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COVID-19's Impact on School Principals' Self-Efficacy as Managerial Leaders

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COVID-19'S IMPACT ON SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' SELF-EFFICACY AS

MANAGERIAL LEADERS

by

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STATEMENT OF DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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has been approved by the following supervisory committee members:

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Date Approved

Dr. Alex Herring, Member   **April 15, 2023**
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and by **Dr**. **J. Lee Brown III**, Dean of the Graduate School.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation in practice (DiP) employs qualitative research and educational theories to examine the impact of COVID-19 on school principals' self-efficacy in one South Carolina school district. Its theoretical framework is based on Bandura's (1977, 1986, 1997) social cognitive theory. The dissertation begins by outlining the specific problem at hand, relevant general concerns, and a purpose statement. This problem serves as the foundation for the research questions: How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted principals' self-efficacy as their schools' managerial leaders? How do these principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by school level (i.e., early childhood, primary, elementary, intermediate, middle, and high)? How do they vary in degree of impact by principals' years of experience? The design of this qualitative research study is framed by Creswell and Poth's (2016) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*.

Keywords: COVID-19; pandemic; school principals; self-efficacy; social cognitive theory; research-based practices

Recommended Citation

DEDICATION

This research study is dedicated to my two favorite people: my grandma, Carol, who has instilled learning in my life from the day I was born, and my mom, who is truly my best friend and biggest cheerleader. Thank you both for everything!

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Chapter One: Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a global phenomenon, spurring countless debates and controversies (Ciotti et al., 2020). The spread of COVID-19 resulted in school principals experiencing significant changes in their schools (Cutting, 2021; Jackson, 2022; Johnson, 2021). The pandemic has forced schools around the world into unknown territory, causing a plethora of challenges interfering with education, such as chronic absenteeism among students, teachers, and school leaders due to contraction of the virus or close contact with an individual who has contracted the virus as well as, in certain cases, feelings of confusion and isolation (Santibañez & Guarino, 2021).

Santibañez and Guarino (2021) have warned their readers of the devastating effects lack of attendance and school closures may have on student performance and overall school success. Fryer (2022) has drawn similar conclusions, suggesting absenteeism has disrupted educational leaders and the school day. An article by Tribune (2020) supports these ideas, explaining school principals are frustrated with disruptions and feel like they are unable to properly serve students, teachers, and families due to the limitations brought about by the pandemic. Additionally, they argue district, state, and federal officials must acknowledge overall school success will suffer without the health of school leaders.

This research contributes to the limited body of literature regarding the self-efficacy of school principals through the investigation of modern workforce issues school principals have faced and continue to face. More specifically, I explore the overall impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on school principals' self-efficacy as managerial leaders. School principals are leaders who are dedicated to creating a safe and fruitful

learning environment for both students and teachers (Sindhi, 2013). The literature indicates school principals play an essential role in shaping the values of young people, emphasizing instilling these values represents a cornerstone of every society (Berson et al., 2016). Despite the key role of the educational process, declines in well-being and feelings of isolation have been reported among principals, teachers, and students since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (Flack et al., 2021). I examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on principals specifically due to the significance of their role in maintaining the well-being of both students and teachers and their overall contributions to the field of education.

The literature indicates school principals are responsible for many domains in the field of education and these heavy obligations—which have grown significantly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic—may infringe on school principals' interpersonal feelings (Jacob et al., 2008). Since the start of the pandemic, "school principals have reported an increase in workloads" (Flack et al., 2021, p. 7). In this study, I analyze the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on school principals with regard to their interpersonal feelings and propose ideas for positive refinements based on my findings.

The literature on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on public schools has already showcased many new challenges and warned us of potential future concerns. Interestingly, the pandemic has offered an opening for all stakeholders in the field of education to formulate and implement new means of growth and development (Jameson et al., 2020). Noting key gaps in the literature on this recent topic, I examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school principals' self-efficacy and discuss my findings. School principals have experienced significant changes in their schools since the start of

the COVID-19 pandemic, influencing them as managerial leaders (Cutting, 2021; Jackson, 2022; Johnson, 2021; Khuluqo & Tenkahary, 2021).

Metcalfe and Perez (2020) have already detailed some causes of low self-efficacy among principals stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. They discuss how, while educators, support staff, and students stayed home during the initial wave of school closures, many principals were still required to report to their brick-and-mortar schools regardless of their childcare needs or other family situations. I aim to contribute to the existing literature by comparing school principals' pre-pandemic self-efficacy to their post-pandemic self-efficacy from a managerial leadership perspective.

