude: Intersectionalities

Figure 5

My Introduction to Autoethnography



Seeking inspiration for my new project, I retrieve my binder from fall 2015. I discover a few memories tucked inside that make me smile. I read some scribbled notes and grin as I see the word “dabs.” When talking to us about dipping our toes into narrative inquiry, our professor encouraged us to dabble a bit, try some things out. You know, “dabs?” I rather like the word; it’s tidy and cute belying the messiness of narrative and visual inquiries.

Nestled safely inside the front pocket of my three-ring binder is a drawing of an intersection (Figure 5). I remember drawing it during our first or second Saturday together in the Willard Hall conference room. It was a curious introduction for us, year-three doctoral scholars when our teacher passed out the magic markers. It was unexpected and different, but I liked it. I study the picture. I don't remember the specifics of our discussion, but I have a sense of it as I stare at the four corners. I see distinct identities or contexts in each box. The intersection represents the space and time they all share. It's such a simple drawing - I am not an artist - but it articulates the complexity of our lived experiences as embodied individuals with many facets to our identities situated within a culture at a particular time.

Ironically, the drawing of the intersection sits in my binder facing the precise, step-by-step guidelines for moving through a traditional dissertation proposal. As I look at the drawing alongside the outline, I remind myself that it's OK to abandon the comfort of the fastidious and ordered to embrace the messiness of autoethnography. "Get off the fence, Lisa. Dive on in," I encourage myself. I remember teasing my fellow cohort members, most of whom were struggling through Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) that semester, that I got to draw pictures in my Narrative and Visual Inquiry class. As a rookie to this nontraditional research methodology, even my joking reveals how I most certainly oversimplified the power and importance of narrative and visual methodologies as vehicles for using personal experiences to understand and reflect the cultural (Ellis, 2011; Ellis et al., 2013). I had no way of knowing that this awakening to a different, creative, personal way of knowing about the world and myself would present itself to me once again five years later.

The intersections of my different identities—a year-seven doctoral student needing to finish a dissertation, a mother/leader cloaked in uncertainty during a global pandemic, and an American citizen witnessing a pressure cooker of racial unrest—created environmental conditions well-suited to autoethnography. As a methodology, autoethnography provides researchers an avenue for making sense of confusion, uncertainty, and complexity through writing. “This characteristic of autoethnography—as a method for figuring out life and writing through difficult experiences—is beneficial for the author, who can use writing as inquiry” (Jones et al., 2013, p. 3). As the author writes to inquire, she keeps an eye on culture in hopes that the inquiry is mutually beneficial to herself and readers maneuvering through challenging experiences (Ellis et al., 2013; Richardson & St. Pierre (2005).

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore my (*auto*) and other mother/leaders’ (*ethno*) lived experiences as we negotiated dual roles during COVID-19. Aligned with autoethnography, the study sought also to understand what these negotiations revealed about the cultures (*ethno*) of mothering and school leadership and how women encountered normative gender expectations in precarity. Mother/leader interviews allowed us to engage in a shared exploration of the pandemic. We learned from ourselves and each other as we reflected on our actions, emotions, and embodiment throughout the chaos of 2020 and 2021. Our collective inquiry of motherwork and leadership revealed strategies for managing both roles during precarity as well as made known the way social structures and gender ideologies work to constrain or liberate mother/leaders. Additionally, this study made visible some of the undervalued labor

mother/leaders performed offering new insights and conceptualizations of mothering and leadership in both policy and praxis.

Autoethnography proceeds from contemplative processes as researchers inquire into a phenomenon of personal/cultural significance, writing and reflecting (*graphy*) asking questions of collaborators (*ethno*), and asking questions of the self (*auto*). Research and analytic questions materialized throughout the study rather than took form only in advance of the inquiry. The lived experiences and the changing conditions of leadership have led me to many questions about the phenomenon. How did mother/leaders navigate precarity? What were their greatest challenges? What forms of structural or personal supports were evident or absent for them? Did their priorities shift? Did their ideas about “good mothering” or “good leadership” change? How will the pandemic permanently alter their roles? What can we learn about the culture of school leadership through their navigations?

Questions for Inquiry and Reflection

1. How do mothers/leaders describe their dual roles during COVID-19?
2. How have mother/leaders’ navigated COVID conditions?
3. What strategies have mother/leaders used to negotiate their roles during COVID-19? How do these align with or differ from the literature on working mothers’ negotiations of social mothering norms?
4. What do women’s narratives of their mothering and leading lives during COVID reveal about structural and/or personal supports?
5. What do mother/leaders’ negotiations reveal about the culture of school leadership?

6. How do mother/leaders' negotiations during COVID-19 offer new conceptualizations of mothering and leading?

Epistemology

The traditional positivist perspective dominant in social science research posits one legitimate way of knowing which relies on quantitative, replicable scientific methods (Crotty, 1998). The epistemology of objectivism and the theoretical perspective of post-positivism that guide quantitative methods rely on conceptions of knowledge creation that presume an objective stance, researcher detachment, and research aims of prediction and control (Crotty, 1998). Instead, constructionism recognizes and values, rather than shuns, a variety of ways of knowing. Constructionism provides an alternative way to objectivism to guide how we as researchers come to knowledge. Constructionism reflects an epistemological stance guiding inquiry that embraces a way of knowing that is individually and collectively assembled through the ongoing interaction between individuals, groups, entities, and the world (Crotty, 1998).

According to Crotty (1998), constructionists come to knowledge through ongoing reciprocal social interactions between individuals, the world, and society. Constructionism is the view, he states, "that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). Social constructionism foregrounds the notion that because individuals are members of culture, "the basic generation of meaning is always social" (Crotty, 1998, p. 55). In this view of the theoretical foundations governing inquiry conducted within a constructionist epistemology,

researchers approach our studies with the understanding that individuals, including the researchers, do not exist separate from society, so our ways of knowing are inherently imbued with social elements (Crotty, 1998).

Theoretical Framework

Feminism

This study is grounded in feminist theory. The basic assumption of feminism is that gender roles are socially constructed in support of a distinctly patriarchal and masculine social order, situating women and others gendered feminine in subordination to men in all aspects of society. As a result, women experience this “man-made world,” as Crotty (1998) terms it, as oppressive and unjust. Elevating competition, individualism, intellect, biology, hard work, and grit, gendered cultural norms, intentionally or not, exclude and control mothers, as well as a host of others whose identities do not conform to masculine, White heterosexual middle-class ideals. Feminism, as applied in this study, provided a framework for the creative exploration of the gendered social norms that shaped the lives of women in non-pandemic conditions, but which rose to the surface with dramatic intensity for some during COVID-19. The undeniable reverberations of gender stratification on women’s lived experiences invited a greater understanding of how patriarchy manifests itself under all circumstances. Refusing to accept that women are passive victims of masculinity, feminism seeks to remediate gender injustice by making visible the invisible and giving a voice to the voiceless (O’Reilly, 2016). By fronting diverse perspectives and seeking to unseat masculine social dominance, feminism invites reframing and new conceptualizations of the way the world can be (Crotty, 1998).

Matricentric Feminism

One form of feminism, matricentric feminism, suggests that motherhood provides an additional intersection that contributes to limitations on women who are mothers. Matricentric feminism appeared as an extension of feminist mothering theory when a prolific and influential feminist scholar of motherhood, Andrea O'Reilly (2016), rallied for feminism to recognize and represent mothers within feminist scholarship. Labeling mothering as “the unfinished business of feminism” (p. 2), O'Reilly (2016) calls for embracing and celebrating mothers' voices within feminist scholarship as well as in social discourse and policy (Lumby, 2015; Lumby & Azaola, 2014; O'Reilly, 2016). She contends that the dominant social discourse of patriarchy and feminist ideology work in tandem to silence mothers' voices. As a result, the social and political gains made by feminism are not enjoyed equally by mothers. O'Reilly (2016) explains:

A cursory review of recent scholarship on mothers and paid employment reveals that although women have made significant gains over the last three decades, mothers have not [...] And although the “glass ceiling” and the “sticky floor” are still found in the workplace, most scholars argue that it is the “maternal wall” that impedes and hinders most women's progress in the workplace today (p. 2).

Feminist mothering or matricentric mothering makes some distinct claims to legitimacy within feminist ideology. Negating the patriarchal implications of *motherhood* as a biological, private, innate, and individual experience, feminist mothering focuses on the empowerment of mothers with “authority, authenticity, autonomy, agency, and advocacy-activism” (O'Reilly, 2016, p. 70). In this view, mothers search for ways to navigate, resist, reframe, and stretch the social constraints and norms that shape their contexts.

In examining the crises mothers faced during COVID-19, O'Reilly (2020) proclaimed, "Despite the cataclysmic upheavals of the pandemic, one thing remains unchanged: mother work remains invisible, devalued, and taken for granted" (p. 22). As a result, she calls for feminism and society to embrace, elevate, and empower mothers (O'Reilly, 2016), and she demands "that governments, the media, and the public begin this necessary conversation so that mothers are rightly recognized and supported as frontline workers performing essential service in this pandemic" (O'Reilly, 2020, p. 24).

Feminism as theory, ideology, and movement is more nuanced than this description provides. However, because research indicates precarity accelerates oppression for marginalized individuals (Fothergill, 1996; Peek & Fothergill, 2008), an understanding of feminism as a vehicle for giving voice to women's experiences during COVID-19 provides the reader with a basic framework to understand the study.

Autoethnography's Dance with Feminism

"Since the days of its pioneers ... feminist ethnography has understood and celebrated the power of the narrative" (McNamara, 2009, p. 165).

Feminist scholarship has relied on autoethnography as one of a variety of creative and arts-based methodologies throughout its roughly fifty-year history. As a fledgling methodology in the mid-twentieth century, autoethnography was embraced by a range of critical and feminist scholars who recognized value in its potential to use personal voice as a way to elevate the cultural voice of oppressed and marginalized groups of people (Ellis, 2004; Jones et al., 2013). Acclaimed autoethnographer, Carolyn Ellis (2004), explains:

“Feminism has played a role in the narrative/autoethnography movement,” I say. “It has contributed significantly to legitimizing the autobiographical voice associated with reflexive ethnography.... “Many feminist writers advocate starting research from one’s own experience. Thus, to a greater or lesser extent, researchers incorporate their personal experiences and standpoint in their research by starting with a story about themselves, explaining their personal connection to the project, or using personal knowledge to help them in the research process” (p. 47-48).

Feminist and autoethnographic methodologies share common characteristics, such as foregrounding personal experience, advocacy for marginalized groups, voice for those who lack social access, anti-oppression/empowerment, and social change. Jones et al. (2013) describe the affinity between feminist theory and autoethnographic methodology. “Autoethnography is feminist with its focus on lived, personal experience, its appreciation of difference and intersectionality, and its valuing of rationality, emotionality, and multiple ways of knowing” (Jones et al., 2013, p. 673.)

Research Design

Autoethnography

“Start with a story” (Bochner, 2014, p.13).

Autoethnography is a distinct yet broad body of methodology, antithetical to traditional research methodologies that eschew the overt presence of the researcher within research. Autoethnographers challenge the idea that social scientific methods should be sterile and value-free, arguing that researchers invariably shape research, and no amount of pretending can change this reality. Bochner (2013) advocates for the

presence of the researcher within the research. “As a form of writing and communicating, autoethnography has become a rallying point for those who believe that the human sciences need to become more human” (Bochner, 2013, p. 52).

In *Coming to Narrative*, noted autoethnographer Art Bochner (2014), a sociologist who was trained in conventional post-positivist theoretical approaches to inquiry, chronicles the inception of autoethnography and narrative inquiry as accepted social science research methodologies. The “narrative turn,” as Bochner (2014) calls it, paralleled his decades-long academic journey from post-positivist objectivity to post-modern reflexivity, what he describes as moving from “facts and graphs to meaning and stories” (p. 14). The birth of narrative forms of inquiry began in the 1980s as social science researchers sought to foreground individuals’ stories and experiences as data that could illuminate not only the personal but also the social, cultural, and political (Patton, 2002). “I turned toward narrative as a mode of inquiry because stories seemed to offer the best possibility of constructing and embodying different relationships between researchers and research participants, and between writers and readers of social science inquiry” (Bochner, 2013, p.52). By the time he published his *magnum opus*, *Coming to Narrative*, in 2014, a wide variety of narrative methods of inquiry, including autoethnography, were flourishing in the human sciences as qualitative and interpretivist researchers came to appreciate the value of the personal as reflective of the cultural (Bochner, 2014).

While traditional positivist methods remain prominent in contemporary research epistemologies and methodologies, critical, feminist, and postmodernist shifts in theoretical and methodological approaches to inquiry welcomed alternate, qualitative

ways of knowing that exist outside the hegemony of rational, objective perspectives. Through reflexivity and voice, constructionist, critical, feminist, and arts-based inquiries provide a pathway for knowing that values previously marginalized perspectives of both people and approaches to conducting inquiry (Ellis, 2004; Ellis, 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Jones et al., 2013). Wall (2006) describes the advent of autoethnography:

This is the philosophical open door into which autoethnography creeps. The questioning of the dominant scientific paradigm, the making of room for other ways of knowing, and the growing emphasis on the power of research to change the world create a space for the sharing of unique, subjective, and evocative stories of experience that contribute to our understanding of the social world and allow us to reflect on what could be different because of what we have learned (p. 148).

Autoethnography recognizes and then foregrounds the inextricable link between the personal (*auto*) and the cultural (*ethno*) providing “emancipatory promise” (Wall, 2006, p. 148) for diverse perspectives in social science research (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Jones et al., 2013; Wall, 2006).

Precisely due to their rejection of objective, universal truth, most autoethnographic researchers resist providing checklists of traits to define this methodology. Jones et al. (2013) make clear, “We do not advocate for any definitive, prescriptive criteria for doing autoethnography” (p. 673). The researchers go on to explain that lists of autoethnographic characteristics, therefore, must be understood as tools for “strengthening the power and accessibility of the text; rarely are the criteria used to determine right or wrong, as life is much more complicated than such a binary

construct” (Jones et al, 2013, p. 673). With that said, I present a set, although incomplete, of characteristics found in some autoethnographic projects. Although individual researchers may disagree about the emphasis placed on the “auto” versus “ethno,” analytical versus emotional, or art versus science, most autoethnographic scholars agree that these projects share some defining criteria (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2013; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005; Smith-Sullivan, 2008).

First, autoethnography is **personal**. The researcher uses specific firsthand “insider knowledge” (Jones et al., 2013, p. 33) as a vehicle for understanding others and culture. As such, it is “a method for exploring, understanding, and writing from, though, and with personal experiences in relation to and in the context of experiences with others” (Adams et al., 2015). The personal is foregrounded but always relates in some way to the cultural (Adams, et al, 2015; Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2011; Smith-Sullivan, 2008).

Autoethnography engages **reciprocity**, an ongoing give and take between the researcher, audience, and the research itself. By foregrounding the connections among the researcher and members of the culture under study, reciprocity welcomes emotion, connection, and humanity. I began this research exploring my own negotiations, but then I engaged others in the dialog where I found affirmation in the stories of other mother/leaders similarly situated within the culture of school leadership. Sharing our experiences mothering and leading in the phenomenon of COVID-19 not only validated my experience but it also broadened my understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on others positioned differently within mother/leader culture. It also opened my eyes to the accepted oppressive social norms that continue to constrain mother/leaders. Jones et al. (2015) explain the importance of relationships in autoethnography. “Autoethnographers,

in particular, turn to narrative and storytelling to give meaning to identities, relationships, and experiences, and to create *relationships* between past and present, researchers and participants, writers and readers, tellers and audiences” (p. 23). Through stories, researchers negotiate the back and forth between the self and others, recognizing this process can get complicated and tangly. It is precisely, however, the complexity and messiness that create a space for making sense of lived experiences. “Although self-narratives focus on the author, self-stories often contain more than self. The irony of self-narratives is that they are of self but not self alone” (Adams et al., 2015, p.16).

Vulnerability is a common theme in autoethnographic research. By embracing vulnerability and emotion, autoethnographers “conduct research in order to better understand social phenomena or to explore the questions we have about our experiences” (Adams et al., 2015). Researchers intentionally foreground vulnerable groups (gendered, aged, disabled) or vulnerable experiences (abuse, illness, secrets, tragedy, uncertainty) to elevate and provide a voice for traditionally marginalized people or call attention to stigmatized, invisible, or misunderstood experiences. This vulnerability is not without risk. If the researcher steps out of the lab and onto the stage, she opens herself up for scrutiny. As Quinn (2008) beautifully describes, “Rather than keeping an academic distance, urging activists from a sterile, objective seat in the balcony, I tell my story from the stage and through the researcher’s eyes” (p. 59). This public “splaying oneself open with the intention of healing,” she goes on to say, is the vehicle for connecting with others and creating work that can change lives and the world (Quinn, 2008).

Closely related to vulnerability is the use of autoethnography to provide an entry into painful, uncertain, and difficult experiences, which allows researchers to understand

the nuances of challenging experiences and make them better for the researcher and others. Ellis (2005) explains that she often writes about life experiences that reveal her vulnerability and cause her to question her reality, “I tend to write about experiences that knock me for a loop and challenge the construction of meaning I have put together for myself. [...] I write when my world falls apart or the meaning I have constructed for myself is in danger of doing so” (p. 33). Through exploration of vulnerable or painful phenomena, the autoethnographer attempts to make sense of and forge a path through the difficulty (Adams et al., 2015). As researchers maneuver their way in and through heartbreak, struggle, pain, and anxiety, they experience more than a personal catharsis. They intentionally create a shared space for others to peek in and find consolation or companionship (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2013).

Autoethnographic studies often employ the personal to **describe, critique, and disrupt the culture** to give a voice to the voiceless or provoke a response. Early autoethnographers recognized the value and richness that accompany different ways of knowing about the world. By challenging canonical research methodologies, autoethnographic researchers seek to legitimize disenfranchised voices and provide representation to a wider audience through narrative and creative forms of expression. By inviting diverse voices into creative, transparent processes, autoethnography foregrounds both process and product in the research (Adams et al., 2015; Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2013).

Reflexivity, attending closely to the author’s position within and impact upon the research, is an essential feature of autoethnography—and all qualitative research that is not post-positivist. As a methodology focused on the interplay between the personal and

the cultural, autoethnography values the voice of the researcher's experience in reflecting society, and it expects more of reflexivity than the obligatory tipping of the hat in bracketed research notes. Whereas traditional research considers reflexivity a limitation to be addressed by a stand-alone paragraph that acknowledges the unfortunate possibility that the researcher might impact research, autoethnography considers the researcher's voice to be an asset that should take center stage in the research (Ellis, 2004; Ellis, 2011; Jones et al., 2013; Wall, 2006).

Autoethnography as methodology foregrounds diversity, writing as inquiry, and representation in qualitative research. "The more different voices are honored within our qualitative community, the stronger—and more interesting—that community will be" (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 959). Born from a narrative turn and a "crisis of representation" in the social sciences (Adams et al., 2015, p. 22), autoethnography opens wide an inclusive pathway to knowledge. Adams et al. (2015) assert:

This focus on representation encouraged qualitative researchers to search for more transparent, reflexive, and creative ways to do and share their research. Rather than deny or separate the researcher from the research and the personal from the relational, cultural, and political, qualitative researchers embraced methods that *recognized* and *used* personal-cultural entanglements (p. 22).

Researchers can conduct autoethnography through almost any theoretical framing or tradition. Embraced by groups working within interpretivism, critical, feminist, narrative, and arts-based traditions, autoethnography allows for authentic representation by someone within the group. Wall (2006) explains how the authenticity and transparency of autoethnographic research invite representation "from previously silenced groups

[removing] the risks inherent in the representation of others, [allowing] for the production of new knowledge by a unique and uniquely situated researcher, and [offering] small-scale knowledge that can inform specific problems and specific situations” (p. 149).

This autoethnographic research project highlighted the voice of mother/leaders to understand their unique lived experiences and ongoing negotiations during the uncertainty of COVID-19. My position as a mother/leader provided a generative perspective that built knowledge with other mother/leaders negotiating dual roles during times of peril. Leaning into vulnerability and emotions, our shared reflections crystalized to enlarge our understanding. Our collective awareness allowed us to interrogate the normative mothering and leading discourses that impact our past, present, and future experiences as mothers and leaders.

Methods

Writing as Inquiry (*auto*)

Autoethnographic methodology values both the process and the product of writing as pathways to knowing. “Qualitative researchers in a variety of disciplines—medicine, law, education, the social sciences, and the humanities—have since found *writing as a method of inquiry* a viable way in which to learn about themselves and their research topic” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 959). For the autoethnographer, writing is much more than just telling; the act of writing becomes a way of knowing, a way of making sense. “Viewed as a mode of inquiry, writing is a way of coming to know an experience better or differently” (Adams et al., 2015, p. 68). Autoethnographers use a variety of writing practices—journaling, text spinning, collaging, found poetry/stories, imaging, and freewriting—to generate writing pieces, either small sketches or full episodes. Over the

course of the research project, the researcher reads, analyzes, and sorts writings in search of emerging themes. Some she will keep and others she will cut as the project takes form (Adams et al., 2015).

Traditional scientific inquiry employs methods to discover knowledge that is both generalizable and unbiased. However, Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) argue, “Nurturing our own voices releases the censorious hold of ‘scientific writing’ on our consciousness as well as the arrogance it fosters in our psyche; writing is validated as a method of knowing” (p. 962). The autoethnographer makes herself the subject of research, whether as a grounding site of investigation about broader cultural processes or as a member of a group under study, such as in my study. As she practices the craft of writing as inquiry, the researcher uses her narrative voice as a tool for knowing. Ellis and Bochner (2000) illustrate:

I start with my personal life. I pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions. I use what I call systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall to try to understand an experience I’ve lived through. Then I write my experience as a story. By exploring a particular life, I hope to understand a way of life (p. 737).

With an eye towards social justice, autoethnographic writing can illuminate the experiences of those marginalized within mainstream society. Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) explain how writing as inquiry can expand representation to hidden voices:

Writing stories sensitize us to the potential consequences of all of our writing by

bringing home—inside our homes and workplaces—the ethics of representation. [...] Writing stories are not about people and cultures “out there” [...] they are about ourselves ... (p. 966).

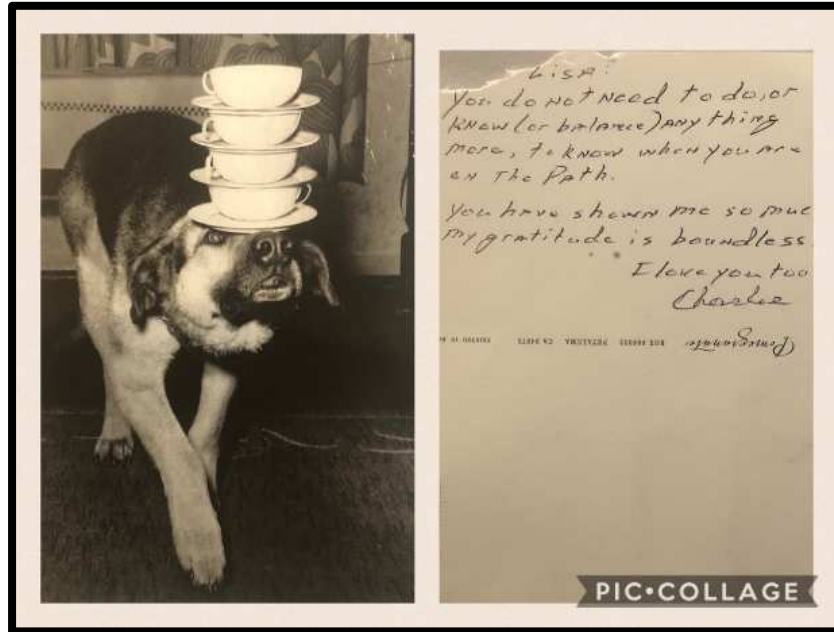
The act of writing causes the researcher to grapple with lived experiences in a way that helps her make sense of the experiences. As the autoethnographer writes, she uses “language as a site of exploration and struggle” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 961), creating knowledge about her life and a way of life (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).

As I navigated the unexpected phenomenon of COVID-19, I wrote to make sense of my lived experiences as a mother and principal in the context of uncertainty and fear. I wrote, and cried, and wrote some more until slowly, my story emerged. “Always, writing autoethnography has been a way for me to find out, to know and to tell, to come out and to say *no* to other ways of life” (Adams, et al, 2015, p. 670). It took time, but as I slowly entered the waters, I discovered the value of my voice as a site of inquiry through writing.

Interlude: Diving in for the First Time

Figure 6

Farewell to “Spinner Lisa” from Charles



I think Sunday mornings must be my muse, my day of inspiration. Monday through Friday, someone always wants something from me, mostly work-related. It's late June 2020, so technically, I'm "off contract," but that's a myth. It's cute, the dichotomy in the emails I receive and send. "I hope you are enjoying some well-deserved rest, but..." or "I trust your summer is going well, although..." The number of emails we are sending and receiving is inversely related to how much we are actually enjoying our summer.

I don't know if it's the industry rooted in my upbringing or genes from my dad or simply that acts of service is my love language, but Saturdays always end up being "project days." Yesterday's project was making Black Lives Matter yard signs for me and my neighbor. While the tedium of designing, cutting, and weeding each vinyl sticker for

the posters took hours of shoulder burning work, I couldn't stop. I have always linked labor to love, and I wanted my neighbor to know how much I loved her.

Sunday, however, that's the day I give myself over to...nothing? anything? I don't really even know, but my body knows. Maybe it's my Christian upbringing and the belief seated in the marrow of my bones that just knows, Sunday is a day of rest. Maybe it's exhaustion from the six prior days of work, projects, dishes, and mending lives that takes me out on Sundays. My knotted shoulders, two stubbed toes, tangled hair, unharnessed breasts, picked nails, and afternoon coffee breath tell me today is Sunday.

This morning, as I linger under the blankets for too long, like so many other Sundays, I listen to the activity outside my bedroom door. The girls are awake, later than usual, but their Sunday routines are anchored in their bodies as well. The first thing they do is check on us, mostly me. Their bodies are anxious and on alert if they can't see and know I am still here. They cannot recall their early trauma, but their bodies remember (Van Der Kolk, 2014). The girls come and go from my bedside as I drift in and out of light sleep. I hear their over-activity on the other side of the walls and know I should get up, but I play a dangerous waiting game. Outside my door, "the whole house began to tremble" (Oliver, 2020) as their activity level ramps up.

I think about Mary Oliver's *The Journey*, a poem articulating a lost woman's journey to find her voice. I came to love Mary Oliver when I was going through a divorce in 2009 after almost 18 years of marriage. Charles shared the poem, *The Journey* with me, and he shared the journey with me. This paraplegic, white-haired counselor – the only man I have ever fully trusted - helped me discover my voice, through guilt, shame, and self-doubt. I haven't heard his voice since 2010, but I remember, my heart

remembers, the hundreds of times I listened to him reading *The Journey* on my voicemail until AT&T purged it from my inbox. I feel the pang of heartache in my chest and the hot tears sting my eyes as I remember him this morning.

I hear him now, whispering like he did in so many of our early morning sessions, “What are those tears for?”

I answer, “Charles, they are for you. I miss you,” but I know he sees through the lie. He always does. More tears. He waits. Like so many times, it takes me the entire session, sometimes many sessions, to know the truth, to feel it in my veins. “I miss *me*, and I’m angry I got lost again,” I confess.

He smiles and says, “I know. I’ve been waiting for you to know.” I rest my head on my desk and release months of tears.

The catharsis leaves me feeling sober and lighter, but I don’t know what to do next. I thought my musings about Mary Oliver would take me in one direction, but out of nowhere, the emotions rolled me like a wave, dragged me down to the rocky, sandy bottom, and deposited me somewhere completely different. I surface, gasping for breath, completely drenched but feeling invigorated. I got out of my head and into my story, and I dove in head-first without thinking twice about the uncertainty. Is this the “auto” in autoethnography exerting her voice?

“I see you. Mother. Survivor. You are not lost. You took your eyes off the path,” I tell myself. I realize the events of the past four months have obscured my vision. The uncertainty of COVID-19 and my utter confusion about how to negotiate mothering and leading is both distracting and consuming. My typical *modus operandi* when things are spiraling out of control is to do more. “Working harder will restore your sense of

control.” I’ve told myself this lie for nearly 50 years. Charles and I used to laugh when we noticed I was starting to “spin the plates.” Instantly, I smile, remembering the postcard he gave me when we said our goodbyes. The postcard has a photograph of a talented pup carefully balancing stacked cups and saucers (Figure 6). The edge of the decade-old postcard is partly torn, but I remember the missing salutation. My dear friend lovingly called me “Spinner” Lisa. With my head back above water and resting safely on the shore, I ruminate on my journey into autoethnography, and I realize that over the past week with ongoing encouragement from my adviser, I was moving away from straddling a methodological fence; my body was turning willingly towards autoethnography, but I was still sitting at the edge, mostly dry, dangling my feet in the murky water. I occasionally ventured deeper, allowing the water to rise past my knees, while I peered past the surface wondering what was down there. Up until now, I was still telling my story like an outsider. Today, I dove in. The initial shock took my breath away, but soon the shock gave way to exhilaration.

Still a bit unsteady but eager to make sense of what just happened to me, I pace around my small, crowded office for a moment almost as if looking for someone. Then, I realize I am not alone. I turn to Carolyn Ellis. I dry my stinging red eyes and leave my office in favor of the bedroom. Crawling under my weighted blanket with a highlighter in hand, I quickly flip past Gene’s death in *Final Negotiations* (Ellis, 1995), and there it is, as plain as day. Carolyn Ellis straddled the fence, like me. In her book, the sections, “Part V: Negotiating the Story” and “Part VI: Endings” are all about the struggle, the messiness, the back and forth. She vacillated between two possible endings for her story—an approved social-science ending which would highlight analysis but subjugate

the researcher's voice and emotion or "taking charge of my life/story, a story that now is primarily between me and my readers" (p. 333). "I had to examine my love for and my need to attract, challenge, and resist, yet ultimately please, the authority of both Gene (men) and sociology (orthodox social-science discourse)" (p. 332).

I turn next to Bochner (2014). He spent 350 pages in *Coming to Narrative* chronicling his journey off the methodological fence. In the epilogue, he describes how he grappled with his search for *truth* a vestige of his positivist past. Ultimately, he concludes, truth is a concept that eludes us all:

As a research project that would make it corrupted by observer bias, the line between I, the observer, and me, the observed, is crossed. I'm inside what I'm studying. It's like trying to catch your own shadow. [...] You have an urge to catch up to your shadow or chase your tail, but eventually you realize that this is not something you can achieve (p. 313).

Both Ellis (1995) and Bochner (2014) describe the messiness and frustration of autoethnography and how mingling the personal and academic creates tension while igniting passion. Ellis (1995) explains the unique ways this methodology tossed her about:

I was passionate about the undertaking, yet frustrated by the complexity of the task, sometimes unsure and scared, other times spellbound by the mystery, relishing the unknown and challenge of figuring it all out. In writing about the relationship, I acted similarly to the way I acted in the relationship. I was involved, then detached, withdrew, and said I couldn't handle it (p. 331).

Despite the sometimes-complex entanglement among the personal, the artistic, and the scientific, autoethnography creates space for the researcher's voice within the social sciences. As a way of knowing that foregrounds the individual's emotion, identity, and lived experience, autoethnography invites us to study all that is distinctly human about ourselves (Bochner, 2014; Ellis, 1995, 2004). While the stories are intensely personal, humanity is something we all share.

Writing as Inquiry (*graphy*)

In addition to providing a space for me to write through the aching personal challenges of mothering and leading in chaos, this methodology provided a way of understanding the real-time phenomenon of COVID-19. As of this writing, in early 2022, the world reached the two-year anniversary of the pandemic with few signs of relief. The researcher, mother/leaders, readers, and the entire world were bound by the common experience of living through and negotiating uncertainty. Autoethnography—a dynamic, vulnerable, reciprocal methodology (Ellis et al., 2011) – provided an outlet for exploring the angst and confusion that accompanied my positioning in this precarious time in history. Unlike the sterile detached research methods of the positivist past, autoethnography opened wide my understanding of the phenomenon from a particularly tender, empathic perspective that strengthened me during a time of hopelessness and perceived failure.

The lived experiences of mother/leaders within the ongoing COVID-19 crisis cannot be objectively analyzed using traditional research methodologies as though they were static and value-free. While the world was impacted by COVID-19, our different lived experiences were byproducts of social norms, as well as our own beliefs, roles,

assumptions, gender ideologies, social locations, and positions within culture. When studying a dynamic, emotionally charged phenomenon such as COVID-19, autoethnographers must attend closely to reflexivity and their location within the culture, context, and research (Adams et al., 2015). As a mother/leader with children who faced emotional struggles, I recognized my negotiations revealed a specific way of knowing about COVID-19. Some of my experiences paralleled those of other mother/leaders, and interviews allowed us to expand our collaborative understanding of the phenomenon. However, my location within the phenomenon also limited my understanding of the experiences of women whose ways of knowing differed from mine. Autoethnography pays special attention to how the personal and cultural are connected in myriad ways that provide pathways for understanding a phenomenon from perspectives far beyond the scope of traditional research (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis et al., 2011).

I wrote to make sense of my story and invited other mothers to share their anxieties, frustrations, failures, concessions, and emotions that accompanied mothering and leading from homes that became schools and schools that became homes. Situating my story alongside other women's narrated experiences connected us on many levels as we processed during interviews the often confusing, emotional experiences unique to our positions as mothers and school leaders. The process also provided a way for us to understand how the existing cultures of mothering and school leadership impacted how we mothered and led before and during the pandemic. Additionally, our alliance provided a space for us to reimagine our roles and hold ourselves mutually accountable to know and do mothering and leading differently as a result of our lived experiences (Jones et al., 2013).

Mothering Leaders

As an autoethnography, this study began with my storied experiences as I negotiated mothering and leading during COVID-19. As a mother through adoption of two children with challenging emotional needs, my experiences were unique. My daughters suffered early trauma, anxiety, ADHD, attachment disorders, and behavioral problems. Additionally, my position as a late-in-life mother in a second marriage provided a perspective that influenced my mothering. As of this writing in early 2022, my oldest has been in our family for seven years and my youngest for five years. Their behavior, and mine, the past two years was unlike anything we had experienced previously. Our familial circumstances created vulnerable conditions that I would have never imagined prior to COVID-19.

My position in this inquiry was central, but my inquiry sat next to other differently positioned women navigating unknown territory. Pilot interviews with ten mother/leaders revealed intense stress, particularly among mothers of younger children. As a result, I narrowed the focus of this study to include only mothers with children under age 10 at home. I interviewed 16 women for this study and conducted a second follow-up interview with 11 of them. The women were school leaders and mothers from four different states in the Midwest and the southern Midwest United States with at least one child under the age of 10 years old living with them. Three women represented historically underrepresented ethnic/racial groups. Six were in their thirties, 10 were in their forties, and I am in my fifties. They represented campus, district, and post-secondary administration; instructional and technology leadership; and principals, assistant principals, directors, supervisors, and coaches. They served in public, private,

and charter schools; rural and suburban districts; and elementary, secondary, and higher education institutions.

Table 1

Mother/leader Demographics in March 2020

Mother	Leadership Experience	Experience in Current Role	Professional Title	Children
Ally*	≤ 1 year	≤ 1 year	District Coach	1 infant
Camille**	≥ 5 years	≤ 1 year	District Director	1 infant, 2 Elem
Christina	≥ 5 years	≤ 1 year	Elem/MS Principal	3 Elem, 2 MS
Dani	≥ 10 years	≥ 10 years	Assistant HS Principal	1 Elem, 1 MS
Debbie**	≤ 1 year	≤ 1 year	Elem Campus Coach	1 Elem
Elena	≥ 10 years	≥ 5 years	Program Director	Pregnant
Elizabeth	≥ 5 years	≥ 5 years	Elem Principal	1 Elem, 1 MS
Gabby	≥ 5 years	≤ 1 year	Assistant Elem Principal	1 Elem, 1 MS
Grace***	≥ 5 years	≤ 1 year	Elem Principal	2 Elem
Holly	≥ 10 years	≥ 5 years	Elem Principal	2 Elem
Janessa***	≥ 5 years	≥ 5 years	Assistant Elem Principal	Pregnant, 1 toddler
Lisa	≥ 10 years	≥ 3 years	Elem Principal	2 Elem
Mia	≥ 5 years	≥ 5 years	Elem Principal	1 Elem, 1 MS
Monica***	≥ 5 years	≤ 1 year	HS Principal	1 Elem, 1 MS, 2 adult
Rachel	≥ 5 years	≥ 5 years	Assistant Elem Principal	1 infant, 1 toddler
Rosie	≥ 5 years	≥ 5 years	Elem Principal	2 Elem, 1 HS
Sarah***	≥ 5 years	≤ 1 year	Elem Principal	Pregnant, 1 infant

* Transitioned into leadership after March 2020

** First year in a new leadership role

*** Accepted a new leadership role after March 2020

Special needs (ADHD, trauma, learning disability, dyslexia, emotional disturbance, disrupted home placement)

Some women became mothers well before they stepped into leadership, and others were leaders first. Five gave birth to children in 2020, and seven assumed new or different leadership positions during or immediately before the pandemic. Differently

situated mothers' stories of mothering and leading during COVID-19 contributed to the collective knowledge of how mothers negotiated dual roles as well as the culture of school leadership. Recognizing that each woman experienced different constraints and agency relative to their positions, this study sought a variety of mother/leader voices to provide a broad understanding of mother/leader experiences during COVID-19.

The Inquiry Process

My early experiences in spring 2020 as a mother/leader during COVID-19 propelled this qualitative study. To prepare for this autoethnographic inquiry, I created and collected texts from three sources: autoethnographic narratives and visuals, interviews, and photographs.

Writing My Way Through: Autoethnographic Narratives

As the COVID-19 crisis enveloped the world in the early weeks of 2020, I was ignorant of its potential to disrupt, actually destroy, my understanding of how I mother and lead. When COVID exploded in the United States in March 2020, it left me dumbfounded and slightly paralyzed. As the tide swelled, however, I was thrust into a sea of frenzied activity that piled uncertainty on top of uncertainty. I worked furiously around the clock trying to stay afloat, but the waves continued. As I navigated these uncertain, turbulent waters, I determined I would interrogate my experiences to do what Poulos (2013) calls "writing my way through" (p. 473). "And, as I begin to write my way through this trauma and pain and memory, through all the silence and anguish and hurt, I begin to find my way through to the other side" (p. 473).

Early in the pandemic, I began narrating my experiences as a mother and leader in response to the upending of my roles as I previously understood them. I began with self-

narratives to process my experiences. As the research design became more palpable, I expanded my writing practice beyond simply chronicling daily activities. My writing included scrawling my rage, celebrating successful navigations, crying for help, listing my labor, emails, texts, and spiritual awakenings (Colyar, 2013). I explored themes such as mothering as it appeared in poetry during different literary periods, romantic, modern, post-modern. I practiced text collaging to juxtapose contrasting ideas on a common theme. My autoethnographic expressive, transactional, and poetic writings (Colyar, 2013) between March 2020 and the culmination of this project provided an entry into and component of understanding mother/leaders' COVID-19 navigations. I included a few of these free writes in the study as interludes. While some made their way into the study, most will remain locked away in notebooks by my bedside or in folders on my computer.

Collective Reflections with Other Mother/Leaders

By engaging in dialogue with others who shared my experiences as a mother/leader, interviews corroborated, extended, refined, or refuted my storied experiences. Although researchers do not dictate which resources an autoethnographic study might include, Chang (2008) explains how interviews can contribute to autoethnographic research. “[Interviews] provide external data that give contextual information to confirm, complement, or reject introspectively generated data” (p. 104).

As the project took form, my adviser and I often discussed the immediacy of unfolding COVID-19 conditions and decided that they necessitated interviews as soon as possible. We prepared an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application, seeking permission to conduct a ‘pilot,’ to explore mother/leaders’ experiences during the pandemic. Following IRB approval, I emailed mother/leaders from my personal and

professional contacts to explain the purpose and rationale for the study and invite them to participate (see Appendix A). The email also included an informed consent document that explained procedures, confidentiality, and participants' right to revoke consent at any time without consequence (see Appendix B). Upon receiving signed informed consent, in July through September 2020, I interviewed five mother/leaders for between one and two hours. The pilot interviews were conducted virtually using digital videoconferencing applications to adhere to CDC safety guidelines, and although this platform took some getting used to, I was able to quickly develop rapport with other mother/leaders. I recorded and transcribed interviews, paying attention to both visual, aural, and written data. Transcripts were member-checked, and on a couple of occasions, the women thanked me for the opportunity to participate and share their stories.

Pilot interviews allowed me to practice interviewing skills, particularly containment and following rather than leading in the interview process. It also allowed me to modify questions for inquiry and reflection and refine the focus to ensure mother/leaders had the opportunity to explore the range of emotions surrounding their experience in COVID-19. As mother/leaders narrated their work, struggles, and emotions in pilot interviews, new ideas surfaced that led me to adjust questions that guided interviews. In September 2020, I added additional questions that explored emergent themes in participant narratives (e.g. How did your experiences change from the beginning of the pandemic through summer into fall? How would you describe your experiences working for a male principal during the pandemic? What equity issues has the pandemic surfaced?). Additionally, I adjusted plans for gathering interview data in the larger study. Perhaps most importantly, the pilot inquiry allowed me to connect

authentically with other mother/leaders as we shared our vulnerability in a safe empathic setting. As the project evolved and participant experiences changed over time, follow-up interviews provided additional insights into mother/leader navigations.

In her explanation of the value of pilot interviews, Kim (2010) described an “autobiographical connection” (p. 193) to her phenomenological study of culturally competent caregiving for Korean-Americans with dementia. Similarly, I am connected to the pandemic and other mother/leaders in this autoethnography through our shared discourse. So, while the methodological lens through which our studies peer differs, both illuminate the value of pilot interviews.

Kim’s (2010) explanation of the use of pilot interviews to strengthen qualitative inquiry provided a helpful guide for me, a rookie interviewer. According to Kim (2010), pilot interviews serve four valuable purposes in qualitative research:

1. finding issues and barriers related to recruiting potential participants
2. engaging the use of oneself as a researcher in a culturally appropriate way and from a phenomenological perspective
3. reflecting the importance of the epoche process and its difficulty in conducting a phenomenological inquiry
4. modifying interview questions (p. 190)

In this study, pilot interviews exposed the barriers that emotionality posed to mothers’ capacity to join my study. The time constraints and emotional toll of pandemic mothering and leading was evident throughout all initial interviews, and the sometimes unwelcomed swell of emotions proved a hinderance for a few women wishing to contain them. Almost all the women cried during the first interview. Most women shared that the interview was

their first opportunity to reflect and process their navigations, and while many found the experience helpful, some expressed anxiety at reliving their experiences. Two women who declined second interviews inferred that they preferred not to reengage in the emotions that their initial reflections surfaced.

Next, Kim (2010) highlights the importance of reflexivity in qualitative projects. “This self-reflection may enable qualitative researchers to recognize how they are positioned in relation to participants and how this shapes the research process” (p. 198). I intentionally sought to present myself as a fellow sojourner and collaborator with other mother/leaders. In this study, as in all autoethnographies, the line between researcher and research was imperceptible, demonstrating the interconnectedness of researcher, women in the study, and the subject of study. Qualitative researchers must also consider *epoche* in the interview process. Akin to reflexivity, *epoche* requires the researcher to unearth and put aside personal prejudgments of a phenomenon or others’ lived experiences within the phenomenon. For me, this meant letting go of any assumptions that other mother/leaders’ experiences were similar to mine. Finally, I edited my interview guide to become more dialogic and remove assumptions about women’s COVID-19 experiences.

In addition to attending to my position within the study, pilot interviews prompted me to develop and refine guiding questions that elicited mother/leaders’ unique navigations during this time of uncertainty (see Appendix C). More importantly, however, pilot interviews allowed me to connect with other mother/leaders in a space we could share our anger, fear, and hope as we continued this shared journey. The emotions that undergirded participants’ stories of their embodied mothering and leading experiences linked us together as we cried and laughed about the unexpected

circumstances wrought by the pandemic. As I discovered during interviews, there is a fine line between engaging with women's lived experiences and revealing my own. The art and science of interviewing required practice and skill, and as I listened, transcribed, and re-listened to my pilot interviews, I recognized many opportunities for growth (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis, 2004; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002).

Using pilot interview data, my adviser and I collaborated on a manuscript submitted in early October 2020 to the *Planning and Changing Journal* for consideration in a special COVID-19 publication (Crosslin & Bailey, 2021). Using inductive analysis and the qualitative tools listed in the following section, including aural, sensory, verbal, and written data processing, we identified emerging themes in the data which allowed us to adjust our interview protocol to expand on these themes:

Pilot interview data highlights the gendered practices constitutive of mother/leaders'

navigations and the triage leadership practices and care work they have performed at home and in schools. Our three findings, (1) triage leadership and mothering, (2) reframing, adjusting, and letting go, and (3) leadership as care work, reflect common experiences and navigations. At this writing, principals are still adapting, responding, changing course, as conditions unfold. There are cumulative lessons emerging from these principals' stories for leadership practices and for framing mother/leaders' care work (Crosslin & Bailey, 2021, p. 8).

Women's stories gathered in pilot interviews conducted in late summer and early fall 2020 revealed that mothering and leading during COVID-19 were intensely emotional as they processed—sometimes for the first time—the magnitude of their

navigations, as well as the gendered cultural norms of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) and intensive leading (Baker, 2016). Consequently, I gradually progressed from descriptive background questions to more poignant ones allowing space for these strong, resilient women to engage their emotions and opinions. Not only did this gradual, empathic process yield sincere responses, it also attended to the ethics of care and compassion for others participating in this journey (Adams et al., 2015; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002).

For this study, I interviewed other mother/leaders to understand how my leading and mothering navigations during COVID-19 compared with theirs (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). I listened empathically, leaned in, and followed mothers as they explored the contours of their experiences. Ellis (2004) describes this style of autoethnographic interview:

Here the interview might take a conversational form in which the interviewer tries to tune in to the interactively produced meanings and emotional dynamics within the interview itself. Though the focus is on the interviewee and the interviewee's story, the words, thoughts, and feelings of the researcher also are considered (p. 62).

The interview guide assisted me as I explored individual mother/leaders' pathways to leadership and their experiences as mothers/leaders prior to and throughout the pandemic. I began the interviews with "grand-tour" (Chang, 2008, p. 105) questions, but as women described their mothering and leading lives, they opened the door to more evocative questions that revealed the struggle and strength they displayed along the journey. Patton (2002) explains, "Once some experience or activity has been described,

then opinions and feelings can be solicited, building on and probing for interpretations of the experience” (p. 352).

Reflexive, semi-structured interviews allowed participants to respond to common interview questions while also providing freedom for them to expand the dialog to include the experiences and feelings that were the most salient and best represented the contours of their mothering and leading in COVID-19. Sixteen women sat with me for initial interviews. I scheduled follow-up interviews with 12 mother/leaders interested in sharing their ongoing mothering and leading experiences. Second interviews lasted between one and two hours and were conducted between 45 days and one year after initial interviews. Per CDC recommendations and IRB approval, these interviews were conducted via recorded remote videoconferencing.

Developing rapport with participants during interviews was crucial for creating a climate of trust that allowed women to share their vulnerability. Although it was sometimes challenging, I tried to contain commentary when participants shared what felt like a common experience. The mothers shared their honest explorations providing thick descriptions of the good, the bad, and the ugly of mothering and leading (Ellis, 2011; Patton, 2002). Although safety concerns prevented in-person interviews, ZOOM conferences allowed me a glimpse inside leaders’ homes and offices to explore the embodied, physical spaces mother/leaders worked.

Photo-Elicitation

In modern Western culture, photos, videos, and other visual images permeate all facets of our lives. Daily I create or engage with visual images in my home, in the world, or virtually on electronic devices. With the proliferation of easily accessible digital tools,

visual media have become increasingly prevalent in all areas of modern life, including social, professional, and academic life. Visual imagery has become a part of lived experiences and correspondingly, proliferated in ethnographic research (Barrantes-Elizondo, 2019; Pink, 2013). “It is now almost inevitable that as ethnographers we will encounter and benefit from digital visual technologies and images in the course of our research and scholarly practice” (Pink, 2013, p.2). The prevalence of visuals in culture compels researchers to include visual representation within cultural research (Barrantes-Elizondo, 2019; Pink, 2013). “The visual is therefore inextricably interwoven with our personal identities, narratives, lifestyles and societies, as well as with definitions of history, time, space, place, reality and truth” (Pink, 2013, p. 1).

The women who participated in this study were invited to share photographs that illustrated their mother/leader experiences during COVID-19. Some, but not all, shared photos of working at home with children underfoot or managing unique operations like contact tracing. The photographs illustrated constrained and overlapping physical spaces indicative of the “blurred lines” some participants described. This study used photographs from other mother/leaders and me, collages, and still images captured from video interviews to deepen our experiential understanding of mothering and leading during COVID-19. Women consented to the use of their photographs and likenesses used in collages. All photographs were obscured for anonymity using a variety of photo editing tools that blurred, pixelated, distorted, and recolored the images while retaining their meaning. I have also incorporated external images that convey the spirit of the mom's actions. The collection, not the individual images, provides value and enriches our understanding of mother/leaders’ experiences.

Common types of photography used in visual ethnography are 1) preexisting, collected, or researcher-created photos, 2) participant-created photos, and 3) researcher participant collaborative photos. This study used preexisting researcher-created and participant-created photos and still images captured from interviews alongside participant interview data, stories, and autoethnographic accounts of mothering and leading in perilous times. Mine and others' photographs, stills, collages, and other visual representations crystalized themes in the study to provide an additional layer of understanding our mothering and leading experiences.

The ubiquity of visual images in our lives does not itself make a case for the use of images in ethnographic research. Photos and other visual media are not inherently ethnographic. "For illustrative purposes, photographs can stand-alone [sic] however, for research purposes insider information is needed to fully explore the phenomenon represented" (Legge, 2014, p. 97). Researchers must engage in reflexivity, interaction, analysis, engagement, and meaning-making for the visual to become a tool of inquiry and data (Barrantes-Elizondo, 2019; Brace-Govan, 2007; Legge, 2014; Pink, 2013). "It is here, in the exchange of meaning and interpretation, that the heart of visual ethnography is achieved. Although images are unavoidably subjective, they also open up new spaces that are not necessarily easily accessible" (Brace-Govan, 2007, p. 7). Therefore, visual approaches connect with other methods and tools to expand ways of knowing about culture, individuals, and phenomena.

Photo elicitation uses photographs as part of the interview process to evoke memory, feelings, stories, or reactions to facilitate a deep understanding of an experience. When situated alongside written data, photographs can provide supportive evidence to

expand understanding. In conventional inquiries, such tools can add validity and reliability to written research, but thinking of photo elicitation in this way invokes positivist notions of photos as tools for data triangulation. Harper (2002), however, argues that photo elicitation is more empowering and dynamic:

I believe photo elicitation mines deeper shafts into a different part of human consciousness than do words-alone interviews. It is partly due to how remembering is enlarged by photographs and partly due to the particular quality of the photograph itself. Photographs appear to capture the impossible: a person gone; an event past. That extraordinary sense of seeming to retrieve something that has disappeared belongs alone to the photograph, and it leads to deep and interesting talk (p. 23).

Figure 7

Zoom Class on Trampoline and in Tent

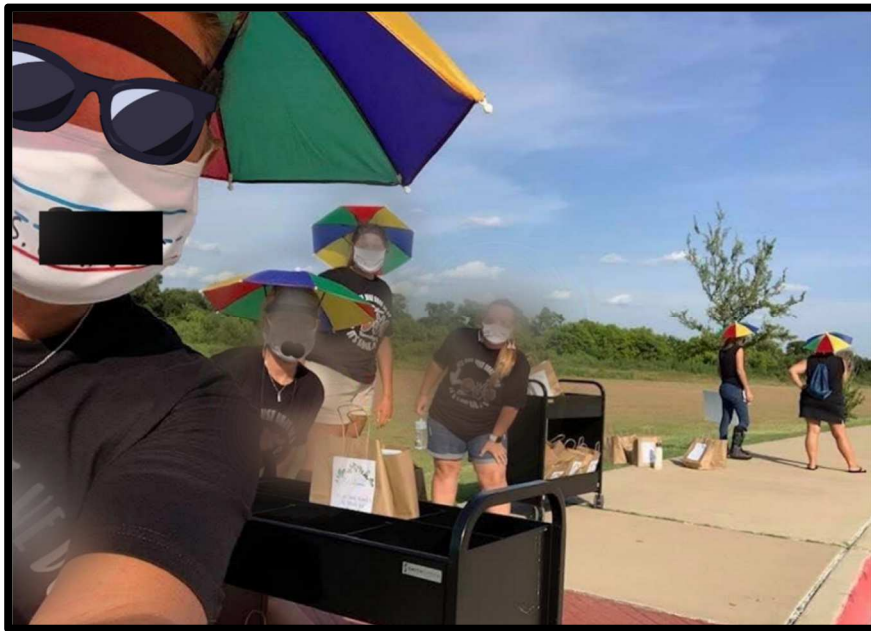


Photographs engage sensory regions in the brain eliciting different responses and feelings than words elicit (Harper, 2002). Thus, photo elicitation has the power to

crystallize with written data to do more than support a way of knowing about a phenomenon. Photo elicitation adds a unique dimension to the crystallization of knowledge and understanding of an experience (Harper, 2002; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).

Figure 8

Meet the Teacher: Pandemic Edition in 99 Degree Heat



Seven women shared their participant-generated photos. As we discussed images of unforeseen, ridiculous, and tender moments, we came to terms with our experiences mothering and leading in chaos. Some images, like tent or trampoline Zooms in Figure 7 above and drive-by parent-teacher engagement (Figure 8) made us appreciate creative mothering and leadership. Others depicting overlapping school and office spaces (Figure 9) and rows of end-of-year student supplies (Figure 10) invoked anxiety as we remembered exhausting physical labor.

Participant and researcher generated photographs provided data that crystallized with self-narratives and interviews to create an additional, complimentary way of knowing about mother/leaders' lived experiences. I also captured still images from video recorded interviews to illustrate embodiment and how women's gestures, movements, and expressions during interviews illuminated the feelings and emotions of their pandemic maneuvers.

Figure 9

Shared Spaces



Figure 10

End of School 2020



While the researcher's primary tool is written or spoken language, photographs capture unique sensory and emotional (re)presentations of lived experience that words cannot replicate. In making the case for the inclusion of visual ethnography in educational research, Barrantes-Elizondo (2019) argues that "study of images in the creation or collection of data may reveal sociological understanding that may not be accessible by other means" (p. 3). Visual media open doorways "through which the ethnographer can encounter other individuals' worlds" (Barrantes-Elizondo, 2019, p. 4), a key component of autoethnography.

Data Crystallization

Data analysis in autoethnographic projects is overtly nontraditional. It is enmeshed, muddled, and recursive, but nonetheless essential for connecting the personal to the cultural. In fact, it is the inextricable link of the self (*auto*) and cultural (*ethno*) that distinguishes narrative scholarship from literature or entertainment. The tools autoethnographers use to analyze data are neither distinct nor linear. Chang (2008) describes autoethnographic data analysis and interpretation as a “balancing act between fracturing and connecting, between zooming in and zooming out, between art and science” (p. 128). As they narrate powerful lived experiences with thick description, autoethnographers compare their stories to existing research, the lived experiences of others both inside and outside their culture, and social science and theoretical constructs (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2011). Ellis et al. (2011) explain:

Autoethnographers must not only use their methodological tools and research literature to analyze experience, but also must consider ways others may experience similar epiphanies; they must use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders (p. 276).

Narrative analysis of women’s reflections, then, occurred during all stages of the research process allowing for what Chang (2008) calls a “more organic transition from data collection to data analysis and interpretation” (p. 131).

In their explanation of how the writing process serves as both inquiry and analysis, Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) articulate the importance of creative analytical processes (CAP) in research: “CAP ethnography displays the writing process and the

writing product as deeply intertwined; both are privileged. The product cannot be separated from the producer, mode of production, or the method of knowing” (p. 962). In autoethnographic projects, writing is not a tool for demonstrating what the researcher knows. Writing is the tool that opens the researcher to knowing. Ellis (2004) describes how data analysis is thoroughly integrated into the writing process. “Narrative analysis” (p. 195) recognizes the inherent analytical process that occurs as one writes her story. “When people tell their stories, they employ analytical techniques to interpret their worlds” (p. 195-196). Conversely, she also describes how “thematic analysis” (Ellis, 2004, p. 196) occurs separately from the act of storying experiences. This analysis is akin to what Chang (2008) calls “fracturing and connecting” in which the researcher uses varied processes to connect data and discover themes in text (Chang, 2008). As the scholarship demonstrates, autoethnography gives wide berth to researchers as they utilize various tools to contemplate, review, massage, and reconsider the data throughout the research process.

Regardless of the diverse analytical tools autoethnographers use, the practice of autoethnographic data analysis has some common characteristics. Autoethnographers are coupled with the data and neither exists without the other. Noted feminist methodologists, Ellingson and Sotirin (2020), offer the idea of “data engagement” (p. 817) to articulate the complex ways in which feminist qualitative researchers interact with, create, reflect upon, live with, and imagine data. Situated somewhere between the conventional positivist idea that data preexists and can be found and the opposite post-qualitative idea that data as a concept is no longer valid, data engagement recognizes the dynamic, creative, evolutionary nature of data as a construction of researcher and research. This is

particularly relevant in this project as I wrote through my experiences to inquire, create, analyze, and make meaning of the past two years. Data engagement suggests “data are *made* rather than found, *assembled* rather than collected or gathered, and *dynamic* rather than complete or static” (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020, p. 819). “Researchers bring data into being—we *make* it. Making data involves inventing, imagining, encountering, and embracing lived experience and material documentation as methodological praxis” (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020, p. 819).

Figure 11

Holly on the Move



As I engaged in the assembly of data beyond myself, I observed and noted the fluid way in which women’s bodies told their stories during interviews. Isolating images from the video interviews, I watched mothers show rather than tell their stories. Some women, like Dani and Mia, moved slowly with equal parts melancholy and grace. Others, like Debbie and Holly, demonstrated kinetic and industrious movement, reflecting

constant mental and physical activity. As seen in Figure 11, Holly's interview was punctuated by texting, voice texting, and hairstyling.

Ellingson & Sotirin (2020) use the metaphor of musical sampling to articulate how data are made. Just as musicians when sampling weave together pieces of others' songs into a new composition, researchers engaging data weave together their lived, material experiences with the experience of others' in unique, creative, and innovative ways that allow data to emerge (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020). Assembling data refers to the messy, generative way in which researchers, participants, culture, objects, and phenomena interact. The fluid boundaries that define the researcher and research erode the linear, clean positivist idea of data. This mess, however, is empowering and rich with possibilities. The ongoing entanglement of lives, events, places, objects, bodies, emotions, and culture allows researchers to capture the contours of humanity that are lost when data exists as nothing more than positivist, sanitized facts. "When we understand assembling data as assembling us, we acknowledge the agentic entanglements of bodies and actants in cultural context" (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020, p. 821).

The idea of *becoming data* (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020, p. 821) underscores the dynamic and agential qualities of data that exert power with and through the researcher. Instead of viewing data as passive and inert, data engagement asserts the independence of data that wields influence on the researcher just as the researcher wields influence on the data. Ellingson and Sotirin (2020) explain the reciprocal relationship between data and the researcher:

Researchers do not imbue data with agency; rather, data weaves its lively way in the world in and through and alongside us. This notion that data exerts dynamic

force challenges traditional conceptualizations not only of data as objects that researchers find or gather but also of data as existing primarily as a product of researchers' agency (p. 822).

In this sense, data is productive, interacting and co-constructing with the researcher, participants, and readers. Data is dynamic and evolutionary, constantly expanding, and never static or replicable. As long as the researcher engages the data, it retains vitality and agency. Ellingson and Sotirin (2020) use the term "radical specificity" to elucidate the agential nature of data as it mingles with the researcher and environment throughout the ongoing process of *becoming* data (p. 821). The radically specific explorations of our unique experiences as mother/leaders in a pandemic invited us to explore our roles and the social norms that shape how we carry them out, shift priorities, and represent unheard voices. As we send our stories into the world, readers, scholars, and practitioners are challenged to engage them, opening the door for them to inquire, prioritize, and envision new perspectives themselves.

Data engagement is not entirely unlike the idea of *crystallization* proffered originally by Richardson (1997) and developed by Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) to debunk the rigid positivist model of triangulation as the gold standard for data validity. The narrow, two-dimensional image of the triangle implies objectivity and a fixed way of knowing. To counter the idea of an objective, complete truth, Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) offer the crystal as a more accurate framework for understanding how researchers come to knowledge. "Crystallization, without losing structure, deconstructs the traditional idea of 'validity'; we feel how there is no single truth, and we see how texts validate themselves. Crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, and thoroughly partial

understanding of the topic” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 962). Crystals refract and reflect and can produce an infinite variety of perspectives, all of which are valid.

Recognizing the constructed, multidimensional manner in which researchers and contexts create data through the research process, Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) suggest data crystallizes in an infinite number of ways as the researcher, participants, objects, and events act, react, and interact with one another in an ever-changing environment. “The crystal imagery offers asymmetry, substance and synergy with boundless opportunities and potential to gain rich accounts of social episodes whilst recognizing the complexities including the undetectable accounts” (Stewart et al., 2017, p. 9).

Creative, analytical processes (CAP) allow researchers to explore innovative pathways to engage and fuel data—such as personal narrative, visual representation, performance, poetry, and creative representations of research (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). In this study, I utilized several creative practices as a way of understanding how autoethnography connects the personal and the cultural. The interlude *Diving in for the First Time*, the storied reflection of my self-discovery in the pandemic, strengthened my understanding of how this methodology foregrounds personal emotional experiences in research (Adams, et al, 2015; Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2011; Smith-Sullivan, 2008.) I explored the metaphors women used in their interviews to make sense of and frame their thinking about COVID-19, noting how their language revealed vulnerability and emotion (Deng et al., 2021; Gibbs & Franks, 2002; Thibodeau et al., 2017). Collages of women’s faces during interviews provided a creative rendering of data on mother/leaders’ embodied border crossings as well as visual evidence of their intense embodied physical and emotional fatigue (Gerstenblatt et al., 2013). Finally, participant

and researcher photographs further illustrated women's material struggle (Harper, 2002; Pink, 2013).

I produced and analyzed the data in this study as the bits and pieces of lived experiences of differently situated mother/leaders negotiating their roles and lives during this challenging time. As they reimagined how to mother and lead in this uncertain context, their narratives crystallized to become part of a broader tapestry for understanding mothering and leading in peril, as well as the cultural norms that enveloped school leadership. The stories of mother/leaders in COVID-19 were both distinct and complementary; they stood alone and worked together to help the researcher and participants process the phenomenon. Additionally, women's stories contained metaphors that underscored the complexity, emotion, and vulnerability of living through the pandemic (Deng et al., 2021; Gibbs & Franks, 2002; Thibodeau et al., 2017). The crystallization of data in their stories and metaphors allowed me to explore the nuances and complexity of the lived experiences of participants whose positions created a unique way of understanding mothering and leading (Ellingson, 2014; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2000). As readers engage the stories, symbolic language, and visual representations in this research, the data will continue to crystallize in additional radically specific ways demonstrating its continued agency.

Photo elicitation added an additional dimension to data crystallization as I explored what it looked and felt like to mother and lead in COVID-19 (Harper, 2002; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2000). The collaborative analysis of 32 participant-generated photographs engaged the senses and evoked unique feelings and memories in participants depending on their positions within the phenomenon (Harper, 2002). I also used my own

photographs as touchstones for reflecting on my struggles. At times, jolted from the flurry of work, I pulled back to document the moment. In spring 2020, we were beginning the virtual pivot while quarantined at home, which made teacher appreciation week a challenge. Scrambling to invent virtual fun, I purchased and planned an elaborate virtual “Game of Games” for teachers, including a digital spinning prize wheel, trivia, and an in-home scavenger hunt with prizes for the strangest refrigerator contents, largest number of COVID cleaning products, best caricature of the principals, and cutest pet pics (Figure 12).

Figure 12

Teacher Appreciation Scavenger Hunt

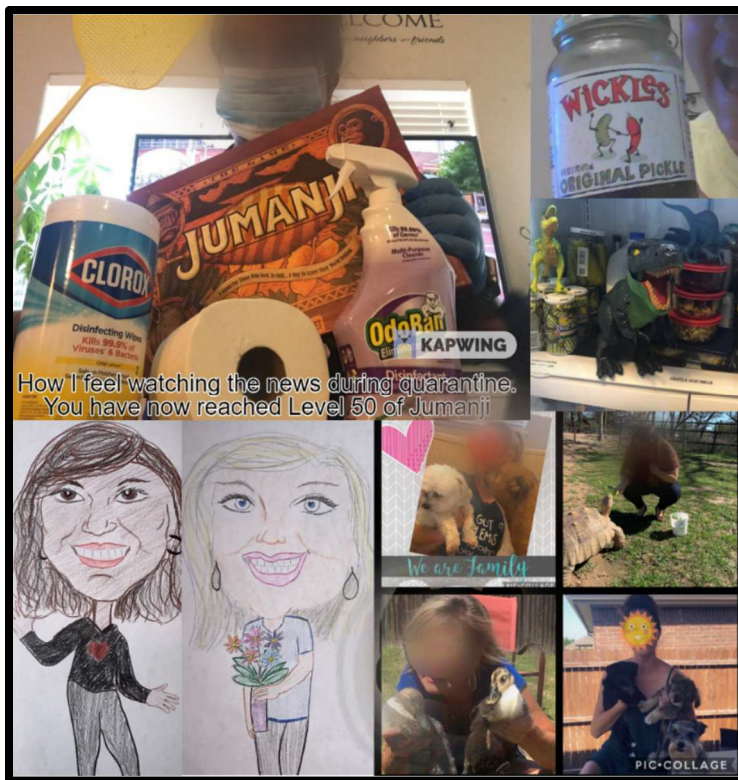
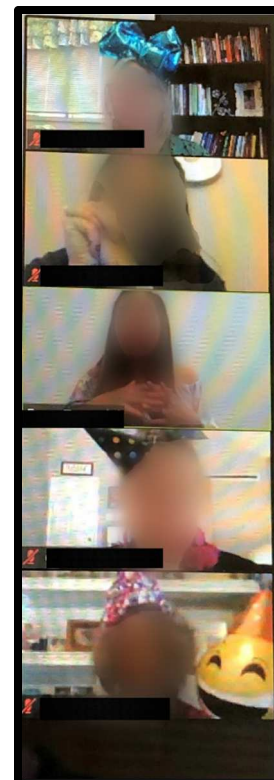


Figure 13

Zoom Gallery Shenanigans



Despite my weariness from managing school operations and my own rowdy children, I spent countless hours on quarantine care work, like the ‘Game of Games’ or

dress up shenanigans just to garner a few rare smiles from a Zoom gallery filled with the faces of equally exhausted teachers (Figure 13). Despite occasional smiles, Figures 12 and 13 do not evoke fond, fun memories. Rather, they crystallize with the other data to reflect a dark time that was painted with a smile as leaders and teachers alike donned brave faces for our weekly Zoom performances. Photo elicitation added another actant to the data allowing it to crystallize in a different direction as the result of this additional layer of understanding. Photographs are not a way of discovering or translating images into written evidence. Instead, visual analysis provided alternative and deeper ways of knowing as participants and researcher explored the connections between images, identity, culture, events, self, and others (Pink, 2013).

Ethical Considerations

Qualitative researchers must pay careful attention to procedural ethics used to protect women's identities and wellbeing. To manage confidentiality and anonymity, I obtained IRB approval before beginning interviews. Per the IRB application, I procured written informed consent (Appendix B) from all participants prior to conducting interviews. This informed consent included explicit language regarding protection of participant anonymity, including the use of pseudonyms for all women. Throughout the pilot interview phase and as the research progressed, I maintained stringent procedural safeguards to protect participants and ensure anonymity (Hernandez & Ngunjiri, 2013).

Feminist research attends closely to the embodied lived experiences of marginalized individuals whose stories are omitted from mainstream discourse. This project sought to elevate the voices of mother/leaders during precarity. Especially in feminist qualitative projects where relationships, emotion, and vulnerability are central to

the data, researchers must engage practical ethical considerations relevant to the study and context. This autoethnographic study began with an exploration of the self and then moved to examine the self in relation to society and others that inhabit similar social and leadership roles. “Thus, autoethnography may be the study of self, but it is the study of self in relation to others within a particular social setting” (Hernandez & Ngunjiri, 2013, p. 263). As a study of mother/leaders negotiating their dual roles during peril, the study of self in relation to others had the potential to expose researcher and participant vulnerabilities and painful emotions that compelled me to proceed with sensitivity.

To protect participant vulnerability, this study relied on empathic, reflexive interviewing (Ellis, 2004, 2011; Fontana and Frey, 2008). Understanding that interviewing could provoke difficult emotions, I approached women with empathy. As is common in autoethnographic interviewing, the researcher desired to give a voice and audience to marginalized individuals and groups while adhering to a high standard of ethics in the process (Adams et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2013; Ellis, 2004).

Feminist researchers argue that we should see and treat research participants as embodied, emotional beings who often navigate difficult circumstances. This recognition compels autoethnographic researchers to proceed with “a heightened concern about the ethics and politics of research practices and representation” (Adams et al., 2015, p. 8). Feminist scholars Ellingson and Sotirin (2020) describe this ethical practice as compassion. Compassion foregrounds the unique needs of research participants whose lived experiences create vulnerabilities that require caring, authentic approaches to data. For example, Ellingson and Sotirin (2020) discuss Holocaust survivors as participants whose lived experiences highlight both vulnerability and resilience. These experiences

require sensitive, attuned feminist research approaches that create a climate of support and understanding and insulate participants from re-engagement with prior trauma (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020).

In their discussion of crystallization, Ellingson and Sotirin (2020) advocate for compassion and two other ethical commitments that should serve as the minimum ethical standards for data engagement—pragmatism and joy. Pragmatism in data engagement attends to the future possibility of the data to promote a more equitable, just future for participants, researchers, and readers – a distinctly feminine goal. Pragmatism foregrounds embodied realities in ways that promote data creation, not data outcomes, as a tool for social justice. Joy is the final hallmark of ethical research. In this context, joy refers to more than a feeling of happiness, excitement, or thrill. “We distinguish the emotional designation of feeling joy from joy as an affirmation and intensification of a body’s vitalities in the context of becomings” (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020 p. 824). Joy is a sense of vitality, agency, and life that is born as experiences and entanglements collide to create different ways of knowing (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020). In this study, pragmatism, compassion, and joy created a context of individual value as well as a collective sense that the researcher, participants, and readers matter in the world.

CHAPTER IV

DISCOVERIES: VOICES RISING FROM THE PANDEMIC

In March 2020 I entered a season of uncertainty, fear, and intense (often futile) labor as COVID-19 surged across the globe. My navigations left me depleted and sometimes hopeless, but this project paved the way for me to find my voice “little by little” (Oliver, 2020, p. 349) as I stumbled through. Additionally, this study explored the simultaneous journeys of 16 other women seeking their way in unknown circumstances. Amid the turmoil, autoethnography provided a compassionate approach to lift women’s individual and collective voices.

This chapter shares our experiences from the early chaos in 2020 through the end of 2021. First, I describe the turmoil throughout 2020 as women juggled the stresses of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) and intensive leading (Baker, 2016) in impossible conditions. Next, I followed women’s stories as we continued to respond to change and ambiguity throughout 2021, still carrying an unbearable workload while seeking to construct a “new normal.” However, as we persevered, we described finding our voices in small, but meaningful moments. Despite limited personal resources and no institutional supports, we shared how we exerted agency as we cast off, bit-by-bit, some (but not all)

of the socio-cultural constraints that oppressed us before, during, and after the pandemic.

The words, emotions, stories, expressions, photographs, laughter, tears, and embodied experiences of each mother/leader mingled to create an almost lyrical ensemble simultaneously showcasing perfect harmonies and distinctive solo performances. This mother/leader opus revealed themes of vital importance to individuals as well as needed reforms in the policies and practices that surround mothering and leading in times of crisis and beyond. I identified the thematic movements in this work using emic language – direct quotes from mother/leaders. Foregrounding mother/leader’s voices, I provide an overview of each theme and related analysis follows.

1. Uncertainty & Chaos

“I just remember feeling lost, like, what do we do?” Ally

2. Urgency & Action

“We just make the next right decision.” Mia

3. Dissolved Work & Home Boundaries

“COVID has blurred my home lines. It has blown them up!” Grace

4. Guilt & Failure

“Am I supposed to pick my job or am I supposed to pick being a mother?” Ally

5. Care Work & Self-Care

“We’re taking care of so many, but who is taking care of us?” Grace

6. Emerging from the Storm

“Look, this isn’t going to determine my fate anymore.” Sarah

7. Embodied Emotions

“It was like, soul-crushing.” Debbie

Movements in the Opus

Uncertainty & Chaos

“I just remember feeling lost, like, what do we do?” Ally

The first five months of the COVID-19 pandemic from March to August 2020 were complete chaos as mother/leaders juggled our dual roles in uncertain conditions. In an early publication on mothering and leading in COVID-19 (Crosslin & Bailey, 2021), my coauthor/adviser and I used the term “triage leadership” (p. 174) to describe leading in constantly changing circumstances. “The term triage leadership conveys a sense of leading within uncertainty and constantly shifting priorities and giving way as waves of demands ebb and flow” (Crosslin & Bailey, 2021, p. 174). As the conditions persisted, the immediate chaos gave way to prolonged uncertainty and fatigue as we attempted (unsuccessfully) to balance mothering and leading amidst persistent doubts in our ability to do either. While these narratives revealed commonalities in our navigations, each woman’s unique position was the site of distinct personal struggles. Emic language conveyed our panic and confusion, and women’s faces and forms illustrated their sometimes painful, storied descriptions.

Early Pandemic Chaos (March – December 2020)

When I asked Rosie to describe her experiences from March 2020, she slumped over her desk resting her head in her palms. “Ugh, do we have to go back there?” she sighed, “You don’t realize how bad it was until...Oh my goodness.” Friedman and Satterthwaite (2021) explain why, a year later, it was painful for women like Rosie to relive, “For mothers who were already trying to juggle unliveable demands in the realms of work and home, this sudden bolus of maternal labour is suffocating and unimaginable.

The worries are infinite, and failure is a foregone conclusion” (p. 56). Like so many working mothers in spring 2020, we felt overwhelmed by the initial wave of the pandemic. Dani, like many women, went into “crisis mode” because the terrain was “unknown and scary.” Debbie, a teacher leader with almost a decade of experience in her district, recalled feeling dumbfounded when she and three other district teachers were invited to an instructional planning meeting in March 2020:

That was the first meeting that I heard for the first time, our district had no plan. We, like, were part of the plan. And this is a district that is so prepared, always ahead of the game, and when I was hearing these leaders ask these questions to teachers, I was like, “oh...oh, we really don’t know what we’re doing.”

We searched for answers for day-to-day operational concerns, only to be frustrated at not receiving them. With little access to information, no guidance, and nothing to tell teachers, we felt powerless as leaders. Ally remarked, “Honestly, I hate saying ‘I don’t know,’ but that was an answer all the time.” Dani, an experienced high school associate principal, struggled with similar feelings of helplessness. She confessed:

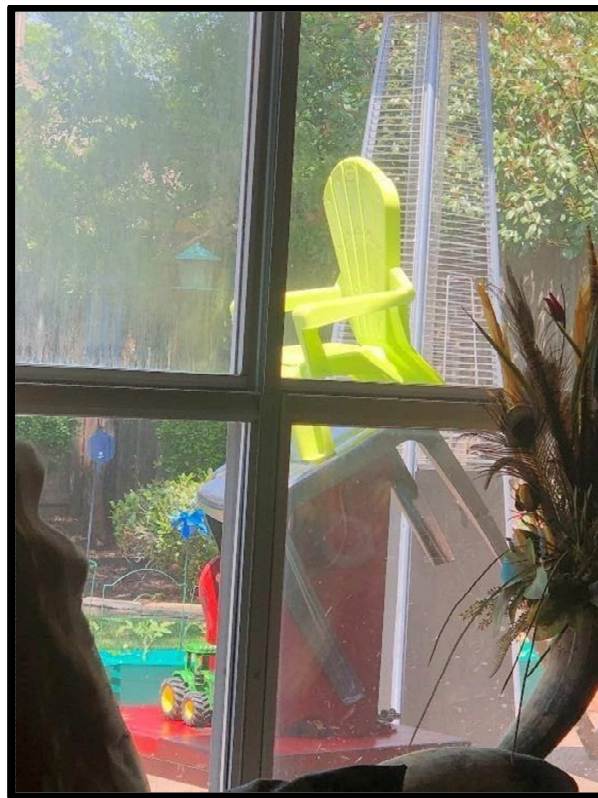
I just didn't know half the time what to tell anybody. Everybody was asking all these questions, and so I didn't know how to answer them. And I'm, I'm not a person that likes to say, “I'm sorry. I don't know,” and I had to do that a lot. And that was really heavy on me because I've established myself as a leader that - not that I have answers for all their questions - but I am knowledgeable. And so, to feel that I wasn't knowledgeable was probably the hardest thing I went through.

Sarah, an assistant principal throughout 2020, was frustrated when she heard through the grapevine about new district COVID plans instead of hearing from her supervisors. When

her supervisor asked her to develop an instructional plan before sharing updated protocols, she fumed, “[My boss asked], ‘What’s your plan? Sarah, have you put your plan together?’ I was like, ‘No, I don’t have a clue what I’m doing. Why are you not telling me what my plan is?’”

Figure 14

Mother/leaders’ *Symbol of Precarity*



Working from home and distracted with leadership tasks, Sarah’s toddler son constructed a tower of chairs and patio gear in the backyard (Figure 14). The picture of her son’s tenuous heap of patio furnishings stacked near an outdoor gas heater symbolized the precarity of her chaotic dual navigations. As a new head principal in fall 2020, Grace wearied of pointless meetings, “I don’t even see the point of debriefing at this point because literally we can’t plan anything yet.” The lack of answers from the

central office left her and many of us to figure it out on our own. Ally succinctly summed up what she called the “dysfunction of the pandemic” when she groaned, “It was a tailspin every day!”

When we received marching orders from higher-ups, many of us found the information outdated almost immediately, leaving us exasperated and skeptical of our supervisors and uncertain in our own leadership capabilities. Rodriguez et al. (2021) used the metaphor of “fighting windmills” (p. 1) to describe the early days of one female principal’s COVID-19 leadership, “The first few weeks were really complicated, as uncertainty led them to continually reinvent themselves. She admits that at the beginning they acted on the spur of the moment, as nobody was prepared for this situation” (p. 7). Sentence stems articulating our unseated confidence suffused the data. “I can’t” and “I don’t know how” were common diatribes uttered in women’s interviews. Mia, an elementary school principal with five years’ experience, described the exhaustion of making quick decisions between March and May 2020, only to find them useless within hours:

I was just so fatigued, just so exhausted from having to figure out, you know, what we were going to do from one moment to the next. [...] There just wasn't any way to stay ahead of what, what to do, and what was going on. And so, I just remember, my assistant and I ... we'd make a plan, and at the end of the day, everything we'd worked on would be obsolete and we couldn't use it. [...] I'm just in disbelief at how unproductive that time was.

Christina broke down in tears in June of 2020 when for a third time, the state changed the requirements for opening school in fall 2020. “That was the day that I locked myself in

the, on the front porch with a glass of wine. [...] I was like, “I can't. I can't do this anymore.” The frustration in Dani’s voice was acute as she explained hours of wasted time on meetings with no answers. “I’m sitting in meetings for six hours at a time, and I still don’t know what to tell [teachers] because I still don’t know.”

We all experienced the chaos throughout 2020 in ways unique to our positions. The unknown impact of the virus on pregnant women presented an extra layer of concern for several women. Elena remembered her initial panic. She scoured the internet for any information on pregnancy and COVID:

I remember one of my doctors saying, “Try not to ever be stressed out during your pregnancy. It's not good for the baby.” [...] Afraid of what I'm hearing, [I would] try to find information on pregnancy and COVID. Or, or what I should or shouldn't do, or who I should talk to. [...] I just remember, like, a lot of fear. And [my husband] would go to the grocery store and come back, and we'd sanitize everything with Clorox wipes, and then wash down everything and take off his shoes and do a load of laundry of all his clothes and everything.

Janessa, a private school principal during spring 2020, responded with “shock and panic a little bit, like, what are we going to do?” Her anxiety was compounded by her recent pregnancy and disturbing orders from her principal to return to work. When her private school closed its doors to all students and staff, but required administrators to come to the building, Janessa worried about her unborn baby’s health. Sarah discovered she was pregnant with her second child just before the pandemic hit and had determined to loosen restrictions on little things like Dr. Pepper. She declared, “I'm going to do things my way,” but when the virus arrived, she reversed course in an instant:

Then quarantine happened and all these new rules applied, and I was like, “Oh my gosh! This is overwhelming.” We didn't go to the store because I was afraid I would lose the baby. We didn't go out to eat. We didn't do anything.

Rachel described March 2020 as “just crazy.” She was on maternity leave and wasn't scheduled to return until the end of the semester. However, the torrent of work demands forced her to return two weeks early. With resignation in her voice, she remarked, “I'm working anyway.”

Ongoing Pandemic Uncertainty (January – December 2021)

When the pandemonium settled slightly, we described fewer panicky moments, but uncertainty remained a constant thread in our narratives. A full year after COVID-19's initial blow, as the chaos continued and fatigue mounted, women contended with the long-term negative effects on student learning, social-emotional wellbeing, and teacher burnout, as well as the virus's ever-present impact.

Most were hopeful the return to in-person learning would increase our sense of certainty in our navigations, but women shared that coming back to school buildings was far from normal. Unclear how to meet the needs of teachers and students, Elizabeth feared that the 2021-2022 school year would bring more challenges than the previous one:

I think [2021-2022] is like, going to be a big burnout year. [...] I think everyone thought last year was the burnout year, but I think this year is going to be the burnout year, just because we're pretty much back to normal, but not back to normal.

Monica struggled to understand how things were more difficult a year after onset, “It does actually seem harder, and I don’t know how it can seem harder.” As she continued to think aloud, she surmised that the failure of a return to normalcy caused the persistent angst she felt throughout 2021, “I guess the word normal – that doesn't exist.”

The majority expressed ambiguity about how to remediate academic losses for students while reestablishing behavior expectations and balancing accountability mandates. Grace feared the long-term impact elementary student achievement, “I also feel like we’re going to be closing these gaps for two to three years, and so that burden will still be carried.” Likewise, Monica worried about the learning losses of students in her large comprehensive high school. She and her team were ready to “hit it hard” with academics but were stalled by the magnified social-emotional needs of students. Facing daily crises – suicide threats, fights, and vandalism – she coached her team to slow down:

I think that it's going to take time. And I think we just had an expectation that things were going to go faster than they were. And so, I don't think that we were prepared for two years. I think it's more evident now the damage of two years in their learning and in their rule-following.

Prepared to face intense academic needs, Ally was surprised at how much her third-graders struggled with simple classroom behavior when they entered school in August 2021. Returning to teaching after one year in a leadership position, she recalled her students running around the classroom, yelling at each other, cutting random things with scissors, and demanding snacks throughout the day. Before she could address academics, she had to return to basics, teaching students how to sit in a desk, take turns, raise their hands, and use supplies.

The added legislative demands of high stakes testing and onerous remediation requirements, amplified the pressure as we entered the second year of the pandemic. Ally described how state assessments contributed to her anxiety:

I think the amount of lost instruction is pretty daunting. [Catching students up is] not going to happen overnight. It's not even going to happen next week. [...] I have kids who don't recognize letters or sounds, and they're in third grade. And then the expectation is that they take a [standardized state assessment]? I mean, state testing? Wow! Just wow!"

Elizabeth voiced similar concerns about state testing, especially for students who spent the previous school year in remote learning.

[Remote learners] were way, way, way, way far behind, and our test scores already sucked, as we knew they would. I mean, it is what it is. But now, they're gonna suck even more this year because we got all these new [remote] kids.

Dani described COVID-related accelerated instruction requirements in her state as an additional source of worry over the long haul. She proclaimed, "House Bill 4545 [an unfunded education bill requiring 40 hours of supplemental, small group instruction for students who failed 2021 state tests] has been the biggest beat down!" With significant staffing and budget cuts, she was unsure how to schedule state-mandated supplemental instructional time. Pervasive unrest wrought by the constant barrage of new pandemic-related challenges overwhelmed Sarah's optimism about 2021, "I feel like we all kind of felt upbeat and excited, and it, just, we got crushed."

The confusion, uncertainty, and deep emotional and physical exhaustion affected our wellbeing. Mothers described the physical presence of fear manifested in insomnia,

anxiety, depression, panic attacks, and hopelessness. Rosie felt the impact of intense fatigue which she had ignored during the school year. When school closed for summer break, she recalled, “I didn’t realize how tired I was until this weekend. I slept 14 hours on Friday and 14 hours on Saturday. I didn't realize how tired I was.”

Urgency & Action

“We just make the next right decision.” Mia

The inequitable gendered burden carried by mothers in school leadership is well-documented (Baker, 2016; Choge, 2015; Kruger et al., 2005; Loder, 2005; Lumby, 2015; Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2015; Shakeshaft, 1986). In the wake of the pandemic, however, productive and reproductive labor increased exponentially as we provided frontline essential services. Even as our sacrificial labor was largely ignored, we pressed on to meet the needs of those depending on us at school and home. Women described acting with urgency and sensitivity.

Our actions in the first wave of the pandemic demonstrated a sense of urgency as we sought to care for others. However, reverberations from the pandemic continued to disrupt conventional time structures that delineated domestic and professional duties, and our actions became increasingly more entangled and competitive. Time and temporality provided a lens for understanding our urgent actions during precarity. As a measure of labor in objective intervals, time signifies the continuous burden of care work that women undertook, but an investigation of the social dimension of temporality and the interactions between all their pandemic experiences revealed women’s evolving attitudes towards their mothering and leading work.

Urgency

With no idea what to expect in the uncertainty of the early pandemic, everything was an emergency. We sanitized groceries, gas pumps, doorknobs, and any other potential purveyor of infection to try to stay safe. Women responded to urgent conditions by taking action, even if that action would be undone as soon as new information surfaced. One woman in O'Reilly's (2021) study of working mothers' COVID experiences described making in-the-moment decisions on a "priority by priority basis" (p. 43) focusing on the urgent and letting go of nonessentials.

News media reports of dramatically rising rates of infection, overrun morgues, and previously healthy victims dying alone exacerbated our fears, but with no time to mourn we set aside any self-focused concerns and acted on behalf of students and teachers. In spring 2020, we deployed food, supplies, and technology, while managing novel school operations – remote instruction, social distancing, masks, sanitizing busses, and contact tracing – taking necessary action without the benefit of planning ahead for long-term needs. Mother/leaders described their actions using phrases that suggested a state of emergency – "all hands on deck," "run with it," "just do it," "go for it," "we're doing this," "pull the trigger," "jump into action," "not quitting," "pivot," and "figure it out." Facing urgent conditions, we worked nonstop to meet the mounting physical and emotional needs of staff and students.

Of all the women interviewed, Camille used the greatest number of action phrases – *jump in, pull the trigger, keep going, go this route, jump into action, open the door, pick up and keep going* – which illustrated the hurried pace of mother/leader action. She declared, "Everything was just immediate!" She recalled how she managed the constant

barrage of communication by prioritizing and working while everyone in her house was asleep:

There was just no humanly way possible to get through the amount of emails that were coming through. [...] I remember being in the executive director meetings, and I just kept saying, “Guys, what you need is important, but I can’t even respond to text messages right now.”

Rosie attended a weekly superintendent Zoom meeting from the emergency room while being treated for heart palpitations. Incredulous, her husband scolded, “You’re in the ER, and you’re on a meeting! You’re in a hospital bed, and you’re on a meeting! [...] This is probably why you’re here!” Rosie was adamant she attend the meeting because she was expecting “big news.” Ironically, by the time of our first interview, she had forgotten what “big news” she received in the hospital that day.

During interviews, I noted frenetic energy in the pace and volume of some women’s voices. Debbie’s voice raised an octave in her interview as she described hierarchizing and re-hierarchizing her mothering and leading roles in one long, breathless comment:

The only real break I get is lunch, and I give him his plate and let him watch a little cartoon while I come back to answer emails or get on a Zoom, which stinks because now I feel like I’m struggling because I can’t have my child have a crappy education, but I’m not going to have this new position that I have fought to get, die either. So, I am literally juggling super high every day and it’s exhausting!

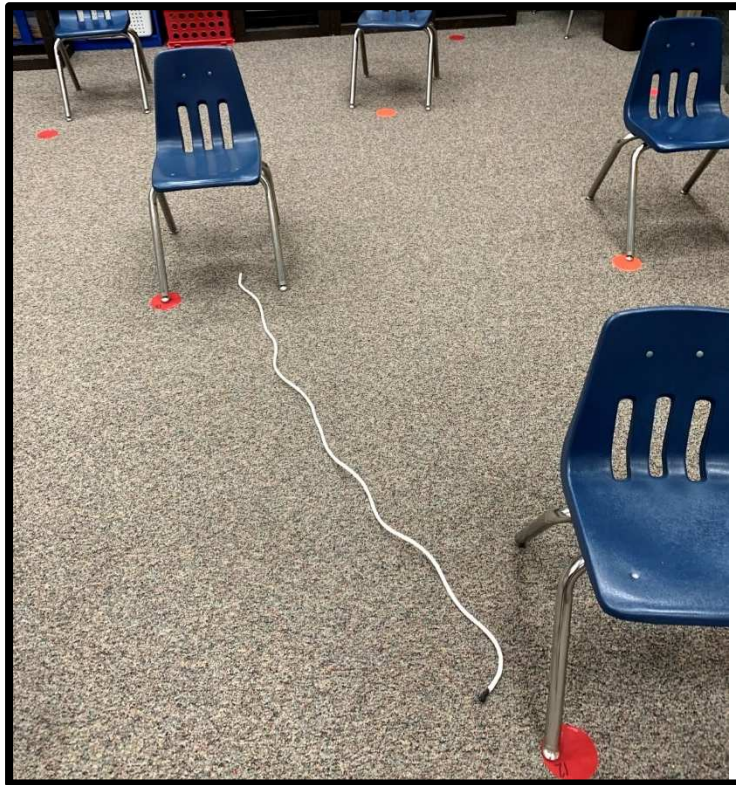
Elizabeth detailed a furious work pace both at home and at school. She copied packets for remote learners, delivered meals to families, stocked classrooms with disinfectant and

paper towels, and viewed hours of lunchroom video footage for contact tracing. Sick with COVID, but not yet diagnosed, she stayed at school for 14 hours to supervise an archery tournament, and then organized the school's weather-related transition to virtual learning once she got home. "Despite having COVID, I still had to organize my teachers and get us all set up to go on virtual instruction, and you, communicate all the messages to all the parents." Mia was exhausted with the ongoing adjustments to protocols and safety practices and the necessity of communicating them to stakeholders. Questioning the constant changes, "Are we drinking out of the fountains now? Or is it only the bubbler? Or is it only the yellow fountains and not the red ones?" Despite the constant change, she told her team, "We just make the next right decision." Rachel scoffed at the stringent contact tracing guidelines of her district that required immediate action when a positive case was reported, usually in the evening. With an infant in tow, she frequently returned to school after dark to contract trace classrooms with a 6-foot rope supplied by the district (Figure 15). The immediacy and specificity of the guidelines were laughable. "This is a joke!" she thought when first receiving her orders.

While uncertainty continued to consume us, we implemented radically specific, often futile, protocols. No rope ruler, mask mandate, contact tracing flow chart, supplemental instruction plan, or judge's order made leading and mothering more certain or secure. In fact, these things added more confusion to the chaos. Action was often only that. Nevertheless, we kept going and doing. Like Mia said, "We just have to take a deep breath, and we just keep, you keep showing up; you keep moving forward, and you keep showing up."

Figure 15

Contact Tracing Rope



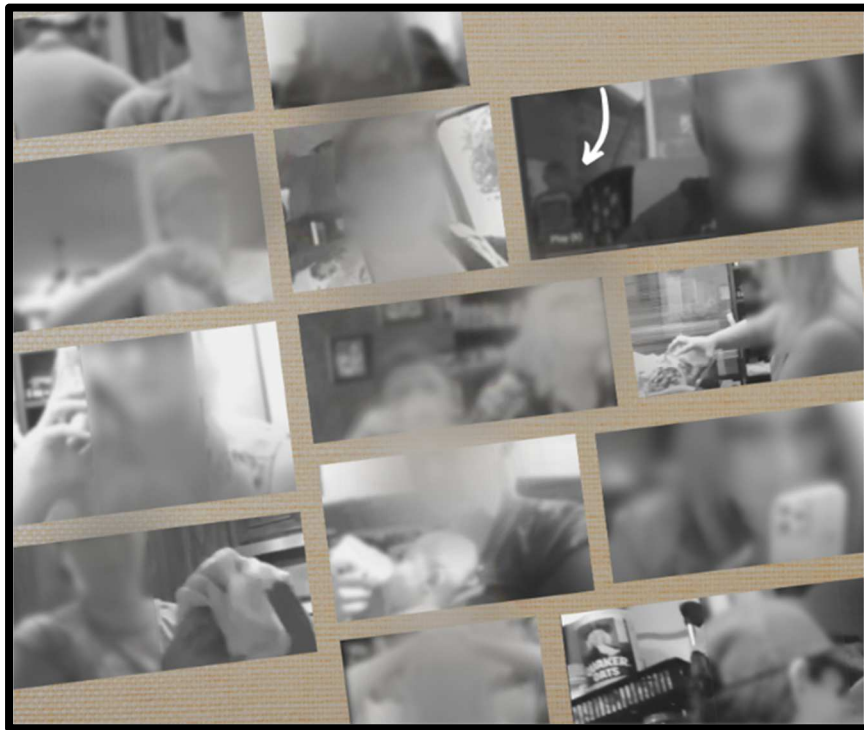
Embodiment

Remote interviews were essential for safety, but they also provided a unique perspective on our embodied experiences mothering and leading from home. I observed women during our conversations carrying out their dual roles with a seemingly automatic pace, sometimes border crossing fluidly multiple times in minutes. Still images captured from video recordings documented the seamless way in which mother/leaders engaged both roles simultaneously. The collage in Figure 16 depicts women discussing leadership while engaging in domestic tasks – cooking dinner, completing chores, having a snack, feeding children, waiting in the car for the end of soccer practice, supervising yard work, and caring for COVID-positive family members. Several shots include family members

lingering in the background. Similarly, images from interviews conducted at school depicted how mother/leaders managed the first shift with interruptions from unexpected fire alarms and student behavior while also attending to the second shift via family phone calls, texts, and emails (Hochschild, 2012).

Figure 16

Mother/leaders' Border Crossings during Zoom Interviews

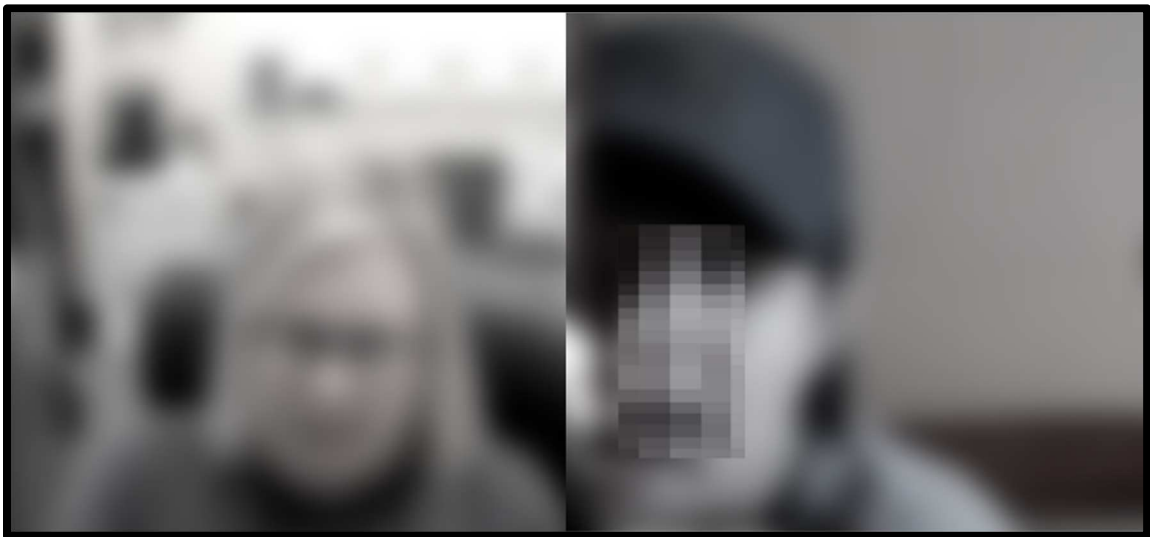


The activity in Sarah's second interview in September 2021 provided perhaps the most remarkable evidence of what Bourdieu (1986) terms habitus, a set of deeply embodied dispositions and skills that were so practiced that she barely paused in her navigations (also see Crosslin & Bailey, 2021). Our 76-minute conversation occurred while we were both at home on a weekend. During the interview, Sarah left the video frame 12 times, picked up and put down her baby five times, and relocated with her computer and webcam seven times. As she moved in and out of view drying dishes,

shopping the pantry, preparing dinner, feeding her baby, and attending to her preschooler, she remained steadfast in her commitment to the interview. Her movements off-camera rarely slowed the pace of her thought or speech. Figure 17, a still shot from this interview, shows her face half off-screen attending to her baby and half on-screen still fully immersed in conversation. “Split Screen Sarah” illustrated the agility of her bodily activity as well as her underlying beliefs about mother/leader border crossings as she fully engaged both roles throughout the interview.

Figure 17

Split-Screen Sarah



Rachel described suiting up to escort her first potentially COVID-positive student to the quarantine room. Donning excessive amounts of personal protective equipment (PPE) was the material representation of her leadership labor. She remembered:

I've trained for this. I'm ready...I have my face shield on, my gown, I take her to our quarantine room...I'm fully suited up, looking like a goober. And she comes out and she's crying. And, I was like, "Honey, what's the matter?" She's like, "I really just miss my mom." I'm like, "Oh, my!" Take it all off. [...] It was totally

just a kid saying she doesn't feel good because she missed her mom. [...] That's where I feel inadequate. I don't know. Like, these kids are so little. They say they don't feel good. You take them at their word.

For Rachel, putting on and then casting off PPE was the physical embodiment of her pandemic leadership duties.

Women's use of metaphors illustrated the powerful emotion that marked their navigations and illuminated the embodied nature of their striving. Metaphors provide a way of reflecting and shaping understanding of human experiences, especially those marked by severe emotion (Deng et al., 2021; Gibbs & Franks, 2002; Thibodeau et al., 2017). Women's metaphors offered insight into how they framed and processed their lived experiences.

Early pandemic research explored the use of metaphors by 27 citizens of Wuhan, China to process their experiences. Deng et al. (2021) found, "metaphors were extensively employed to show participants' intense emotional reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic" (p. 10). The metaphors Wuhan residents used were overwhelmingly emotional and embodied. The most frequently used metaphor types, in descending order, were imagery, motion, war, sensory, symbolic metaphorical enactment, darkness/light, spatialization, and life/death (Deng et al., 2021). Similarly, women in this study employed over 300 emotional metaphors to articulate the complexity of their experiences. Darkness/light (e.g., "It was a dark place") and symbolic metaphorical enactment (e.g., "I'm a machine") were used less frequently than the others, accounting for fewer than 10 metaphors combined. Women used 49 metaphors in four other categories: spacialization

(e.g., “I don’t want to go back there”), life/death (e.g., “killing ourselves”), war (e.g., “fighting” & “battling”), and imagery (e.g., “Band-Aid to stop the bleeding”).

Overwhelmingly, women employed two main types of overtly embodied metaphors to describe and process their lived experiences – motion metaphors and sensory metaphors. Of the total metaphors spoken, one-third (113) were categorized as motion metaphors. Women described their mothering and leading navigations frequently using action words like “juggling,” “running,” “spinning,” “crashing,” and “drowning.” Many motion metaphors illustrated how women persisted. They had to “keep showing up,” “moving forward,” “digging in,” “pushing through,” and “navigating uncharted waters.” Notably, their motion metaphors, although sometimes multidirectional (e.g., “spinning”), articulated two binary states of activity – progress or setback. They described “[being] thrown into the fire” or “moving forward,” “trying to move this mountain” or “rising to the challenge,” “spinning my wheels” or “juggling everything.” Women’s use of motion metaphors underscored our embodied material struggle as constantly moving actants. Whether progressing or regressing, as conditions fluctuated, we were in perpetual motion.

While the language of motion in women’s metaphors captured the pace and speed of our acting and doing, sensory metaphors highlighted the corporeal aspect of our experiences. The body was materially present in some metaphors: “like pulling teeth,” “back against the wall,” “all hands on deck,” “banging my head against the wall,” and “stop the bleeding.” Of the 82 sensory metaphors shared, 30 conveyed heaviness and weight, and women referred to their “shoulders” and “backs” frequently as sites of “carrying the burden.” In highly emotional experiences, weight metaphors convey the

fear, anxiety, and stress we felt as difficulties were communicated as burdens (Deng et al., 2021). Dani eloquently captured the heaviness mother/leaders commonly felt, but she particularly highlighted how the pandemic increased the load, creating a no-win situation for these women:

I think oftentimes leaders that are women are pleasers, and we take all the weight on. And I think it's just completely impossible right now. The set of circumstances is just too much, but we're going to go down trying.

Metaphors provided us with a framework for processing unfamiliar and challenging circumstances. Having never lived through a global pandemic, we had no prior knowledge from which to draw to make sense of our lived experiences. Metaphors allowed us to connect the familiar (e.g., “climbing a mountain”) with the novel (e.g., “remote learning”). This aided us in processing and coping with the complexities of our navigations (Deng et al., 2021; Gibbs & Franks, 2002; Thibodeau et al., 2017). Gibbs and Franks (2002) assert that metaphors provide additional emotional and psychological support for those enduring disasters or other uncertain conditions, promoting “self-awareness, meaning, emotional comfort, and potential growth” (Gibbs & Franks, 2002, p. 163)

Time & Temporality

The concepts of objective time and subjective temporality were punctuated throughout women’s storied experiences. Chronological time in our narratives revealed the unique ways we understood and felt objective time. The use of different registers of time to describe our lives before (e.g. getting up at 4:30 am to work out before school) and after (e.g. working 24/7) March 2020 exemplified the pandemic’s disruption of linear

time as women acted in response to the virus. The urgency of our leadership and care work trumped any time markers that had previously separated work and home. In addition to the ubiquitous presence of material time in our narratives, temporality – the influence of past experiences and future expectations on our momentary perception of a phenomenon – framed women’s evolving understandings of our mothering and leading labor. As we moved through the initial 20 months of COVID-19, our coping, sensemaking, and becomings were intertwined with the virus, highlighting the contingent nature of temporality.

Relying on often elaborate timebound systems, constructed by mothers, we managed the first and second shifts like professionals prior to the pandemic. Several described giant color-coded family calendars, extensive multi-person chore and task lists, and detailed drive schedules that included multiple routes and chauffeurs to manage school, sports, daycare, and social drop-offs and pick-ups. When Dani’s kids asked her to attend class parties, chaperone field trips, or have lunch with them at school, she worked it out with “a lot of negotiation and some apologies.” She discussed meeting the teacher *early before school* to drop off birthday treats, *dashing* out of the building to attend Thanksgiving lunch at the elementary school, and *squeezing in* time for children’s activities. Dani’s narratives of these schedule negotiations referenced the carefully managed time intervals that framed her day. The linear scheduled dimension of mother/leaders’ usual labor indicated extra hours and very real-time constraints, yet we accepted these as inherent in mothering work.

Although frequently unclear as to what action to take, we described brutally long hours of urgent labor in our initial responses to the crisis. We accepted the dissolution of

the 8-4 school day (and occasional other duties as assigned) as we labored to meet the immediate demands of leadership. We felt time differently too, making comments such as “things are changing so fast,” “[we were] whipping up training real quick,” and “there’s not time to do what I needed to do.” Our early labor was “triage” (Crosslin & Bailey, p. 174), taking swift action in the moment to meet needs whenever they arose.

We described working long hours to get information, disseminate it to stakeholders, and plan for next steps or reverse course and start over. Camille, a technology director, understood when she accepted her position shortly before the pandemic that she was never truly off the clock. COVID conditions, however, intensified the time demands exponentially as she shifted from being *available 24/7* to *working 24/7*. With no time for special treatment of cabinet-level executives and district supervisors who rarely put in technology help desk tickets, she laid it out bluntly for them, “Listen, you’re gonna have to put in a help desk.” Leadership for Camille meant envisioning things that had never been done before, but this required a balance between managing details and facing considerable time constraints. “We knew if we didn’t capitalize on every moment, that we were going to face big repercussions.” So, she procured technology resources before they were in short supply and reviewed technology contracts at 3 a.m. hoping she didn’t miss important details. She remembered, “Look at how toilet paper flew off the market. I knew hotspots were going to be the exact same way.” Narratives emphasized how typical work schedules, always somewhat fluid for school leaders, fell apart as we responded to the immediacy of each new challenge regardless of the time of day or night.

Evidence of renegotiated time registers was woven throughout our stories in both literal and figurative language. We reported “back, to back, to back, to back Zooms,” “working every single day,” going from “one moment to the next, “there’s never truly a weekend,” and “no downtime.” Women recounted 10-hour to 16-hour workdays, staying at school past midnight, and working in the early morning hours while our families slept. Our figurative language confirmed the presence of time in our narratives. Women discussed “pouring hours” into leadership tasks and “drowning” in work commitments. Rosie, an experienced elementary principal, talked about her phone “blowing up all the time...seven days a week. [...] We were working twice as much.” Without traditional office hours to separate leadership work from home labor, mothers were never off the clock; work needs could emerge at any time during the day or night.

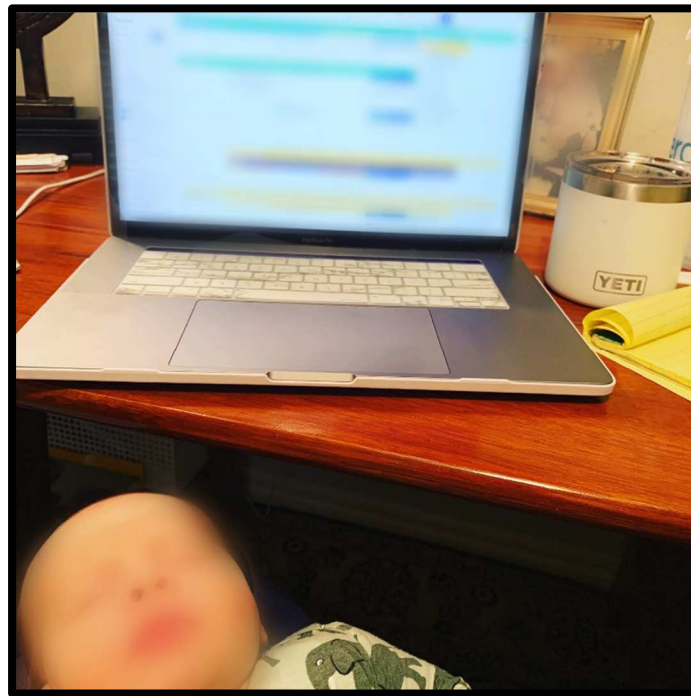
Lengthy hours and seven-day work weeks were typical early on, but they were impossible to maintain beyond the short-term. With so many urgent leadership tasks early in the pandemic, Rosie rarely slept more than 4 or 5 hours per night, and Elizabeth frequently worked until 2 a.m. and got back up at 5 a.m. to stay on top of her leadership work. Mia described how long work hours sometimes left her in a fog of confusion and uncertainty. Sitting on a Zoom meeting in the kitchen from 3 p.m. to 8 p.m., she was unaware of her family cooking dinner, eating, and cleaning as she remained tethered to her screen during a marathon leadership meeting. She explained the surreal experience:

I didn't even think about it, because we were so engrossed in whatever the conversation was. And it was important, and we needed to talk about it. But also, like I said, we just really weren't getting anywhere, but we couldn't figure out how

to gain traction. But I just remember, I would just lose track of time, and just lose track of what was happening.

Figure 18

Rachel's Double Duty



Early studies confirm the fervent pace of working mothers' pandemic labor. Figure 18 above portrays what O'Reilly (2021) described. Working mothers were "innovative, "resilient," and "resourceful" (p.49), but not indefatigable.

They are working late into the night, devising creative scheduling, working while the children nap, managing to work amid the chaos, juggling homeschooling with their own work, deferring all but necessary work. [...] But all of the mothers highlight that this juggling and coping cannot continue indefinitely and that for most of the mothers the pandemic already has had a substantial negative impact. (p. 49).

While mother/leaders worked feverishly to keep going and doing, it ultimately became evident that we could not maintain this pace forever.

Temporality – “the lived through experiences (subjective time) that are shaped by history, context and expectations” (Dawson, 2014, p. 294) – permeated our narratives. Mother/leaders’ stories illuminated the interplay between past, present, and future in their sensemaking and coping. For example, temporality was evident when Christina commented on her youngest child getting academically “caught up” after the pandemic. Many women drew comparisons between the first and second years of the pandemic, frequently articulating discontent in the lack of progress. Reflecting on her ongoing stress and anxiety, one participant questioned, “How am I still feeling this way a year later? I didn’t think I would feel this way a year later, and I think that’s what’s very unsettling for me.” Elizabeth remarked, “This year is so much harder than last year.” She was unsure why it was more difficult, “I can’t quite put my finger on what it is.” Perhaps Monica most coherently captured the frustration of the pandemic’s prolonged impact. She suggested, “The stress this year is much harder than it even was before. So, I think maybe it was that expectation that we were going to get back to some normalcy and then that disappointment that we didn’t.”

This idea of a *return to normalcy* underscored the temporal concept that the past influences how we experience the present and envision the future. Dawson (2014) explains the connection between past memory and present perception, “Memory does not just describe the past, it creates the past” (p. 290). For me and several other mothers, the chaos of finishing the school year in spring 2020 stood in stark contrast to our hopes for a return to normalcy in the 2020-2021 school year. A number of women referenced

normal, implying their beliefs that the virus's disruption would be short-term. Grace proclaimed, "I am making plans as if everything is going to be normal." In a similar fashion, temporality emerged in Verhage et al.'s (2021) study of older adults coping with COVID-19. Conceptualizing the pandemic as a temporary phenomenon allowed some to cope with the anxiety of their difficult circumstances. "They approached this insecurity by not thinking too far ahead to avoid disappointment" (Verhage, 2021, p. 295).

As the virus continued, one time-marker after another came and went (e.g. summer vacation, starting a new school year, a new calendar year), and each season brought with it additional leadership demands – implementing social distancing procedures, creating hybrid schedules, deploying personal protective equipment, managing remote instruction, and more. Coping with enduring upheaval in our leadership roles was of temporal significance for us. As Verhage et al. (2021) observed, "Coping is not just an interaction between person and context, but a dynamic process in which temporal dimensions, such as duration, timing, and order of stressors may play an important role" (p. 296). As the heavy workload of leadership consumed most of her waking hours, Sarah was distracted from being fully present with her son. Sarah cried as she recalled how her focus on school work siphoned hours and hours away from attending to her son. Her sense of time lost to the pandemic provided an emotional example of temporality. She voiced her regret:

Last year, I felt like I was working at home all the time. And this year, I've just said, "I'm not going to do it." You know, like, I think I finally just got to the point where I was like [my son] is five years old. I started looking back at pictures. He

was three when this started. I have missed two years with him – two years because I was pouring everything into school.

Just as students needed time to recoup losses, we also needed processing time to moderate our understanding and responses to the crises. Early intense action meant caring for our schools and sacrificing personal time/hours previously dedicated to our children. Perhaps we assumed the pandemic surge would swell and then retreat in short measure. When it didn't, long-term personal sacrifices became more burdensome, and women were less interested in “killing themselves” to maintain intensive leadership. Temporal awareness permeated our lived experiences as the pandemic's duration and timing shifted our responses to the crisis.

Dissolved Work & Home Boundaries

“COVID has blurred my home lines. It has blown them up!” Grace

The hardworking mothers in this study either carried out or managed the *second shift* (Hochschild, 2012) before and during the pandemic. Primarily responsible for children and the home, our workloads multiplied when professional and personal boundaries collapsed during the shutdown. Before COVID, some women maintained more permeable boundaries between work and home while others established more rigid distinctions. However, for all of us, the complete dissolution of boundaries amplified the stress associated with both mothering and leading. In their collection of scholarly works on mothering during COVID, O'Reilly and Green (2021) detailed the complexities for mothers. “When there is no separation between work, family, and home pressures rise exponentially, with added concern, work, stress, and anxiety” (p. 24). Without exception, the collision of work and home labor eroded physical and temporal boundaries. As we

scrambled to reinvent teaching and learning, we were forced to enlist strategies to occupy children so they could work and parent in overlapping spaces.

To balance intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) and intensive leading (Baker, 2016), we redrew boundaries, redefining what it meant to be a “good enough” mother/leader (Winnicott, 1973) in precarious times. Sometimes, this boundary renegotiation resulted from pragmatic framing, but other times, it was borne from sheer exhausted necessity. Unaware of Winnicott’s (1973) research, Dani claimed “good enough” as her motto for the 2020-2021 school year. She readily admitted, “It wasn’t the highlight of my career,” but she clung to, “We’ve just got to be good enough. Like, it’s not great. Going to be good enough.” In contrast to scholarship on mother/leaders’ pre-pandemic navigations in which mother/leaders established clearer boundaries between work and home and retained control over their chosen “border crossings” (Jordan, 2012), the women in this study described – and some demonstrated – constant, uncontrollable permeability in boundaries during the pandemic.

Mother-leaders were frequently unable to negotiate leading or mothering the way we preferred. Despite our best efforts, all women shared stories of unmanageable boundary transgressions. Borrowing the term “context collapse” from digital culture, Putnam (2021) described the dissolution of working mothers’ boundaries during the pandemic. She explained, “Unlike the online phenomenon, this context collapse is not virtual; personal, professional, and family spheres are now coexisting in the same time and physical space” (p. 424). Likewise, Bromwich’s (2021) investigation of mothers “doubling up” on productive and reproductive labor revealed the impossibility for women. She derided the unrealistic burden on women:

[Work from home orders] led to the simultaneous expectation that women would be doing their paid jobs while simultaneously caring for, and homeschooling, their children. That impossible expectation suddenly became more visible in their background of video conferences, with messy rooms and precocious children on full display. No digital Zoom background could effectively hide this reality (p. 132).

Despite feeling she had to maintain a smiling, optimistic façade, despite dire circumstances and juggling her competing roles from home, Grace felt the stress of blurred boundaries. She remembered vividly the white-hot embarrassment of being called out on screen in front of dozens of her principal colleagues during an at-home Zoom administrator meeting. When she briefly looked away from her screen to take care of her kindergartener, her superintendent chastised her. “I was turned talking to [my son], and he said my name, and by the time I got back, he said, “Come on, Grace, you got to be with it.” She received the message and it never happened again.

Most of us accepted relatively benign strategies to manage the chaos: electronics, less at-home studying, endless peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, later dinners, extra pool time, and more independent play. We all acknowledged the demanding conditions led us to loosen restrictions on screen time and other activities that we closely regulated prior to the pandemic.

Other boundary navigations were more challenging. Maintaining relationships and scheduling quality time with our own children was a constant difficulty. As we faced the reality of amplified labor, we had to adjust our expectations. Debbie, wanting to put her best foot forward in a new leadership role, described managing her work and

mothering roles at home with her 6-year-old son during the school shutdown, “I wanted to be super involved. But with my day-to-day schedule and what I was doing, I couldn’t. So, I had to set him up in his room and shut the door.” Monica recalled hearing her family on the other side of her home office door. “Life carried on with them, and I was just kind of locked in. I felt like I didn’t know much of what was going on.” Similarly, Camille remembered going through the motions with her kids while working at home during the shutdown. Physically present, but not always mentally available, she made lunch for her school-aged children with a baby on her hip and earbuds in so she could attend a meeting.

Priding herself on checking over her children’s schoolwork or making time for educational enrichment prior to the pandemic, Camille explained that the circumstances necessitated only the essentials. Her kids did not participate in optional PE, art, music, or other supplemental opportunities, “We’re not doing that, you know, there was no extra.” Christina focused more on her older children whose academic load during the pandemic was more rigorous than her kindergartener’s. “At some point, she’ll get caught up, like, I’m not too worried about it. So, I really kind of let things go for her.” Dani described that in addition to foregoing daily reading practice with her dyslexic daughter, she never checked her middle school son’s work.

It's seventh grade, we can recover; we've got time. Like this won't prevent him from doing good on his SAT, I hope, in like three years. I didn't pick the battles all the time because I just kind of, at this point, felt like I couldn't do much more than that.

A victim of intensive mothering, Mia struggled to relinquish control of her children's academics to her husband and accept the bare minimum work from them. "It was really hard for me to not get my kids all the things that the district was giving them. But I, I just couldn't do it."

The extant literature indicates that 70% of women run the second shift (Hochschild, 2012). The mothers in this study confirmed the prevalence of traditional and transitional gender roles that govern our domestic lives. While these stereotypical roles place the obligation for domestic labor either directly or indirectly on women, we mostly balanced productive and reproductive work prior to COVID-19 by implementing structures and systems that worked for our families. Pandemic conditions, however, disrupted our mother-managed systems, resulting in impossible circumstances.

Guilt & Failure

Am I supposed to pick my job or am I supposed to pick being a mother?" Ally

During my two conversations with Monica, a high school principal with four daughters, the word *guilt* was mentioned 50 times. Not all the women expressed this much mom guilt, but it was salient to all our experiences during the pandemic. This is nothing new for most working moms. Many have experienced pervasive guilt for years as their paid labor collided with the ideology of intensive mothering (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hays, 1996; O'Reilly, 2016; Williams, 2000). However, as the pandemic imploded work/home boundaries and presented extensive leadership demands, mom guilt skyrocketed. Faced with necessary "no choice choice[s]" (Borda, 2021), we sacrificed usual mothering tasks to meet the demands of intensive leadership.

Guilt

Guilt and sacrifice were particularly acute for mothers with younger children or children with special needs. Even women with extensive systems of support mourned lost time with their children, inadequate educational opportunities, stressful quarantine living conditions, and social-emotional struggles faced by their children. Mothers with fewer supports or with children with greater needs, suffered more significantly, including one mom whose child threatened suicide and another's whose son became physically violent towards her.

Good enough mothering (Winnicott, 1973) was barely manageable on most days as we struggled to meet strenuous leadership demands. At some point, we all felt the impossible binary of choosing our jobs or our children. Ally, a teacher in spring 2020 before moving into district technology leadership, explained:

It's like you have two sets of children. Like you have your children that are in your classroom, that you're with eight, nine hours a day. You spend more time with them than your own kid [...] It was guilt on both sides. [...] It was hard, hard to navigate and pick and choose [between your students and your children].

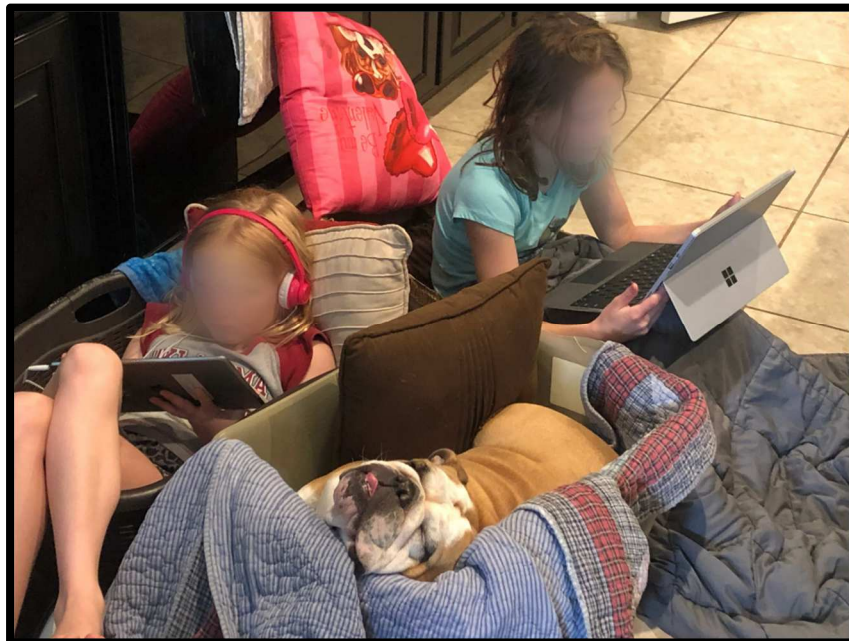
This “no choice choice” (Borda, 2012) left us with feelings of extreme guilt.

The majority described trying to work with children on schoolwork, as the picture of my children (Figure 19) below represents, while working tirelessly in leadership. Several with infants and toddlers remembered coddling a crying baby while attending a virtual meeting or trying to complete a work-related task. Fearful of daycare safety, Rachel kept her newborn and young son home during spring 2020 and hired an in-home babysitter for busy workdays. This created challenges when her babysitter regularly

canceled, or her male principal called a last-minute meeting. She laughed remembering her panicked decision to hire her six-year-old neighbor to watch her two young boys while she attended an impromptu video conference. “I come out of the office after my hour meeting, and there are goldfish everywhere. I mean, [the babysitter] is a first grader” (Crosslin & Bailey, 2021, p. 176). Ally, too, struggled balancing leadership and caring for an infant. Trying to participate in videoconferences as her infant’s nap time approached, she placed her son in a play seat, lined up his toys, and crossed her fingers. When he began to protest, she “just poured all the snacks in front of him, like, ‘Just eat them; just eat them!’ And then he was like spitting up.”

Figure 19

Researcher’s Children ‘Doing School’ at Home



Facing her son’s subpar learning environment provided by apathetic, inattentive campus support staff during remote instruction in the first weeks of August 2020, Debbie

shifted her priorities. After three painful days she felt her only option was to stop working from school and bring her son back home because "...the paras truly let our kids down, which is not OK." Although the decision increased her stress, she felt it was better for her son. Unlike Debbie, I had no other option but leaving my girls in a learning lab with poor supervision and support. Their behavioral struggles prevented me from working with them underfoot.

Other responses prompted strong emotion as women described mothering circumstances at odds with their values. Rosie fought back tears as she remembered an altercation between her two boys while she was on a virtual meeting. A normal sibling disagreement escalated to physical aggression towards each other and her, something she had never experienced. After her oldest son threw a chair across the living room, she snapped, "I was like up in his face like, 'You DO NOT throw furniture ... you've got to control yourself.' And I've lost control, so I'm not modeling. And then he, like, he pushed me." Remembering this incident months later in her second interview brought Rosie to tears. She paused the interview to regain her composure. Sarah was heartbroken knowing that her four-year-old son would miss the birth of his baby sister. "It does crush me that [my son] can't be there.... I want that for him, and he will never get it back because we won't have another [child]." Another recalled guilt at shameful acts of maternal violence – yelling, smashing toys, and spanking – which, in reflection, she attributed to the pressures of mothering and leading in spaces in which the boundaries had completely dissolved.

After questioning her identity and declaring that she wanted to use non-binary pronouns, Monica's middle-school daughter threatened to take her own life in spring

2020. Overwhelmed with guilt and terrified, Monica remembered the physical and mental fatigue of leading a large high school as interim principal and caring for the mental health of her daughter. Although she had three other children, she faced the sobering realization that she was physically unable to provide them all the same level of care. She sighed, “So, you ignore one [child] to help the other, and it's like managing your energy to the one that needs you the most.”

Gabby presented heartbreaking evidence of maternal sacrifice as her own as well as her daughter's underlying health conditions prompted her family to take drastic preventative action. Within minutes of receiving the news that she was denied an accommodation to work remotely, she had no time to process; she simply submitted to the mounting wave. Falling back on kinship support, she packed her daughter's things and sent her to live with family several hours away. Gabby's potential exposure to the virus at school necessitated limited in-person contact with her daughter. Throughout 2020 and early 2021, she visited her daughter only after receiving a negative COVID-19 test result, once or twice per month:

It's been extremely difficult as a parent, also as a working parent, to come to the school and, um, be around other kids, and not get to be around my own. [...]

That's really hard. When do I get my baby back?”

Dani captured the sad dilemma that most mother/leaders faced, “[My family] feels like they don't have a good mom right now. It's sad that they already feel that way and it's September [2021].”

Failure

We all expressed regret around the difficult choices we faced, fueling a sense of personal inadequacy and failure. As we struggled unsuccessfully to meet the demands of intensive mothering and leading, we described “failing on all fronts” (Kearney & Bailey, 2012). Ally recalled the hopelessness of not being able to do it all:

[My baby] is crawling everywhere that we have stairs in our house. We have dogs. I mean, I was like, I can't do this. [...] And it almost felt like, what am I picking here? Am I supposed to pick my job or am I supposed to pick being a mother?”

Elena compared mothering her newborn daughter during the pandemic to climbing Mount Everest. Each new obstacle felt like a “false summit,” and she faced one false summit after another – hormones, sleep deprivation, mastitis, blurred boundaries, unsupportive supervisors, daycare closing, and her father’s hospitalization with COVID-like symptoms. She said, “It just seems like now we’ve entered a season of Everests.” Sarah sobbed to her principal after losing her patience with her three-year-old son. “I had a lot of guilt. I just felt so guilty about the fact that maybe I sent him to his room when he was throwing a fit in the middle of my Zoom.” We all faced serious decisions, and in some cases made painful sacrifices that felt like life and death. Gabby explained her somber decision to send her youngest child away, “I had my back against the wall.”

Interviews were peppered with the language of failure. “You just can’t do both [mothering and leading];” “I feel a burden as a mom, and I feel a burden as an educator;” “I feel like I can’t do anything right;” “I’m a crappy mom;” “I’m not enough;” “I can’t win;” These declarations, as well as the physical expressions of guilt and failure,

illustrated shattered confidence in our abilities to mother and lead during the pandemic. O'Reilly and Green (2021) in their edited collection on mothering during COVID-19 summarized the findings from all contributors, "These reflections, whether alone or with friends, through text or art, continue to underscore the relentless and harmful expectations of intensive mothering that leave mothers feeling inadequate and unsupported, particularly for those already on the edge of mental health" (p. 28).

Support

While the conditions were arduous, 75% of women received domestic support from four main sources – partners, extended family, friends, and hired help. Although woefully insufficient, these women expressed that access to personal support systems was crucial in their ability to continue both productive and reproductive work. According to over half, partners provided the bulk of support as moms struggled to balance the demands of leadership and mothering. Despite the extra help, women described retaining responsibility for domestic labor during the pandemic. Mothers continued to arrange for the care of children and the home, but they delegated some responsibilities to spouses or partners. Interestingly, all but two women indicated a considerable decrease in their partners' paid labor, allowing them additional time to provide home support. While mother/leaders faced a massive increase in career demands, their male partners primarily experienced the opposite. Nevertheless, mothers still devoted more time to domestic labor than their partners.

Grateful for even modest personal support, none of us received the slightest recognition from our institutions that the intersection of mothering and leading in a crisis

Table 2

Personal Supports

Number of women who discussed neither partner nor other personal supports	Number of women who discussed only partner support	Number of women who discussed only other personal supports	Number of women who discussed both partner and other personal supports
4	4	4	5

amplified our work, stress, and anxiety. Incomprehensible to those without both maternal and career obligations, our taken-for-granted mothering and leadership work remained undervalued and invisible.

Table 3

Structural/Institutional Supports

Number of women who discussed the presence of institutional support	Number of women who discussed an overt absence of institutional support	Number of women who did not discuss the presence or absence of institutional support
1	10	6

Dani described her frustration at the lack of resources and organizational support, “It’s hard enough feeling you have to be all things to all people, but why are we being asked to be all thing to all people when there are resources out there?” She went on to describe how she was frequently brushed off by supervisors when she raised questions. She complained:

Every time I try to bring something to the attention of the district, it’s, “We’re working on this right now.” [...] But I have all these questions [from teachers] I need answered [...], and you’re not even answering my questions.

The lack of backing from the district office, combined with budget cuts and staffing problems, caused morale to plummet, but she and her principal were reminded regularly to keep smiling and taking care of teachers and angry parents while also trying to meet district expectations. Hochschild (1983) describes Dani's smiling and taking care of others as "emotional labor" (p. ix), suppressing her emotions in order to present the organization's prescribed affect to stakeholders. Even in precarity, educational organizations' "emotional rules" (Sachs & Blackmore, 1998, p. 265) regulate leaders' emotional responses, causing Dani in this case to stuff feelings of frustration. Dani explained her efforts, "[I'm] trying to do everything that I need to do, everything the district wants me to do, versus staff, and then not getting any help. Not feeling like I've got a lot of support from human resources." Ally, a mother/leader who stepped into her first leadership in August 2020, described a similar lack of support from a district office she called "hostile" to teachers. She remembered being surprised during her first months at the central office at the disconnect between campuses and central office administrators. She voiced a solution, "Even if you're in a big district, like you should not be in your offices. I feel like you should be at the schools, knowing what's going on, so that you can support those people."

Clearly suffering from a lack of structural support from her district, but not wanting to blame her supervisors, Rosie vacillated between frustration and empathy for the challenging circumstances experienced not only by campus leaders but also by her district supervisors. Her reflections hint at traditional gender ideologies at play in her leadership persona (Hochschild, 1983). She acknowledged:

I think admin wants to help, and I think, you know, our executive director wants to help. They all want to help, but we're experiencing things that nobody has ever gone through before as a building principal. So, they are willing to do anything they can, but they don't quite understand everything that's going on at the same level, because it didn't exist when they were principals.

Even as she proffered grace for her bosses, she recognized she needed more support at the campus level. With new COVID protocols, increased student needs, and hiring challenges, she admitted:

This is where I think admin sometimes doesn't get it. [...] I said, "I'm just really struggling to find [substitute teachers], and we're each struggling to find staffing," and the [administrator] said, "Well, if I know anything, I know that principals are super creative, and you'll figure it out." And I said, "The thing is, I agree with you. Principals are creative; we are problem solvers. But it's exhausting when we are problem-solving big problems every day before school even starts."

Pushing burdens back onto principals underscores the lack of institutional support for leaders. Dani echoed the frustration that accompanied backhanded compliments intended to keep mother/leaders toiling individually and in futility. She bristled:

People have gotten so used to seeing us do everything and spinning the plates that they don't even quite believe that we can't. So, they don't even allow us to put one down. [They say], "You can do this." And I'm like, "No, I'm telling you I can't." [They say], "No, I know you can." And I'm like, that's not helpful, or you're making me feel guilty because I've come to you and told you I can't keep spinning

them, and you encouraging me basically just makes me feel more embarrassed, guilty, frustrated that I came to you in the first place.

Elizabeth described working on remote instruction for the 2020-2021 school year, even though the district was supposed to be taking it over. Her relief that the campuses were no longer technically responsible for virtual learners was tempered as she scoffed, “Our district started online enrollment when they didn't even have an online enrollment department. Yeah, so they start this stuff when they don't even have a staff to back it up. Yep. Stupid.” Sarah felt that if she asked her director for help, she would try to assist her, but she laments, “I just wish I didn't have to ask.” Like Rosie above, Sarah's reluctance to ask for help from her supervisor reveals her acceptance of traditional gender ideologies in the workplace and the expectation that support is the responsibility of individual principals and supervisors rather than educational organizations.

Although most women accepted the absence of institutional support for mother/leaders, Janessa and Gabby actively pursued support from their districts. Janessa, who discovered she was pregnant in Spring 2020, was concerned about her baby's safety. She consulted with her doctor and presented the director of her affluent private school a letter requesting an accommodation to work from home during the shutdown from March to May 2020. The physical building was closed, and students and teachers were prohibited from entering even to retrieve personal belongings. The school had pivoted to remote instruction, and only administrators were allowed inside the school. In fact, administrators were required to work from school. Given the transition to virtual learning, Janessa assumed the accommodation would be simple to grant, so she was

shocked when it was denied. Incredulous, she pushed back, refusing to return to the building while pregnant. As a result, she was subjected to disciplinary action.

She remembered feeling terrified of the unknown impact the virus could have on pregnant women. She was fighting for her family's safety, and as a result, her principal put her on an improvement plan. She imagined the terrible things that could have happened to her unborn child and the likely dismissive response she would have received from her school. "They will send me a nice bouquet and an Uber Eats gift card, but I will be the one to pick up the pieces for my family."

Gabby also applied for a health-related accommodation to work remotely at the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year. After obtaining her doctor's recommendation and documentation of a recent uncontrolled flare-up of asthma and pleurisy, she was told that the district would not grant any accommodations for administrators. A blanket decision was made that administrators were essential campus staff. Afraid exposure could threaten her asthmatic daughter's life, she took five days of personal leave in August 2020 to move her several hours away to live with extended family in strict quarantine. The primary breadwinner for her family, she was forced to choose between providing for her family's financial needs or their health. After consulting with an attorney, she felt her only choice was to return to school, which she did with a stockpile of personal protective equipment and her daughter a three-hour drive away.

Perhaps the most damning testimony regarding the lack of structural, institutional support for mothers in educational leadership was women's silence on the topic during interviews. The question of district support for mother/leaders left most mothers quiet. Surprisingly, they didn't seem angry about the lack of institution assistance; they seemed

more defeated. Several women expressed annoyance, but most seemed to passively understand that a career in educational leadership did not include accommodations for mothers.

Although she hated to admit it, Dani remembered her mother's advice about trying to do it all yourself:

My mom used to tell me, "God really didn't mean for women to do it all, and have it all, and be it all." And she said, "That's not because you can't. It's just that it's too much for one woman to handle." And I used to think, That's crazy. Like, I can do everything.

The pandemic has caused us all to think twice about what we can do.

Care Work & Self-Care

"We're taking care of so many, but who is taking care of us?" Grace

Interlude: I'll Have the Cashew Chicken

February 8th was the kind of day that has principals saying, "I should write a book because you can't make this stuff up." Interestingly, it seems like I'm saying that a lot these days. Maybe it's the "cancel culture," the partisan politics, or the racial reckoning. Could it be the coronavirus, still? I promised a dissertation draft to my adviser and fully intended to duck out at precisely 3:45 p.m., although I should have known that the thought of leaving after a wimpy eight-hour day would jinx me. Still, I had high hopes.

Shortly after arrival at 7:15 a.m., my assistant and I meet a tearful mom attempting to peel her daughter finger by finger off her lower extremities. Little girl was not having it. When mom finally wriggled free and slinked to her car, little girl lost it – swearing, scratching, kicking, and hitting. I was blocking the door when she popped my

AP in the mouth. When I addressed little girl from the opposite side of the door, she told me to “shut up” and smashed her middle finger onto the glass insert directly in front of my face.

Things continued in this vein for the rest of the day. If my school published a tabloid newspaper, the headlines would read something like this:

- Dad in red hot rod burns rubber in school parking lot, “You’ll be hearing from my lawyer!”
- After two years of alleged adult bullying, teacher loses it and calls colleague a “bitch!”
- High school intern: “He wouldn’t stop grabbing and slapping my butt” she said of kindergartener who assaulted her!

By 1:00 p.m. I am confident the ketogenic diet I was planning to start can wait another day. I suggest the office crew make a Door Dash order from my favorite Asian bistro. I input entrees for the office team, pay \$98, and wait for our delivery. The dasher arrives with two bags, which always look smaller than they should – the illusion of Chinese food packaging. I unpack bento boxes, fried rice, and miso soup, and then divvy up the soy sauce. Soon, I realize there’s no cashew chicken. As a school principal, I can take more than a few hits and keep a smile on my face. When she’s ready, I will hug the little girl who flipped me off, and I will politely email the dad our carline plan for the 10th time. I will host a restorative circle with discussion protocols for the fussing teachers. I will gladly do these things because it’s my job to take care of my students, families, and teachers. I don’t need much, but occasionally I would like cashew chicken.

Care work

Moms sometimes do whatever it takes to serve others, and in hard times, empathy can drive us to ignore our difficulties and do even more for others. Podcaster and mother, Zibby Owens (2021), explained the tug of compassion in the pandemic. Although “[my] life slowly circled the drain of the quarantine, my need to serve intensified” (p. xiii). As we sought to provide for stakeholders and our own families, our needs were set aside, and the momentary frustration at not getting *my* cashew chicken quickly shifted to gratitude. “At least it was my lunch, and not someone else’s, that was left off the order.” There’s no time to mourn lost lunch, lost sleep, or lost anything. The crisis even robbed Liz Astrof (2021) of taken-for-granted, pre-pandemic opportunities to cry, “I don’t have time to cry. Most moms don’t” (p. 176).

The emotional nature of our care work reflected a distinctly feminist “emotional turn” (Blackmore, 2011, p. 208) that challenged the rational/emotional binary entrenched in educational leadership. Through listening, questioning, lifting diverse voices, and seeking equity for students and staff, we enacted transformational leadership skills as a way through the turmoil (Blackmore, 2006; Dentith & Peterlin, 2011; Sachs & Blackmore, 1998; Shaed, 2018). Our care work appeared to be our response to the chaos and uncertainty of COVID-19 (Lanoix, 2013), suggesting that caring for others in times of precarity allowed us to exert agency when normal routines seemed out of control. Our crisis care work illuminated the gendered nature of women’s leadership in these times, by cutting through the noise, seeing clearly, listening, setting boundaries on excess labor, and focusing only on essential tasks whenever possible. As we undertook care work, we demonstrated agency and empowerment. For me, this meant putting aside everything to

be present when a teacher was struggling. In that moment, nothing else mattered. Masks, contact tracing, remote learning, social distancing, vaccines, grading guidelines – everything disappeared when I shared a space with someone hurting. When asked, “Do you have a minute?” I almost never did, but my answer was always, “Yes, of course.”

Recognizing the anxiety and exhaustion of her staff, Grace canceled routine staff meetings. She said, “I think that the stress level of the teachers was as bad as mine was. And so, I am going to take 30 minutes for a staff meeting? I felt guilty doing that to them.” As teachers navigated new technology and their fears, they often felt overwhelmed and ill-equipped, leading to tearful, emotional breakdowns. During these times, mother/leaders described efforts to provide emotional support by listening to and advocating for teachers. Rachel, for example, the only leader under study with a male supervisor, regularly empathized with other moms when her principal called last-minute meetings that left them scrambling for childcare or flippantly told them to figure out work-home conflicts as he had done when his kids were young:

I just asked him, “Well, so how did you do that?” He was like, “Actually, my wife did it, and she was late to school.” And I was like, wait, so you really didn’t do that? [...] I told him, “You have to stop saying that.”

Calling out her principal’s gender bias challenged male-centric attitudes and practices and provided a space for the voices of mothers to be heard. In that small moment, Rachel’s agential action pointed to a more socially just way of enacting leadership.

Mother/leaders described other small ways we exercised transformational leadership and care work as evidence of our agency. We made intentional efforts to support teachers with positive notes, social media posts, text messages, and extra

classroom visits. To boost morale, several offered special events that were only mildly successful. Holly created Workout Wednesdays, allowing staff to dress down in yoga pants or sweats if they listened to a weekly inspirational podcast, and Monica offered Walk-It-Out Wednesdays with a similar premise if staff participated in a social-emotional support activity. “Nobody signed up. Nobody came. [...] They just want to go home when school's out. They're just tired and want to go home,” she lamented.

Women in this study recognized the delicate balance between compliance with bureaucratic expectations and acts of agential resistance. Camille, Grace, and Sarah described care work as focusing on priorities and sheltering staff from anything that wasn't necessary or urgent. Sarah remarked, “I have not probably communicated everything. I have sheltered them from as much as I can.” Camille described her role, “To me being a good leader is helping people focus [on priorities].”

Sarah enacted care work by shifting her preferred leadership style to meet teachers' needs and alleviate the burden of extra work. Proud of her typical collaborative leadership style, she became more bureaucratic when her team wanted her to “just tell us what to do.” Despite her own hectic schedule, she, like many of us, created dismissal plans, safety protocols, and lunch schedules so these tasks wouldn't land on teachers. Although it was sometimes difficult, we approached teachers with sensitivity and understanding when asking them to step out of their comfort zones. Gabby recalled asking staff to cover classes when her school faced a shortage of substitute teachers:

Teachers were scared ... there were even some tears from teachers that day that I ... asked them to step into these classrooms. [...] I just said, “Hey, you can do this. You know, you can do it” ... kind of built that teacher up.

Care work also meant saying “no” to the demands placed on teachers and staff. Elizabeth felt strongly that as the school leader, she needed to assume some tasks the district had assigned to teachers, so she began copying district-assigned homework packets. “I’m looking through the stuff that the district wants us to copy, knowing full well, that 99% of my kids are not going to do any of this shit at all.” In that moment, she exercised agency and caring, refusing to copy packets or ask her teachers to either. Care work in that moment was rejecting the district’s plan for quarantine busywork. Similarly, Mia couldn’t ask teachers to continue doing work that didn’t meet the needs of students in her Title I school, one of only a few Title I schools in an affluent district.

I know it's not responsible for the [school] to just not do anything. But also, this isn't good either. [It] just doesn't feel right, to just keep doing stuff that isn't mattering. And so, you know, I don't know what the right answer is even looking back.

When her teachers reached the breaking point, Dani stepped in with decisive action. “I’ve had teachers in tears that I’m like, ‘OK, no, we’re not going to do that. I’m going to call that parent for you. And we’re not doing that.’” Sheltering teachers from unreasonable expectations gave us the sense that we were protecting and caring for them, even though we could actually do very little to protect them from the impact of the virus.

Although we desired to demonstrate care towards staff, nothing seemed adequate in the crisis. Dani felt she had “used up all my deposits” with staff. “They don’t need a cookie. [...] Taking, you know, chocolate with me to every meeting only gets me so far.” Sarah mocked the district’s gesture of allowing teachers to wear jeans, “They can all have jeans at the end of the year last year? That is not giving them anything!” Grace said:

As a leader...we struggle...[in] really showing our appreciation [for our teachers], but when I can't even sit in a room with you or I can't give you all that you deserve, it's heartbreaking...I don't know that with COVID if it was necessarily tasks that were hard. I think it was the people connection ... because you can't connect on Zoom correctly."

After a particularly grueling day in fall 2021, my assistant principal and I brainstormed ways to show appreciation for teachers. There was simply no remedy for the pervasive fatigue educators were feeling:

I don't know what else I can do or give them to make things better for [our teachers]. Nobody cares about a jeans pass or snacks anymore. I feel like the only thing I could offer that would be appreciated is maybe a kidney.

My assistant principal curled her lip, and sarcastically replied, "Oh, a kidney? Is that all you have? I really need a heart." We laughed, but we also realized how true it was. No token of appreciation could remedy the effects of the coronavirus on teachers.

Impression Management

Care work at times meant impression management. Goffman's (1959) classic concept captures people's labor in social interactions to shape others' impressions of them. With no control over the pandemic and their confidence as proven leaders shaken, mother/leaders in this study often sought to be a stabilizing force for their teachers, students, and stakeholders. Most leaders described upset parents, crying or angry teachers, and complex school dynamics. Some described putting on a "brave face" to prioritize others' feelings over their own and opening their office doors to be a steady source of support for staff. In these cases, impression management was thus a form of

care work. After the unexpected death of a beloved teacher on her campus two months before the pandemic, Mia remembered the relief of learning that her school would be going fully remote in March 2020. Impression management, debilitating grief, and exhausting leadership demands were overwhelming. “Emotionally, I just couldn't, I just couldn't. The best way I can describe it is that I couldn't grieve publicly anymore, you know? It was just hard.”

At home, several mothers described trying to create stability for their children and families. Sarah, an elementary principal with a toddler and an infant, expressed the need to protect her young children from the chaos and “trying to not put the burden of everything that went on for the last six months on a baby.” Despite her perception that she adequately managed her fear, Camille’s daughter reminded her how perceptive children are when parents are under strain. When a friend tested positive for COVID, her teen daughter didn’t tell her mom. Justifying her silence, she proclaimed, “I thought you'd freak out. You're always freaking out.” Conversely, Camille felt she controlled her worry. “I didn't feel like I was freaking out. So, I don't know, their perception is I do.” Gabby explained mothering during a time of heightened fear:

I allow [my kids] to see my strengths as well as my struggles. I don’t hide a lot from them because I want them to understand the joys of life, but I also want them to understand how to navigate rocky waters. And so, I am a very authentic person with them ... I talk about everything with my kids and I allow them to ask me questions, tough questions. There is really not anything that is off-limits with them. [...] I refuse to give everybody else my best and give them the last of me.

For a few mother/leaders, the disruptions to both their work and domestic lives were so severe that they cloistered their fears and kept them hidden from everyone – children, bosses, and spouses. Camille described her breaking point in fall 2020 when grace and support for her division had withered leaving her with little grace for herself as well. Despite her mounting despair, she kept her distress hidden from those closest to her while continuing to protect her team from the storm.

There was so much anger on social media. There was not a lot of forgiveness internally. And that was probably the hardest part in my career ever. And I don't know that I'll ever have a harder time than that. [...] just the lack of grace across the board. [...] I felt a lot of me wanting to take that in because I didn't want my team to feel it. But I think we all felt it. [...] It was really hard. It was so hard. I don't even know how to describe it.

Ally, a new mom in spring 2020, found herself battling feelings of fear and failure, dispositions she was unfamiliar with prior to COVID. Her husband's job loss, mounting bills, lack of familial support systems, and virtually no institutional support in her leadership role brought Ally to tears regularly:

I've never really felt that way. I've always felt like I've been a positive person, never really let negative thoughts creep in. But I remember there were lots of tears and frustrations. Like, I don't know how to be a mom right now or I'm failing.

With both work and home life in free fall, she had nowhere to turn for support. "I'm the person that wants to make sure everyone else is okay. You just kind of forget about yourself, and then I just like randomly would bust out in crying tears. [...] I don't know how to fix this." Still, she insisted on carrying the burden for her husband and son. "I

don't want [my husband] to worry about me because you are already worried. [...] So, I put it on my shoulders. Like, I can do this. I am going to support you." Holly asked herself, "Could I get out of it and be enough?"

Self-Care

Despite a deep commitment to caring for others, mother/leaders in this study described doing little to care for themselves. Grace captured the sentiment of most women in the study, "I'm terrible at self-care. And I always have been, and I think that that is the gift of being a mom and a principal." Accepting poor self-care as part of their job descriptions, mother/leaders relinquished all but the slightest elements of self-nurturing during the pandemic.

Although six women worked out consistently prior to the pandemic, the closure of gyms and clubs halted their routines, and all six only sporadically exercised during the first year of the pandemic. Debbie observed, "I can't work out," and "cook dinner, clean house, be a great wife, great mother, great teacher ... I can do 3 or 4, but I can't do it all."

Camille practiced physical, emotional, and spiritual self-care before the pandemic. She woke up at 4:30 a.m. to hit the gym before work and disconnected for focused quiet time and meditation every evening around 8 p.m. Her evening quiet time was especially sacred, and her family knew that once it arrived, she wasn't to be bothered. Dim lights, essential oils, and no auditory distractions created what she called a "very Zen" environment. After March 2020, however, Camille mourned:

It just kind of went out the window. There is no self-care, and I still probably need to figure out how to how to bring it back. I need that quiet like recharge time, but that doesn't really feel like it's a thing anymore.

Other women described less structured efforts, like trying to lay off junk food or drink less wine. Two women readily admitted they simply had no time to attend to themselves. Dani described a hybrid form of self-care, joking that when she takes time to do little things for herself, like getting a pedicure, she is so happy to have uninterrupted time that she usually answers work emails or returns calls. She admitted it's not the pinnacle of self-care:

Is it really self-care if I'm spending the whole entire time doing work? But, I feel like it is because at least in my mind, I'm like, "Oh, this is time for me to catch up." Like, this is so great.

Women described some efforts toward self-nourishment as a way of coping with stressors. Debbie recognized the value of self-care while also admitting that chaotic conditions often prevented her from committing to it regularly.

I have my own grounding techniques that make me feel stable ... I do things that bring me joy. I know that sounds so silly, but it works for me. [...] And it makes you a better person; it makes you a better Mom; it makes you a better teacher if you can have that self-care in that balance and say, nope, it's my turn.

Two shared that their faith and regular prayer strengthened them to face risk and uncertainty. Gabby, a firm believer in self-care and boundaries, remarked, "I love taking care of me. I love pampering myself. [...] So that part of it, you know, I miss that side of it. [...] I've just, I've grounded myself in prayer, and that has been able to sustain me."

Three participants described self-care more in terms of family than individual nourishment. One mother and her family created a sticky note wall of challenges that they had to accomplish as a team, and another spent time with her children working on

special projects like building rockets. Holly, who loves cooking and sees it as a gesture of love and care, found comfort in planning and preparing meals for and with her children and stepchildren during the shutdown. She explained, “When I make my kids dinner, I feel like a good mom. When it’s a homemade dinner, I feel like a great mom.”

Some managed with medication or alcohol. Rachel, who gave birth early in the pandemic, proactively began anti-anxiety medicine based on a previous PPD diagnosis. Instead of weaning off the medicine as she did with her oldest child, she increased her dosage and maintained it as a helpful intervention during COVID-19. Another woman who was diagnosed in her 40s with Attention Deficit Disorder increased her ADD medicine. Six joked that alcohol consumption had increased, and one of them admitted that her excessive drinking had become more of a problematic routine than an effective management tool.

Mia completely redefined self-care during the pandemic, and it did not include pampering or luxury. Taken for granted before March 2020, basic survival needs *were* self-care. “I needed to make sure that I ate every day, and I needed to drink water every day, and I needed to take shower. And those are the three things.”

Primarily, even as we recognized its importance, we displaced our own self-care to care for others. Frequently, care work took the form of listening and empathizing when no action seemed adequate for the moment. Impression management as care work meant we tried to protect teachers from information overload, inane decisions, and their own pandemic struggles. Elizabeth resolutely declared, “I don’t think anyone takes care of the school leader. We have to do it ourselves.” Unfortunately left to us, it usually just did not

happen. “The school leader just goes and goes and goes and never stops until we are at the breaking point,” she admitted.

Emerging from the Storm

“Look, this isn't going to determine my fate anymore.” Sarah

Women’s narratives revealed subtle shifts over time in our perceived confidence and resiliency as we navigated three different seasons of the pandemic. We moved from the smooth seas of clearly defined pre-pandemic routines to chaos during COVID-19’s initial blow. As the swell settled, we began constructing what three participants called a “new normal.” For most women, the new normal consisted of applying lessons learned and adjusting here and there – better boundaries, more family time, and giving ourselves grace. Because this study was completed while many of us were still reflecting and processing our experiences, our reimaginings were still open to possibility. Likely, some will seek a new normal that resembles as closely as possible the old normal, while others might advocate for alternative critical discourses that create space for feminist leadership.

Before the Storm

Prior to the tumult of COVID-19, I and other women in this study implemented routines and strategies to manage our stressful existence as mothering leaders. Although we received varying supports from partners, family, daycares, and friends, we all took responsibility for the *second shift*. We designed creative systems to balance work and home life – color-coded master calendars, digital scheduling tools, clearly defined job lists, and synched family smartphones. We proudly described ourselves as *multitaskers*, *planners*, *fixers*, *problem-solvers*, *schedulers*, *organizers*, *workers*, *providers*, *caretakers*, and *decision-makers*. Some women’s daily routines seemed almost heroic before COVID

wrecked them. Rosie, for example, professed, “The more that’s on my plate, it seems like the more I can accomplish.” The pandemic shattered Dani’s sincere belief that she could do it all and have it all. She confessed, “It’s hard when you’re a female and you feel like your mantra has been female empowerment, and that you can do anything. You can be anything you want. You can do everything.” Holly simply “want[ed] to be supermom.”

Batten Down the Hatches

Seemingly overnight in 2020, our world was struck by a tempest of epic proportions, but working long hours, managing complex decisions, and making sacrifices were nothing new for motivated driven leaders like us. However, some described enjoying the successes that come with a demanding career and pride in their leadership strengths. Buffeted by the first wave of the pandemic, we experienced what seemed like endless days of fruitless labor with no discernable wins. The simultaneous stress of leading in uncertainty while also managing the most basic care of employees, students, and our own families, caused extreme physical and emotional burnout. Regardless, we continued our often-futile labor. Action and doing became the accomplishments. Impossible workloads fueled preexisting, socially constructed feelings of inadequacy and guilt as both mothers and leaders. We all recalled breakdowns resulting from failure and defeat. Holly fell apart after receiving a series of disheartening emails from her sons’ teachers, upset employees, and angry parents:

I broke down. I was like, I shut my computer, and I sat there and cried, and just said, “I can’t do this. I can’t do it. I don’t know what I’m going to do.” And you know, it just felt like the weight of the world, everything. I was failing my kids. I was failing my students. I was failing my teachers. I was just at that moment, “I’m

not good enough. I'm not enough.” It was one more thing I wasn't good enough, and it was emotional.

I heard the utter hopelessness in Dani’s voice as she described a similar emotional collapse.

I've kind of always had prided myself of having it together and not really having breakdowns. But I had like one or two moments that I actually cried in a Zoom, and I was mortified at myself, but I just couldn't. I was so frustrated and upset, and I just didn't know how to accomplish what they were asking me, and it wasn't that I was unwilling. I just, even with all my experience, I didn't know how to do what they were asking. I didn't know how to make it work.

As the pandemic persisted, we wearied from toiling in chaos. Grace and Holly both described carrying “the weight of the world.” Gabby commented on her changed feelings after the district’s inhumane decision that she could not work at home for a short time to protect her family’s vulnerable health, “It has really, it has really changed me. [...] I just want to work and do everything I can to the best of my ability. But I don't have a lot to give in regard to this district.” For the remainder of the 2020-21 school year, she kept mostly to herself. When her bid for a principal job for 2021-22 was unsuccessful, she transferred within the district and accepted an out-of-district position for 2022-23.

Early research on working mothers’ COVID lives mirrored our experiences. Researchers detailed women’s unsustainable workloads, extreme physical and emotional exhaustion, and sense of utter failure and hopelessness (Bromwich, 2021; Friedman & Satterthwaite, 2021; Hayden & Hallstein, 2021; O’Reilly, 2021; O’Reilly & Green, 2021). Regarding the early shutdown, Bromwich (2021) concluded, “One cannot

simultaneously work in a paid job effectively while homeschooling children or caring for preschoolers and infants. Lockdowns demand the impossible, which led to mental health concerns for those, disproportionately women, faced with these simultaneous obligations” (p. 133).

Charting a New Course

As the initial torrent of the pandemic relented, we adjusted to the ongoing uncertainty of a COVID world. By the time of our second conversation, conducted between 45 days and 12 months after our first meeting, most of the 11 women who sat for two interviews expressed a sense of slowly regaining control while continuing to process the regret and loss related to early pandemic navigations. Reflecting both sadness and strength, Dani described the paradox eloquently:

In some way, it's freeing. But in other ways, it's so disappointing because you feel like *I really can't do all the things I really thought I could do. I really can't be a great mom and a great worker and a great sister and a daughter and all the things at the same time.* And I'm just gonna have to pick and choose when I can do those things.

The crisis forced us to let go of our usual mothering and leading practices and cast off our own unrealistic expectations, as we renegotiated our roles in the wake of the upheaval.

Rather than focusing on our losses – diminished self-care, blurred boundaries, and remote failures – we began to exercise new forms of agency amidst uncertainty. Changes were small for some, more sweeping for others. Modifying our mothering and leading to this new context, most relinquished trivial matters and recommitted ourselves to family and self-love. Women described making small efforts to leave work earlier, take time off,

carve out time for family, lose weight, get our nails done, and answer fewer emails from home. Some of us took bolder action. Ally quit her leadership job and returned to the classroom. Concerned about our district's no-position stance in the wake of George Floyd's recent murder, I raised the issue of racial equity in a district meeting. I was more than a little nervous to be the first in our context to publicly mention the racial upheaval gripping our country, but I was determined something, anything, needed to be said. As I unmuted my computer, I focused on the faces of Black principals in the Zoom gallery, and I instantly felt the insignificance of my White woman's fear. After the meeting, I released my held breath and buckets of cathartic tears.

Noticeably, as some regrouped, several women experienced renewed confidence in our abilities to mother and lead. Most mothers, like Holly, were honest about shortcomings. She admitted, "I'm not gonna pretend I was great. Not. I did the best I could." Acknowledging, "we're stuck, and we're a little done," Dani learned to forego perfection and accept "good enough" mothering and leading. At one point, she declared, "It's barely good enough..., but I'm going with it." As some of us began to realize the cost of intensive mothering and leading in the pandemic, we released some, though not all, impossible expectations. Sarah recalled discussions she'd had with colleagues, "We just kind of agreed, we're done."

For some of us, "being done" meant small acts of rebellion against unworkable socially constructed expectations for mothers and educational leaders. For me, this meant asking more of my partner at home, taking better care of myself, and excusing myself from meaningless tasks while at school. Whereas none of us made a bold declaration of matricentric freedom, for which O'Reilly (2021) advocates, our agential maneuvers in

2021 and following opened the door to more sensitive, mother-centered ways of carrying out both roles.

Several of us described releasing control of the mother-managed presentations that reinforced our worth as mothers, what Goffman (1959) termed impression management. We exercised agency in implementing mothering routines that suited our lifestyles and let go of what Camille called “magazine standards” of mothering. Perhaps the starkest example of pre-pandemic impression management, Holly described dressing her boys in matching suspenders, bow ties, and polos for church. When her youngest attended remote learning from the backyard in only his underwear in spring 2020, she realized, “I had to let that go. [...] He dresses himself every day, and I don't care anymore.”

Once I accepted the pandemic was not soon going away, I feared for my daughter, now in middle school, wondering if she could recover from her emotional trauma from her early life that the pandemic may have intensified. So, I prioritized the needs of my girls, especially Sunshine who continued to struggle with anxiety, blatant lying, and defiance. I left work earlier, took vacations, and played more games with them. I found Sunshine a counselor and recommitted myself to her recovery. Elena and Ally both relinquished their babies' rigid feeding and sleeping schedules, and Grace and Sarah planned more downtime with their kids. Monica embraced her daughter's use of different pronouns, and perhaps more importantly stopped blaming herself for her daughter's mental health struggles.

During our first interview, Monica came to terms with her husband buying her daughters' clothes, making their lunches, and transporting them to activities. However,

she retained some fear of what others might think of their nontraditional arrangement. “I think I feel more guilty when I tell other people.” Amused, she recognized the inanity of her impression management (Goffman, 1959) when she came down with COVID in spring 2021 and quarantined her children unnecessarily because she didn’t want to admit that she hadn’t been in close contact with them. “I quarantined my kids because I was too embarrassed to tell [human resources] that like, I haven't seen my kids in days, so um, you know, but that would have been embarrassing.” By the time of her second interview, she had abandoned any attempts at impression management:

I don't feel the need to defend what my family is or isn't, or because maybe you see it more clearly too that everybody's a little bit messed up. [...] You guys might look like you have it all together, but you guys got your thing too.

Holly concurred that time spent worrying about others’ opinions was wasted, “We can't compare ourselves. Everybody's situation is different, and as long as your kids are healthy, happy, loved, and you're doing your best, good for you.”

Most women discussed the need for new self-care routines, and several made changes to promote better wellbeing in 2021, increasing physical activity, losing weight, and healthier eating. Monica and I made time for the extras. She got regular manicures and eyelash extensions, and I scheduled monthly massages. Like me, several let go of the stigma associated with pharmacological support as a way to care for oneself. Holly confidently announced:

I'm done [with feeling guilty for taking antidepressants]. I'm not going to be embarrassed about taking care of myself. I'm not going to be embarrassed about

being on medication. [...] I don't care. Because I'm taking care of myself. If I have cancer, you wouldn't say anything about me taking chemotherapy.

More than specific actions, most of us renewed our commitment to making decisions that were right for us and our families, regardless of others' opinions or judgment. Elizabeth declared, "I guess my philosophy was like we're still going to live life." So, despite travel warnings from her pediatrician and her extended family, she kept a promise to her son, who was diagnosed with Crohn's Disease in 2020. "I decided that even though it's COVID, we were going to go [to Disney World] because come hell or high water I wanted this boy to go. I promised him that he would get to go when he felt better." Similarly, Camille insisted that regardless of outside pressure, she would make choices that suited her family. She pondered her biggest lesson learned:

I'm going to do this because that's what works for me and my family is something that I will definitely keep [from her pandemic experience], as opposed to, this is what other people say I should do. [...] I think the biggest thing, I'd say is just me doing what's best for my family and not doing what I feel pressure to do.

Many of us felt the weight of disintegrated boundaries between home and school required more flexibility at both places. As Figure 20 below represents, Rosie's son literally climbed the walls when he accompanied her to school for an afternoon of work. Christina, a principal and a single mom with five children, embraced a liberal stance on children in the workplace, despite initial protests from her traditional male assistant

principal. When he complained that staff kids lacked proper boundaries and were too visible in the office, she pushed back.

It was interesting that he observed that. And to me, it's just how we're doing it.

Like that's just what we have to do. [...] Kids are a fixture in our office. And that is something that, you know, me personally, as a school leader is a necessity because I have five kids.

Figure 20

Rosie's Son Climbing the Walls



Some of us grieved the losses we felt from allowing pandemic intensive leadership to rob us of connection with our families. In her second interview, almost exactly one year after her first, Sarah expressed contempt for lost family time. “I have missed two years with [my son] because I was pouring everything into school. I regret that now. And I can’t change it, but I can fix it moving forward.” She established new boundaries that allowed her to take control of her time with family. Starting in August 2021, even though she started her first head principal job, she refused to do schoolwork

from home, previously a daily habit. Grace also wished she had focused more on family than work during the shutdown and quarantine. “I did that all wrong. I really did. I did not utilize that time the way I should have with my family.” These days, she’s more intentional about family time, and while still occasionally working from home, she does a better job of “shutting it off.” Plus, she reported that she has repented of sneaking around the house “cheating” on her husband with work.

Similarly, Hayden and Hallstein (2021) identified the ways in which some academic mothers reconsidered work-home balance in the wake of the pandemic. Hayden and Hallstein (2021) reported, “For some of the mothers we interviewed, the pandemic brought about changes they hope to incorporate into their postpandemic lives” (p. 178). These academic mothers, like participants in my study, planned to be more intentional about time spent at home and with children, refusing to sacrifice mothering on the altar of intensive leadership.

Rejecting the unsustainable load of leadership tasks, most of us intentionally pulled back on intensive leadership. Rosie, who in 2020 attended a Zoom meeting from the emergency room while she was treated for heart issues, skipped a district meeting when her schedule became overloaded and a few months later used personal leave to attend a niece’s graduation out of state. We began limiting the amount of leadership work brought home after hours, and while we acknowledged the occasional need to work from home, we did so less. Sarah announced, “I’m just not doing it. [...] It’ll be there tomorrow.” Likewise, Elizabeth put limits on the hours she was willing to work from home. She explained the futility of intensive leadership in the current 2021-2022 school year:

I mean, if I feel like this year, it's not going to matter how hard we work, that we're not going to get the results that we want. That doesn't mean I'm going to work less hard, but I'm not going to kill myself trying to get where I need to be. We took advantage of rare times when the pace of leadership work slowed. Like me, when there were no after-school meetings, Holly went home from work earlier to spend more time with her children. "I like to come home in the afternoon because my kids are done."

Interestingly, Camille's reworked boundaries meant loosening, rather than fortifying, home/work borders as the pandemic progressed. Recognizing her job will always have occasional extended workdays, Camille allowed her mothering role to transgress her leadership role. During slower seasons on the job, she arrived later to work or took her kids for a long lunch as a way to balance the occasional 12-hour or longer days. Conversely, when her job required extra time after hours or on the weekend, she shared the time with her children, especially her fifth-grade son who is interested in technology:

I guess you could say [the pandemic has] really impacted my priorities. My family was always my top priority. I like that my family gets to see me lead because what I do is important. And so, on the weekends when I'm on the phone and I'm dealing with something, I always make it a point to [include my kids]. I used to be like, work is separate, and home is separate.

Unable to maintain rigid pre-pandemic boundaries, she determined she would take charge of her border crossings by finding ways to intentionally include her family in her after-hours leadership work and vice versa.

For some of us, our redrawn boundaries also served as a form of institutional revolt as we took more dramatic steps to reject the ideology of intensive leadership. After months of extreme labor with little recognition for our sacrifices, some mother/leaders questioned their loyalty to their districts specifically and their commitment to educational leadership in general. Rosie pondered, “I even contemplated, like, okay, what other [job] options are out there? Because this is causing some health deterioration. This is causing a lot of hours of time away from family.” After being overlooked for several head principal positions, Sarah considered returning to the classroom if her final bid for the principalship for the 2020-2021 school year hadn’t worked out, and Dani, a 13-year veteran of her district, questioned why she or other school leaders would elect to stay. With budget cuts, reduced benefits, and non-competitive pay, she saw no incentive:

It's been really the most challenging of my career, and I don't know if it continues like this that I'll be, I'll be able to do it. I'll be honest, if things don't change, I... It's been very trying mentally and emotionally. [...] There's no incentive to stay here at the district. There's no loyalty incentive. [...] There's just not a lot to offer. Why stay?

Ally left the classroom for a district technology position in August 2020 and quickly became disillusioned with the institutional misogyny, lack of commitment to diversity, and covert racism at the central office in her district. Coupled with personal financial hardship after her husband’s job loss, Ally took decisive action. She abandoned her leadership position, moved her family back to her home state, and returned to the classroom. Her struggle as a new leader opened her eyes to the traditional patriarchal systems that perpetuate the status quo and oppress women and others positioned on the

fringes of power. Her personal challenges were compounded by her disenchantment with the direction of the district, leaving her with no regrets about leaving. “It probably would have been different if we had different leadership [in the central office]. I probably would have felt differently, and who knows, we might not have left.”

Enduring hardship empowered some of us to use our voices to call attention to structural inequities. Rosie felt compelled to advocate for her teachers:

I've got to speak up, I've got to say something. Like if we say, “kids come first,” then why are these things taking place? And so, I feel like I've been more open to sharing my voice because I'm seeing the pain in the eyes of my teachers. I'm about to meet with my supervisor, and I'm going to share some things with her.

And whereas I may not have shared things in the past.

Grace recounted how the pandemic exposed inequitable access to co-curricular experiences for disadvantaged students. To provide more opportunities for all students, she committed to making changes to future school operations. “We're going to make some adjustments as they come back in, to be better for our campus as a whole. [...] It's going to look a little different so that everyone's included.”

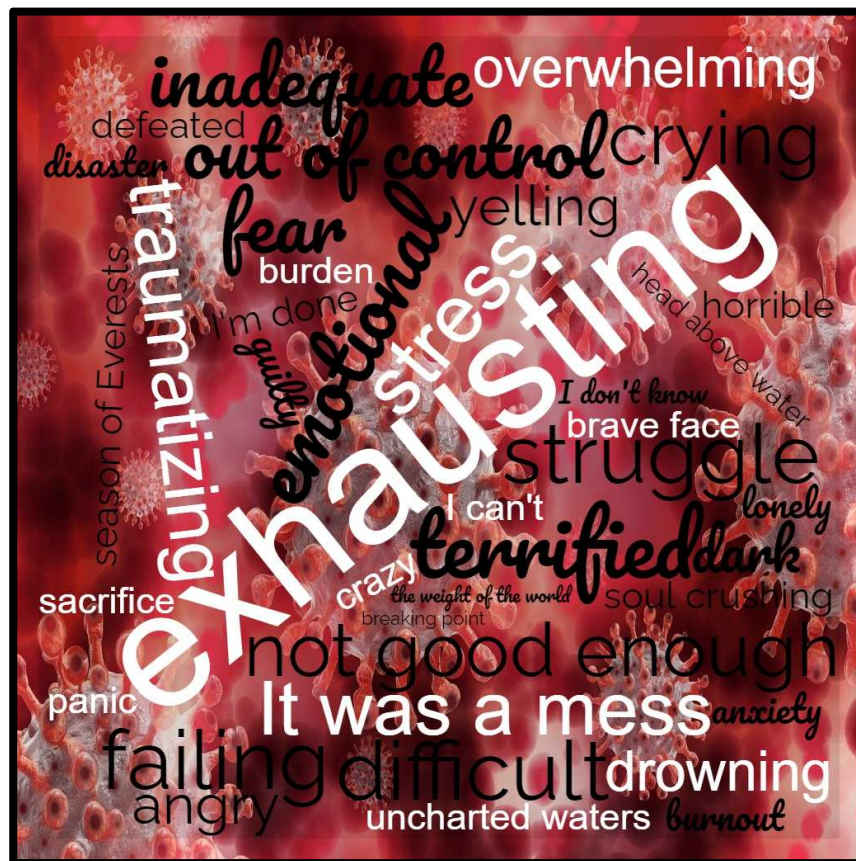
These courageous women demonstrated agency and resiliency despite grueling mothering and leading conditions over the past almost two years. We expressed pride in the strength we demonstrated as mothers and leaders. Grateful that COVID jolted her into reconsidering and eschewing the normative discourses of intensive mothering, Holly reflected:

I feel like COVID has done that for a lot of people. I feel like it reminded us of why are you spending 60 hours a week on baseball? Why are we doing these

things? Is it, who's it for? Is it for the kid? Is it for me? Do I think my kid's gonna be a professional baseball player? Like, what is the purpose? If it's for your kid and you're having fun? Yes, go after that, sister. But if it is stressing everybody out, stop.

Figure 21

Mother/leaders' Language of Precarity



Embodied Emotion

“It was, like, soul crushing.” Debbie

A powerful finding that surfaced from women’s narratives was the intense emotion that appeared in our stories. Emotion appeared in the precise, impassioned language of the interviews, seen in the word cloud (Figure 21) created from interview

transcripts and the discussion of themes. Notably, we described grief, loss of control, and disconnection as pervasive in our experiences. Grief appeared in our evocative language (e.g. “it does crush me,” “it was heartbreaking,” and “killing ourselves”). Elena used the word “dehumanizing” to describe how her institution treated her as a mother. Unable to live with and care for her own child as long as she risked exposure to the virus at school, Gabby’s grief was palpable. Wiping away tears, she mourned her “no choice choice” (Borda, 2021) of having to move her daughter while navigating on-site leadership requirements from her district, “When do I get *my* baby back?”

Mother/leaders explained how fear and uncertainty left us feeling like we had lost control. In addition to explicitly describing “out of control” moments, we frequently used phrases such as “I don’t know how to make it work,” “I can’t do this,” or “I didn’t have answers.” Our moments of perceived loss of control frequently left us feeling like we had failed students, teachers, and our own families. The compounding sociocultural stressors of racial tension, political divisiveness, and a “cancel culture” further stripped us of any sense of order and control in a social climate of “divisiveness, “distrust,” and “anger.” Two participants voiced discontent and wanting somebody to blame, but there wasn’t a villain – only a virus.

The pandemic erected physical boundaries around us through quarantine orders, mask mandates, and social distancing, leaving us isolated and frequently disconnected. As we sought to stop the spread of contagion, we sanitized furiously – hands, groceries, mail, doors, and, sadly, relationships. We were angry and frustrated at the physical and emotional separation from teachers, students, and sometimes our own families. Holly captured our loss, “We don’t know how to function isolated.” We missed social events as

well as the countless taken-for-granted informal moments in which relationships are built at the copy machine or in the staff lounge. We mourned the lost connections with students too. Initially, the quiet corridors and empty classrooms underscored the distance, but as school buildings gradually reopened, we realized that masked faces and air hugs were a poor substitute for real connection with students. In her first interview in summer 2020, Grace expressed the emotional need to return to in-person learning, “I don’t care [if I have to wear a mask], I just want to be around people.” Several described how the physical and corresponding emotional separation led to dismal school morale. Debbie emphasized the upsetting nature of the disconnect:

I think the kids not being able to see their teacher smile, and us not being able to see our kids' smiles makes a difference when you can't read emotions. [...] I think that even though we were spaced, it spaced us emotionally as well.

Two years later, we continued to feel the heaviness of disconnection.

We frequently felt disconnected from our own children as well. At-home working conditions left us feeling “locked” in our offices or physically, but not emotionally, present. Monica recalled going days without seeing her children, a contributing factor to her overwhelming “mom guilt” when her daughter threatened suicide in spring 2020. Remembering the crisis, she cried, wondering how she didn’t see it coming. “You blame yourself,” she sobbed.

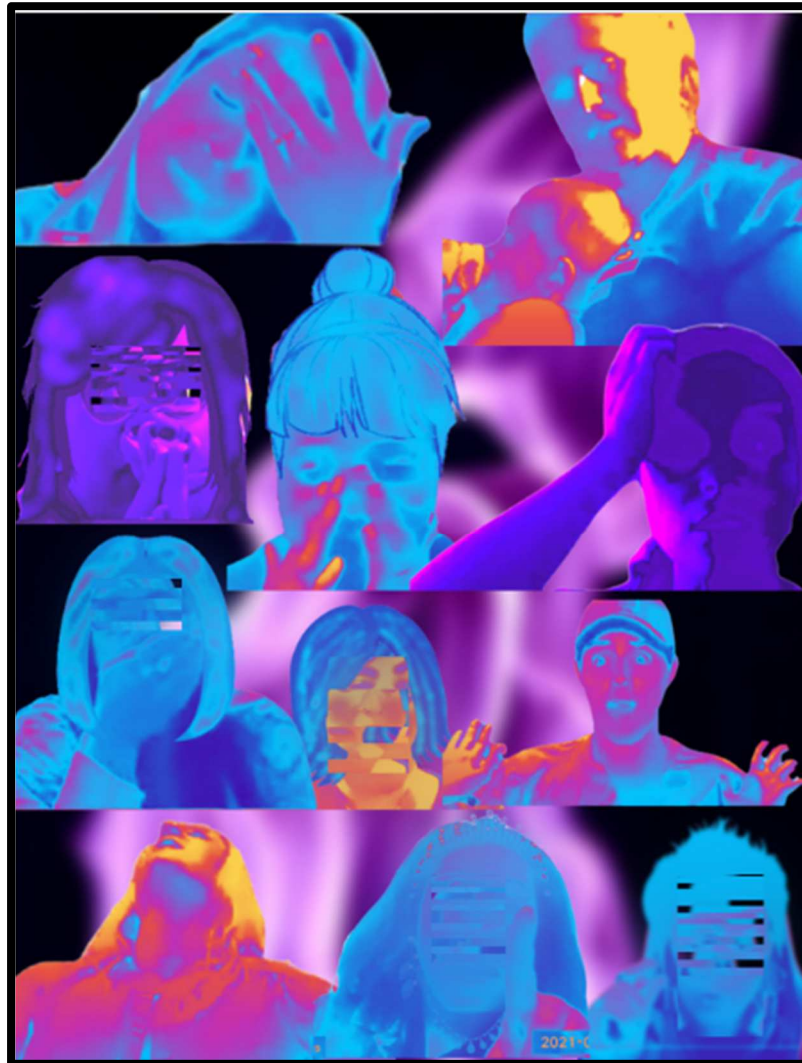
Neither Rosie nor I could revisit the height of our mothering failures without mutual tears. As noted earlier, Rosie’s son was aggressive toward her, throwing a chair, and shoving her after interrupting a work meeting. Equally horrified and devastated at her behavior and his response, this encounter marked the low point of her mothering. My

breaking point came in June 2020. My workload left me short-tempered and impatient. Buried in leadership work and scheduled for eight hours of virtual meetings, I ignored my girls' attempts to get my attention, and I remained isolated in my office. Apart from periodically yelling at them while my computer microphone was muted, they were left alone. Feeling the full weight of their early abandonment and mistreatment, they ratcheted up their behavior – hitting, kicking, and biting each other and trashing their bedrooms. When their brawl failed to draw me out of the office, they literally kicked the handle off my office door. When I finally finished my meetings at 4:15, I was exhausted, distraught, angry, and embarrassed. I lost control and chased them while screaming at the top of my lungs before retiring in violent sobs to my bedroom. It was the worst day.

Emotion manifested itself on mothers' embodied forms as they revealed vulnerabilities throughout the interviews. As Figure 22 captured, their expressions, gestures, and affect illustrated their difficult negotiations during the pandemic. Women's countenances were painted with apprehension, indignation, disbelief, frustration, regret, sorrow, and existential exhaustion that framed the other emotions. The pace and volume of our voices captured the nuances of our feelings, and our posture and affect evinced the emotional toll of pandemic labor.

Figure 22

Mother/leaders' Embodied Emotions



Throughout the interviews, emotion served as a place of connection between researcher and participant. We shared how the visceral emotions of fear, guilt, and failure plagued us throughout these years, but for the first time in quite a while, we weren't invisible or "lost." In a season marked by distance, isolation, and broken connection, being seen and heard provided a balm for our souls.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Interlude: I Have the Coronavirus ...again.

January 4, 2022

It's day nine of my second round of COVID-19, and while my staff gathers on campus for our first professional learning day of 2022, I'm quarantined at home. My COVID symptoms are gone, but I feel vaguely nauseous as I make the girls a breakfast of our classic go-to meal of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, brew my morning coffee, and prepare to disappear into my home office for a Zoom faculty meeting. I notice the feelings in my body – the anxious gnawing in my stomach and my suddenly shallow breathing. I remember *The Body Keeps the Score*, a book I read years ago to better understand how to parent my daughters, victims of early trauma. Our bodies are a repository of memories and without our knowledge or consent, our brain can transport us instantaneously to the site of prior trauma (Van Der Kolk, 2015). *Is that what's happening to me? Is my body reliving the trauma of 2020?*

It's been over a year since I hosted a faculty meeting by Zoom, yet it's sickeningly familiar. Even the smell of the PB&J, a quarantine staple for my girls, turns my stomach. As I slip behind my desk, I notice the graffiti on the inspirational sign behind my desk, the backdrop for Zoom meetings the past 20 months. In spring 2020,

Figure 23

Stop Signs



during the pinnacle of our quarantine trauma, Sunshine scribbled “stop” in the bottom corner with a black Sharpie. Seen in Figure 23, now it reads, *“Always pray to have eyes that see the best in people, a heart that forgives the worst, a mind that forgets the bad, and a soul that never loses faith in God, stop.”* Using that same Sharpie, she vandalized at least a dozen other items in my office – books, binders, switch plates, coffee cups, papers, doorknobs, drawers – **“stop.”** If only I had summoned the courage and wisdom to pay attention to her admonishment back then, maybe we wouldn’t be in weekly therapy. Maybe her bedroom would still look like a little girls’ Parisian dream. Maybe her windows wouldn’t be covered with plywood, and her door wouldn’t be secured with an extra lock to keep her from stealing money from my purse, eating an entire box of Thin Mints or half gallon of ice cream, watching YouTube all night on her computer, destroying furniture, or hurting our dogs – all attempts to control the chaos of her early

world. Maybe she – maybe we – would be OK. *I should redecorate*, I think as I login to Zoom.

Overview of Study

This research began with my tearful reflections as an exasperated mother unsure how to mother and lead in the volatility and fear of a global health crisis. Overwhelmed with the uncertainty of constantly shifting leadership demands, designing new learning systems, and the burden of caring for students and teachers, I spent countless hours planning, collaborating, communicating, acting, and reacting. As intensive leadership consumed my days, I neglected all but the most basic care of my own young children. I toiled in isolation 15 feet away from them, yet unreachable, sequestered behind my home office door. My two daughters were left to fend for themselves in a lonely house, and they suffered. The early abuse and neglect from their biological parents changed their developing brains, so now *felt* safety is a constant negotiation. Consumed by the fear of failing at work, and failing the teachers, staff, and children for whom I felt responsible, I was completely unaware that I had failed my children during those intense months. I felt forced to choose my job over my girls, a “no choice choice” (Borda, 2021).

As I wrestled with both roles, I wondered how other mother/leaders were managing the cataclysmic changes to their mothering and leading roles. I invited 16 other mother/leaders to share their pandemic accounts, and as their stories encountered mine, our collective navigations coalesced to reveal themes about the cultures of mothering and leading that permeated our lives. Using narratives, images, photographs, collages, written, aural, and sensory data, this study interrogated the social norms of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) and intensive leadership (Baker, 2016) that mother/leaders

encountered, reframed, and resisted during the precarity of COVID-19 (Dolman, 2018). This study created a space where the norms that constrain mother/leaders during crises can be assessed critically with the hopes that they can be dislodged and replaced with more matricentric sensitive policies and practices.

Questions for Inquiry and Reflection

Unlike traditional research projects, feminist and autoethnographic projects do not seek definitive answers to inquiry questions. Instead, they use questions as springboards for thought, reflection, collaboration, and generating new questions that further the inquiry. Many of the questions we ask in such conditions are, in fact, unanswerable, still part of living out these unfolding work/mothering conditions. Questions orient the researcher and others to a common starting point for inquiry, but do not map or exhaust the learnings from the study.

The questions that initiated this study sought to understand how mother/leaders **described** their individual mothering and leading experiences from spring 2020 through fall 2021. It zoomed (literally Zoomed) in on the **actions and strategies** we employed as we **managed productive** and **reproductive labor** in precarity. As the inquiry zoomed out, the project explored the **personal and structural supports** available (or unavailable) to us, illuminating the **social mothering** and **leading norms** that framed our negotiations. Finally, this inquiry unpacked women's narratives to reveal the **culture of school leadership** in which we lead. I hope that our discoveries will support mother/leaders in exposing and considering how to cast off the neoliberal patriarchal structures that prevail in schools and constrain mothers who serve in educational leadership.

Summary of Discoveries

A product of my tumultuous experiences mothering and leading in impossible circumstances, this autoethnography sought to understand how my material lived experiences aligned with or differed from those of other mother/leaders negotiating the same phenomenon. Desperate to make sense of incomprehensible personal and global conditions and to forge a path for mother/leaders moving forward, I turned to autoethnography to guide my inquiry. Focusing equally on the personal (*auto*) and the cultural (*ethno*), this qualitative study mined the pandemic for lessons in hopes that mother/leader navigations would be made visible and domestic mothering labor honored in both policy and praxis. As the global crisis entered its second year, the Omicron variant of COVID-19 promised to prolong the pandemic indefinitely, making this research valuable as we navigate current conditions while imagining a more just future for mothers leading in the pandemics of tomorrow.

Interlude: Kick the Dog

Nanny wrung her hands as she approached the overstuffed living room chair where I was sitting with my laptop. The girls were outside, probably playing on PawPaw's golf cart. With my husband asleep and PawPaw drinking coffee with the other old men at the gas station, their cozy house was quiet, and I was, as usual, getting some work done. My mother-in-law was always nervous, but I could tell something was bothering her. Torn between needing to share something terrible and giving me one more thing to worry about, she hesitated before telling me about Leo.

Leo was our new puppy, rather Sunflower's new puppy. In 2016 Sunshine got Xena, an English bulldog, as a gift for her one-year *adopt-a-versary*, and her little sister

never let us forget that she wanted an dog too. In July 2021, we welcomed Leo, a “shih-malte-pom-poo,” our made-up breed name that represented his diverse genealogy. When we brought him to the country to meet Nanny and PawPaw, he was four-months old and weighed seven pounds. His nickname was Tiny Dog, which we always said in a low gravely voice.

Up before dawn with the girls, Nanny had asked Sunshine to take Leo for a potty break in the backyard. She protested at first but ultimately carried the puppy outside. Nanny watched from the window as Sunshine looked suspiciously over her shoulders while Leo sniffed the steps. Seeing that she was alone, Sunshine kicked the puppy in the stomach causing him to roll off the back porch and into the grass. Horrified, Nanny called them back inside, but she didn't say a word to Sunshine.

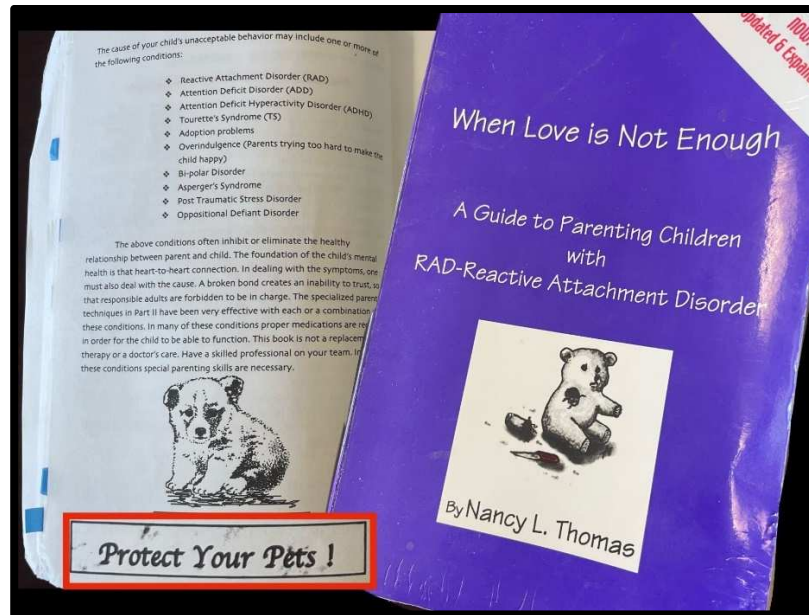
When Nanny told me about the incident, I was shocked and angry. The “purple book,” given to us by the girls' therapist (Figure 24), cautioned that kids with early trauma and attachment disorders sometimes hurt pets, but they also warned about other awful things that weren't true of Sunshine. In fact, most attachment parenting resources told of horrific behavior that made us grateful our girls' attachment disorders were “mild,” as if that's a thing. I was shocked at first, then mostly scared. Our girl was sick, and we had no idea bad. Sunshine loved our pets, didn't she? My mind began to race. Our 12-year old bulldog started vomiting his dog food a couple of weeks ago. Given that he had already outlived most bulldogs by several years, this wasn't surprising. However, this past week, Xena had begun regurgitating her food too. Could this be Sunshine?

Later that day, I told Sunshine she could no longer be alone with the dogs. Hoping she would confess to a one-time offense, I kept my words few and vague. She asked what

I knew about Leo, which hinted she had done this before. I asked her about Xena and Chuck too. She dodged again, asking me what I knew. She didn't confess but she didn't deny either. After that day, both bulldogs ate their food without any problems.

Figure 24

The Purple Book: When Love Is Not Enough



Pandemic's Cost Paid by Mothers

Reflecting on Sunshine's struggles, I counted the costs paid by me and other mother/leaders (and our children) during the pandemic. Women described overwhelming guilt because our children suffered during this crisis, and we blamed ourselves. Monica was annoyed and confused when her middle child began using nonbinary pronouns, but when they threatened suicide, Monica felt terror first, and then guilt. She wondered how she could have missed the signs. I countered, "How could she have *not* missed the signs?"

Located in the "pinch point of the [educational] system, [...] school leaders [walked] a tightrope without a safety net" (Harris & Jones, 2020, p. 244). Mother/leaders

were at an additional, intersecting pinch point. We managed the bulk of care work, homeschooling, and domestic labor while also juggling extensive leadership demands, a reality that has been largely ignored by educational institutions, researchers, governments, and the media (O'Reilly, 2021; O'Reilly & Green, 2021). The cultures of intensive leadership (Baker, 2016) and intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) worked in tandem to keep us toiling in uncertainty and intense pressure.

The voices rising from Chapter IV resonated an impressive collection of mothering and leading skills enacted by a group of intelligent, well-educated, and savvy women. **Why then, from within this context of precarity, did we labor for nearly two years without relief? Why didn't we ask for, or demand, support? Why did we continue to pay the rising costs of mothering and leading with our bodies, minds, and families, yet criticize *ourselves* for not doing enough?** As my stories and lived experiences crystallized with those of other mother/leaders throughout this project, certain ideas rose to the surface. As these wonderings interacted with feminist theory and the existing literature on mothering and educational leadership, they created a tapestry of understanding about ourselves (*auto*) as well as the culture of leadership (*ethno*).

Interlude: I'm Still Standing

In spring 2020, at the height of the chaos at school and home, I leveraged the power of songs for care work. Teachers experienced the combined stressors of intense isolation, learning *and* delivering remote instruction concurrently, and for many, caring for their own children. I hosted weekly staff meetings by Zoom to keep everyone apprised of ongoing changes to our plans. Teachers sometimes had more questions than I

had answers. To lighten the mood and honor their labor, I opened each meeting with an inspirational song. Frequently, this was the only time I saw smiles in the Zoom gallery.

The idea of opening with a song first came to me about 10 minutes before one of our weekly online meetings. With no time for a song search, I chose my favorite pick-me-up, “I’m Still Standing” (John & Taupin, 1983). This song seemed appropriate at the moment. As a child of the 1980s, I vaguely remember the video – Elton John in a suit on the beach with his crazy glasses. Seizing the opportunity to share both audio and video, something we didn’t do when using music for in-person meetings, I made a quick YouTube search for the video and shared my screen.

As people logged in, they smiled, sang along, and even did some seat dancing. We laughed and cringed at the 80s costumes in the video, a bit garish and flamboyant per Elton’s usual style. Throughout the first minute of the song, the painted bodies and revealing swimsuits triggered some impression management in me, but it was all in good fun, so I brushed it off. At the two-minute mark, however, the video became overtly suggestive. I couldn’t find the “stop share” button quickly enough. Zoom was still new, so I fumbled to unshare the video. Red-faced, I apologized. There was no Title IX investigation and we still joke about it. After that debacle, I screened all videos before showing them in staff meetings.

Evolution of Theme Songs

Smile – Emotional Labor and Cruel Optimism

As we opened the school year in August 2020, I continued to use songs as a tool for care work. My assistant principal, coach, and I inscribed mock 45 rpm LPs with a unique teacher theme song and an encouraging note for each of our 72 teachers. Hoping

to buoy their spirits, we distributed the theme songs at our first standing, socially-distanced staff meeting.

Staff meetings remained virtual for most of the 2020 – 2021 year, and I wanted to continue opening with music. Instead of finding a new song each week, I selected one theme song for the year. To keep things up positive and happy, I selected the upbeat pop tune “Smile” by Katy Perry (Perry et al., 2020) and played it at the opening of every staffing meeting.

Yeah, I'm thankful.
Scratch that, baby, I'm grateful.
Gotta say it's really been a while.
But now I got back that smile” (Perry et al., 2020)

The lyrics were intended to inspire, but as the school year stretched on, the words became hollow, creating “a relation that [was] ultimately unworkable” (Capellini et al., 2019, p. 472). Feminist scholar Lauren Berlant (2006) calls this “cruel optimism,” tethering us to an idea with “compromised” (p. 21) possibilities. Without realizing it, I was enacting emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), as a masculine leadership practice, to create the desired effect of positivity on my staff. Like me, many mother/leaders put on a brave face and ignored our adversity, unwittingly collaborating with impression management norms of education leadership to keep our struggles invisible.

In simplest terms, pretending things were fine, didn’t actually make them fine. Instead, it made things worse by highlighting the masculine leadership practices – stoicism, individuality, control, and strength – that govern schools. We suppressed our negative feelings and struggle because we believed that leaders are in control. In doing so, however, we collaborated in minimizing the personal challenges we were experiencing which reinforced the invisibility of emotion and caring labor enacted by

mother/leaders during the crisis (Berlant, 2006). Devaluing motherwork extinguished hope of real collective strategies we might create in these conditions. It, in fact, undermined the visibility of the inequitable gendered burden placed on mothers in leadership. Cruel optimism and emotional labor were agents serving to increase the social power of patriarchy in leadership by silencing women's voices. In her study of emotional labor in precarity, Veldstra (2020) explains:

The stakes of the implicit demand for emotional labour are highest at its intersection with precarity. [...] Precarious workers have no choice but to at least appear – in their affective orientation – to remain attached to the systems that generate their exploitation. [...] Conditions of precarity come together with the demands of an affective economy to provide little option but to internalize negative emotions that might otherwise pose a challenge to the neoliberal status quo. This dynamic explains the *cruelty* of cruel optimism in this context as the expectation that those pinched between precarious work and affective labour take on the emotional labour necessary to bear the hefty personal costs of precarity while continuing to express optimism.

Women's stories were framed almost exclusively by the gendered norms that govern mothering and educational leadership—expectations of performing in particular ways all the time. When her superintendent told Grace and other school leaders to maintain a strong (masculine) leadership persona throughout the pandemic, she complied. Her recollection paints a vivid picture of emotional labor as cruel optimism:

[The superintendent] said, “You can say whatever you want when we're in here, but when you're out there, you need to model strength and be the support for

everyone else.” And I've really taken that to heart because it, he's right, if I was a blubbering mess every day because of this situation, my teachers would not feel confident. And so you know, and they laugh at me because I always say, “It's fine.” And I smile, this big fake smile, “It's fine.” And so they know when I say that, it's not fine, but that I'm going to be pushing through until it is.

Stuffing her emotions, building teacher confidence, and pushing through suggested her acceptance of primary responsibility for teacher support and care work, as well as her complicity in maintaining the entrenched institutional norms of patriarchal leadership of schools. Mother/leaders were told directly by supervisors, or indirectly by pervasive social norms, that good leaders stay strong, keep working, and smile. Sachs and Blackmore (1998) warn women in school leadership, “never show you can't cope” (p. 274).

Women in education leadership are culturized to demonstrate strength and composure. As the face of the school, many feel we have to “keep it together” for teachers, students, and stakeholders. In fact, as part of our impression management and proof that we can handle the job, I expect most of us portray this same strength when engaging with our supervisors and directors. I would also venture that although her superintendent allowed leaders to “say whatever you want when we're in here,” none ever did.

Complicity

Women's stories of their leadership and mothering labor revealed their participation in their own conditions of precarity and overwork. They acknowledged over and over that while they were taking care of everyone, and it was “killing us,” nobody

was taking care of moms. It made me wonder why these women, despite incomprehensible fatigue, never asked for help. I considered my own experiences and thought through women's interviews. Although it seemed too easy an explanation, I offer that we simply accepted that mothering and leading (even without precarity) were challenging roles, but we chose them for ourselves. We accepted the expectations we perceived as inherent to these roles. In their study of intensive mothering in hard times, Cappellini et al. (2019) also recognized the complicity of mothers in their oppression:

[Mothers] have tamed their own lives to follow ideals of self-sacrifice. This is not framed as a 'choice', something that women have planned and selected for themselves, but more as a naturalized pattern that they follow because this is 'the way things are' and 'this is what mums do'.

We accepted the roles, so we must keep going and doing and performing leadership.

Framing their navigations primarily with "I" statements, women's language revealed the masculine, neoliberal culture of school leadership which values individual effort, positional power, and performativity over collaboration, emotion, and a socially just orientation. Leadership often translates to taking charge, controlling conditions to the best of one's ability, and creating the culture of the school. Most mother/leaders accept that they are personally responsible for their school's success, even in precarious circumstances. Like intensive mothering norms that assign the second shift solely to women, the gendered structure of leadership places the obligation of crisis leadership squarely on the shoulders of individuals. As solo operatives leading schools while concurrently (but invisibly) leading homes, mothers were materially unable to do it all, yet women rarely spoke about the lack of support and were hesitant to blame others or to

question the impossible structures themselves. Cummins and Brannon (2021) agree, “Mothers internalize intensive motherhood predicated upon neoliberalism to find themselves constantly failing; then, they assume it is a personal, individual issue rather than a problem with society at large” (Cummins & Brannon, 2021, p. 213). Anything that contradicted the metanarrative of individual inadequacy simply never entered women’s conversations.

This study offers an alternate matricentric narrative that contradicts the dominant gendered discourse that frames mother/leaders’ failures as personal rather than the result of the inequitable patriarchal structure of leadership. This narrative seeks to open their eyes and lift their voices offering hope that their labor will be seen and valued.

I Still Believe – The Personal is Political

In May 2021, over a full year since the pandemic upended my mothering and leading worlds, I hosted my final leadership team meeting of the year. It was the longest, hardest year, and I was searching for a way to honor the teacher leaders at my school. I startled awake around 3:30 a.m. with a song playing on repeat in my head – “I Still Believe” (Goodwin & Been, 1986). I got out of bed to locate the song, a staple on my college playlist in 1989 but long since forgotten. Letting go of the emotional labor of “Smile” (Perry et al., 2020), it was time to honor the reality of our work.

Contrary to the peppy neo-disco vibe of Katy Perry, *The Call* brought a strong bassline, drums, and gritty lyrics. Hyped from looping the song all morning, I circled my leadership team on the carpet and invited them to remove their masks, if they felt comfortable, and hold hands. It was time for them to be seen. I shared the lyrics and played the obscure song. As we listened, we cried together.

I've been in a cave for forty days
Only a spark to light my way
I wanna give out, I wanna give in
This is our crime
This is our sin

But I still believe, I still believe
Through the shame and through the grief
Through the heartache, through the tears
Through the waiting, through the years

I'll march this road, I'll climb this hill
Up on my knees if I have to
For people like us in places like this
We need all the hope that we can get

Oh, I still believe (Goodwin & Been, 1986).

The emotional catharsis not only honored the exhausting labor women (teachers and leaders) enacted over the past year, it opened the door to a more authentic feminist practice of educational leadership. We embraced relationship, community, messiness, care, emotions (but not as performative), vulnerability, and embodiment. Perhaps these are the key to unlocking the heart of our complicity. For the first time in a while, I felt hopeful.

Admittedly, at the time I wasn't thinking how feminist theory was at play in my leadership, but throughout the process of writing to know and crystallizing mine and other women's experiences, I heard a feminist voice rising, reminding us that the personal is political. In her call for more feminist leadership orientations in education, Jill Blackmore (2006) reminds us, "There is some consensus in terms of a shared political project based on the personal is the political; a desire to produce social change and improvement and a passion to undertake politically motivated research and politically engaged theory" (p. 186). The first step in social change is awareness of the need for a

different, more just leadership culture. This research revealed to me that in the nonstop going and doing, most mother/leaders probably never slowed down enough to consider the benefits of feminist leadership as an alternative to the established masculine order.

Gendered power structures are socially constructed to perpetuate the dominant, White masculine order, to the exclusion of all others positioned outside the patriarchal structure. The result is inhumane constraints on mother/leaders which became amplified in precarity. To perform her leadership role, Gabby had to risk her own health and the health of her daughter due to a blanket decision that school leaders were ineligible for remote work. Janessa, resisting this homogenized decision and refusing to endanger her pregnancy, faced disciplinary action for not working from the school building. By making the personal political, feminism confronts oppressive, mother-blind structures, seeking emancipation for those oppressed by gender, race, class, or other conditions of marginalization. Feminist ideology challenges us to resist intensive mothering and intensive leadership and the neoliberalism that keeps us striving unsuccessfully as individual actants.

Thoughts on Education Leadership Theory

Feminine Leadership Skills vs. Manifestations of Feminist Leadership

One key discovery from mother/leaders' narratives was their enactment of feminine leadership skills. Women described care work as compassionate, relational, supportive, participative, and sometimes emotional. Prior to COVID-19, feminine leadership skills were gaining popularity with the proliferation of emotionally sensitive, transformational leadership frameworks (Beatty, 2000; Fullan, 2001; Hallinger et al., 2016; Hargreaves, 2004; Leithwood & Beatty, 2008), and the initial offering of post-

COVID-19 literature suggests feminine leadership skills are essential in precarity (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Grooms & Childs, 2021; Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2021). Aptly titled in light of mine and other women's mothering and leading navigations, "Fighting windmills" (Rodriguez et al., 2021, p. i) described the experiences of a female principal in Spain during the pandemic:

In this sense, it is relevant to point out that these educational practices in a challenging context coincide with those leadership values developed by female school leaders. In fact, several studies suggest that in contexts of difficult performance, female school principals promote leadership strategies and actions based on collective commitment, mutual support and social justice (p. 14).

Feminine leadership skills weren't new in educational leadership before the pandemic, and by all means, we needed more leaders with better listening, collaboration, and relationship skill. But as I considered the labor, stress, and pain of the women in this study – all of whom demonstrated varied feminine leadership skills – I couldn't help but wonder why they struggled so fiercely. If the pandemic called for leadership skills gendered feminine, and that's exactly what we were doing, why were women still carrying such a heavy burden. We worked for over 20 months with little result, except guilt, failure, exhaustion, and burnout. Something was missing, so I turned again to the literature. Eacott (2011) revealed a possibility, "Leadership welcomes complexity and ambiguity and cannot be represented in a neat framework" (p. 5). The multidimensional nature of leading in a range of contexts, pandemic included, disavows the simplicity of frameworks that offer a list of prescriptive leadership skills.

I used the literature on feminist educational leadership as a site for further exploration. What I found was that feminine leadership skills do not, necessarily, represent the fundamental premises of feminist leadership – social justice, representation, emancipation, and dislodging masculine power structures (Blackmore, 2006; Dentith & Peterlin, 2011; Doan & Jaber, 2021; Sachs & Blackmore, 1998). While transformational leadership foregrounds emotion, it ignores the social, structural, and cultural contexts of educational leadership. Blackmore (2006) highlights the distinction between feminist leadership as a concept and a set of skills, “Not all women and leadership research is ‘feminist’ when gender is treated as just another variable and not an organising principle. For feminists, leadership is about gendered power relations that impact on social justice” (p. 187). Social justice includes the leaders, staff, and students in the system.

Offering alternative ways of conceptualizing leadership, not just a selection of leadership skills, feminist leadership as theoretical offers promise for transforming schools into socially just organizations. However, the overtly hierarchical, neoliberal patriarchal structure of schools has constrained feminists emancipatory promise.

Feminist perspectives therefore offer alternative ways of thinking about leadership as a situated social and political practice, a habitus produced over time and not merely equated to position. While feminists within educational administration and leadership research and practice have been transgressive, it has often been within the parameters set by others (Blackmore, 2011, p. 195).

For women seeking to promote a distinctly feminist leadership practice, the research and the mother/leaders in this study offer some ideas. While listening is essential in transformational leadership, **feminist listening** requires listening with an open mind

and without judgment. We must court diverse voices and listen, attending to ours and others' biases that might dismiss alternate perspectives (Blackmore, 2011; Dentith & Peterlin, 2011; Doan & Jaber, 2021). Doan & Jaber (2021) offer some framing about the entrenched ideas guiding leadership practices that endure today, despite diverse forms of leadership and the rise of women leaders: "Leadership paradigms were created by white men for white men, and leaders of all identities continue to be compared against these theories and tools with the consequence that equity-seeking groups are not measuring up" (p. 2).

Feminist leadership calls us to **ask questions** and **look critically** at our practices and the structures of leadership (Dentith & Peterlin, 2011) and the conditions of our own labor and practices. We must interrogate the gendered inequalities that have long existed in education leadership and question our complicity in perpetuating them. We must approach our leadership with **authenticity**, resisting the performative culture of leadership. We must avoid impression management that lures us to judge ourselves and others by an unrealistic standard. Describing her lessons learned, Janessa illuminated the importance of living authentically, a distinctly feminine notion:

[The dual challenges of COVID and racial reckoning] elevated my voice. It pushed me to use my voice, use any like platform that was given to me. I can either be totally real and totally myself, or do I need to, like, scrub this really, really clean and make it very, very palatable for everybody? I'm not willing to do that.

Feminist leadership as a practice focuses on power and how power is wielded in schools to promote some and marginalize others. The ultimate goal of feminism, then, is

to transition power into **empowerment for more equitable conditions for all**. In doing so, the voices previously marginalized by the historical structure and practices of schools can be heard and included. This is the emancipatory promise of feminist leadership.

New Visions of Leadership

There is no “I” in Mother or Leader

This collection of mother leaders’ pandemic narratives offered a range of heartwarming, painful, infuriating, and emotional moments that painted a vivid image of life during the first two years of COVID-19. The women’s stories exist as more than a static historical account of pandemic life. Dynamic and agential, they hold the potential to transform the culture of leadership for mothers in their settings and others positioned as inferior by the gendered structure of schools.

Women’s voices rising above the chaos offered lessons for mothers and all leaders seeking a more socially just leadership culture. Recognizing that all change starts with one person taking a single forward step, women described small but powerful lessons learned over the past two years. Some women expressed a desire to be kinder and less judgmental of themselves. Holly said, “We can’t compare ourselves. Everyone is different.” Several reprioritized families over paid labor by establishing limits on intensive leadership that was incessant and without any discernable ending point. Women needed to construct their own ends. Finished with long hours at school, Sarah determined, “This year I’ve just said I’m not going to do it.”

Family was a constant in the narratives, as women expressed a renewed focus on mothering on their terms. “I’m just resolved that there is no, no right way,” Monica said. Elizabeth was adamant about making “decisions that are right for our families,” and for

Rosie, this simply meant, “We stick together” through hard times. Summing up her improved commitment to self and family, one mom expressed, “We’re going to live life, and we’re going to enjoy our life.”

Women recognized the difficulties of mothering and leading as solo actants, although, with some exceptions, this was their predominant mode of activity in the pandemic. Ally’s experience with isolation opened her eyes to the need to share her burden, “Don’t keep emotions bottled up. Talk to someone. Get it out.” Grace articulately lobbied for a community of similarly positioned mother/leaders to support each other:

I think that one of the things that we are really bad about is finding that common space. I think about, you know, reading that and hearing what some of [the mother/leaders] said and their experiences. We are all experiencing very similar things, and in very similar ways, which is fascinating to me. [...] These are conversations, like, you think about relieving the burden. My husband can't empathize with me, you know. Some of the teachers can't, you know, the teachers can't. My mom can't; my friends can't. The people who can empathize with me, are other leaders in this position. And I think that that's the one thing that we are seriously missing, that would help all of us in self-care, is even just having, you know, a conversation every now and again, with a group of us. And I don't know why we don't do that, other than the fact that there's just no time.

I agreed, mother/leaders needed and deserved a community of support, as a space of comfort, care, recognition, and collectivity, but I also felt the tug of feminist sensibilities issuing us a grander call. But how? Just days before this writing, I struggled to understand what I had learned as a mother/leader surviving a pandemic. Sure, it would be

nice to have more flexible schedules, accessible childcare, recognition of our caring labor, humane healthcare policies, and reasonable workloads, but beyond individualized accommodations of the patriarchal norm, I could imagine nothing.

Collaborating with my adviser and turning to the literature one final time, I began to understand what Bromwich (2021) envisaged, “This time of unprecedented possibility reveals that change can be made to all aspects of social life, including gender relations” (p. 137). To reconceptualize leadership from a feminist position, required letting go of the gendered structure I knew and had navigated for over a decade. Reimagining could emanate from a masculine paradigm; it could only originate from my own embodied position as a mother/leader. From this worthy position, mother/leaders must come together as a collective body to engage in dialogue that renders visible our labor and audible our voices and create ways of changing conditions within our contexts, whether in small or large ways. Our stories make clear the futility of individual labor. We must engage our collective consciousness of our shared experiences to disrupt gender inequity.

I wish a feminist reconceptualization of culture was as simple as mother/leaders heeding Sunshine’s angry pandemic directive, “Stop!” but the social norms surrounding us – the air we breathe – are deeply-rooted. Still, I challenge you, mother/leader, to cast off the known and embrace the wild, scary unknown. Your voices, no longer silent, compel us to imagine previously undreamt possibilities. Stop when you can stop, to reflect and dream. When you cannot stop, continue moving and becoming. Most of all, use your voice boldly so that others will hear and see you lead like only a mother can.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Female Leaders' Experiences during COVID-19: Mothering and Leading in Times of Peril

Researcher: Lisa Crosslin
Participant Recruitment Email

Dear _____,

I am conducting research for my dissertation regarding the current phenomenon surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, I am studying mothers who are also leaders to explore how they negotiate the dual roles of mother and leader/worker during times of peril. During summer 2020, I will be conducting pilot interviews with female leaders/workers with children ages 0-12 to understand their experiences during the pandemic. These pilot interviews will serve as a basis for developing relevant research questions. The pilot interviews will be conducted virtually using Zoom per CDC guidelines. Once allowable and safe, the researcher would like to expand the interviews to face-to-face interviews in school leader offices to consider the importance of the physical spaces of mother-principals work. I am reaching out to you because I know you, like me, have young children at home. Would you be interested in volunteering to participate in a pilot interview for this study?

Once I receive appropriate approvals, I plan to conduct interviews this summer. Let me

know if you are interested. I look forward to speaking with you about your recent experiences. If you have any questions, I can be reached by email:

lisa.crosslin@okstate.edu or phone: 405-443-0601.

Regards,

Lisa Crosslin

Appendix B



Department of Educational Leadership

Informed Consent Form ***Female Leaders' Experiences during COVID-19: Mothering and Leading in Times of Peril***

Background Information

You are invited to be in a research study of school leaders who are also mothers during COVID-19. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. Your participation in this research is voluntary. There is no penalty for refusal to participate, and you are free to withdraw your consent and participation in this project at any time. You can skip any questions that make you uncomfortable and can stop the interview at any time.

This study is being conducted by: Lisa Crosslin, doctoral student and Oklahoma State University, under the direction of Dr. Lucy Bailey, Social Foundations/Gender and Women's Studies, Oklahoma State University.

Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things: participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher via Zoom to answer questions related to your roles as mother and leader during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interview would be recorded and the data obtained from the pilot interview would assist the researcher in developing additional relevant interview questions to be used as the research progresses. A follow up via email would be conducted to member check the transcription once it is complete. This will take 15-30 minutes. One follow-up interview following the same format could be scheduled as a follow-up.

Participation in the study involves the following time commitment: The interview will last 45-75 minutes. Approximately one month after the interview, the researcher will follow up via email to conduct a "member check" of the interview transcript that will take 15-30 minutes.

Compensation

You will receive no payment for participating in this study.

Confidentiality

The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your information will be assigned a code number/pseudonym. The information connecting your name to this code will be kept in a locked file. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, this information will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report.

We will collect your information through a virtual interview via Zoom. This data will be stored on a password protected computer in an encrypted file. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, the code list linking names to study numbers will be destroyed. This is expected to occur no later than December 2021. The audio recording will be transcribed by the researcher, and all identifying information (e.g. participant name, email, unusual town names, unique professional roles, name of workplace) will be removed by the researcher. The recording will be deleted after the transcription is complete and verified by participant. This process should be complete by December 2021.

Contacts and Questions

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human research participants at Oklahoma State University has reviewed and approved this study. If you have questions about the research study itself, please contact the Principal Investigator at 405-443-0601, lisarcrosslin@gmail.com or Dr. Lucy Bailey, adviser, at 405-744-9194, lucy.bailey@okstate.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research volunteer or would simply like to speak with someone other than the research team about concerns regarding this study, please contact the IRB at (405) 744-3377 or irb@okstate.edu. All reports or correspondence will be kept confidential.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have my questions answered. I consent to participate in the study.

Indicate Yes or No:

I give consent to be audiotaped during this study.

Yes No

I give consent to be videotaped during this study:

Yes No

I give consent to be contacted for follow-up in this study or future similar studies:

Yes No

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C
Female Leaders' Experiences during COVID-19: Mothering and Leading in Times of Peril

Researcher: Lisa Crosslin
Interview Guide

Background

1. Tell me a little about your professional journey and what led you into education leadership.
2. How would you describe your leadership style and what you enjoy about leading?
3. Tell me about your family. What are your kids like?
4. How would you describe yourself as a mother? How would your kids describe you as a mother?

Current Position

5. Tell me about your current position. What does a typical day look like for you as a leader? What are your primary responsibilities?
6. Describe your life as a working mother prior to COVID-19.
Explain how you negotiated the role of mother and leader prior to COVID-19.

COVID-19 Context

7. Describe a typical workday during COVID-19. Explain how your job changed during the pandemic.
8. What tasks were difficult for you as a leader? What made these challenging.
9. Tell me about things that were more manageable for you as a leader during the pandemic.
10. As a mother, talk about the challenges you faced during COVID-19.
11. Describe what went well for you as a mother during the pandemic.

12. How did you negotiate the concurrent roles of mothering and leading, especially when you were still on contract?
13. What inequities or inefficiencies were surfaced by the COVID-19 pandemic?
14. Tell me a bit about your greatest uncertainties as a mother and leader during COVID-19.
15. Explain how your confidence has been unsettled because of the pandemic.
16. Describe where your confidence has remained secure despite the COVID-19 pandemic.
17. Tell me how your experiences changed from the beginning of the COVID pandemic in March 2020 to the present.
18. How have you negotiated your relationship with your husband/partner/spouse/While working from home during COVID?
19. What equity issues with the school's children are you facing during this time?
20. What issues with teachers are you facing during this time?
21. What advice have you given your teachers during this time?
22. What advice would you have for new school leaders (or teachers, depending on the position) right now?
23. Have COVID events surfaced any inefficiencies in school practices that you'd like to address when things get back to normal? What practices would you like to retain, or dispense with, going forward?)
24. Have you had any emotional meltdowns during this time? Could you share? What precipitated, etc.
25. Talk a little about your self-care during the pandemic.
26. How well have you slept during the pandemic?

27. Thinking of working from home, describe what your physical spaces looked like and felt like?

28. Describe the unique experiences you faced as a mother and leader during the pandemic.

Looking Ahead

29. What stories stand out for you from this experience as a mother/leader?

30. What did you learn about yourself as a mother/leader through the COVID-19 experience?

31. How do you lead in times of peril?

32. Looking ahead, what uncertainties do you have for the future?

How do you feel you have grown as a leader during this time? How has your vision of leadership shifted as a result of COVID?

VITA

Lisa R. Crosslin

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Dissertation: FEMALE LEADERS' EXPERIENCES IN COVID-19: MOTHERING AND LEADING IN TIMES OF PERIL

Major Field: School Administration

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Education in School Administration at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May, 2022.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Education in School Counseling at East Central University, Ada, OK/USA in 1998.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in History at Oklahoma Baptist University, Shawnee, OK/USA in 1992.

Experience:

15 years School Principal

5 years School Counselor

9 years Teacher – High School and Middle School

Professional Memberships:

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD)

National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)

Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association (TEPSA)

Publications:

Crosslin, L. & Bailey, L. E. (2021). Mother school leaders negotiate 'blurred Lines' between work and home during COVID-19. *Planning and Changing*, 50(3/4), 165-189.