Problem Statement

The COVID-19 pandemic has potentially impacted the self-efficacy of principals as the managerial leaders of their schools in a South Carolina school district. When considering the qualitative approach with the best fit for this research, I looked to Creswell and Poth's (2016) description of phenomenological research. They assert phenomenological research is appropriate when researchers aim to identify a lived experience of individuals pertaining to a specific phenomenon. Based on my problem statement and research questions, this qualitative study undoubtedly aims to describe a lived phenomenon. Thus, I frame this study with phenomenological research procedures based on the guidance of Eddles-Hirsch (2015), Moustakas (1994), and Phillips-Pula et al. (2011) regarding phenomenological research methods.

Based on the current literature, there is still a limited understanding of how to combat post-pandemic factors in educational settings. This dearth of research led me to my problem statement: The COVID-19 pandemic has potentially impacted the self-

efficacy of principals as the managerial leaders of their schools in a South Carolina school district. Principals' perceptions of their own ability to managerially lead teachers, faculty, and students may be among the most significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants in this study are school principals who have served in their leadership position from at least the 2018/2019 school year to the present day in the same school district. These principals have experience leading their schools in both the pre- and post-COVID-19 eras and have experienced the level of support offered by federal, state, and district officials throughout this pandemic. There is a need for a greater understanding of the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on school principals, as these officials have a significant influence on student performance (Grissom et al., 2021). Evidence indicates "students learn substantially more in both math and reading in schools with more effective principals" (Grissom et al., 2021, p. 43). Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay (2021) demonstrate school principals' actions have both immediate and gradual effects on all of their students, teachers, and staff members. According to Crumbley (2021), "Engaging with crisis response protocols is becoming commonplace for high school principals as they navigate the critical task of responding when crises occur, while keeping students and employees safe at school" (p. 1).

Nature of the Study

This qualitative study aims to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school principals' self-efficacy in one South Carolina school district. Its focus is on understanding the essence of school principals' experiences as managerial leaders since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of these experiences on their self-

efficacy. To further examine the pandemic's effects, I pose three primary research questions and three theses.

Research Questions:

1. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the self-efficacy of principals as the managerial leaders of their schools?

2. How do these principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by school level (i.e., early childhood, primary, elementary, intermediate, middle, and high)?

3. How do these principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by their years of experience?

Theses:

1. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted principals' self-efficacy as the managerial leaders of their schools.

2. These principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by school level (i.e., early childhood, primary, elementary, intermediate, middle, and high).

3. These principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by their years of experience.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school principals' self-efficacy as managerial leaders in a South Carolina school district. Bandura (1977, 1986, 1997) was the first to emphasize the significance of self-efficacy and its influence on stakeholders. Self-efficacy is a measure of one's confidence and belief in their own actions and performance (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997).

Bandura's work provides us with powerful explanations and recommendations pertaining to efficacy, postulating research on self-efficacy can be conducted through the lens of social cognitive theory. Ultimately, Bandura (1977, 1986, 1997) popularized a combination of behavioral theory and cognitive theory outlining means of learning from one another: through observation, through imitation, and through modeling self-worth. Creswell (2002) provides information about social cognitive theory in support of the idea school principals' self-efficacy constitutes an indicator of their performance and, in turn, the performance of their faculty, staff, and students.

As already established, the purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school principals' self-efficacy as managerial leaders in a South Carolina school district. Rehm et al. (2021) argue the spread of COVID-19 has resulted in a wide variety of obstacles for school leaders. While some research already exists on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school principals, this study has the potential to provide additional insight into the limited body of literature on this topic given the recency of the pandemic.

The Theoretical Framework

In selecting a theoretical framework under which to effectively assess the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school principals' self-efficacy, social cognitive theory, founded by Albert Bandura (1977, 1986, 1997), was found to effectively frame this study. Social cognitive theory, which discusses the roles and self-beliefs through which individuals manage their thoughts, feelings, and actions, was first outlined in *Social Foundations of Thought and Action* (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). Bandura has shaped social cognitive theory by theorizing about the significance of

interpersonal beliefs, explaining it is vital for humans to acknowledge their feelings and react accordingly (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). Under the framework of social cognitive theory, this study should reveal whether principals felt equipped to uphold the integrity of their role as managerial leader during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Self-Efficacy Beliefs

Bandura (1977, 1986, 1997) views self-efficacy as the fundamental factor in social cognitive theory. According to Bandura (1986), self-efficacy entails "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (p. 391). His insight points to the importance of future research initiatives aimed at supporting people's interpersonal feelings and performance. Importantly, recent research suggests the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the personal growth of school leaders (Ritchie et al., 2021).

Many educational scholars (e.g., Hattie, 1985; Linnenbrink, 2002; Pajares, 2002; Pintrich, 2004) have contributed to the literature on self-efficacy in schools. Hattie (1985) shows self-belief is correlated with academic achievement and emphasizes the importance of setting goals. Evidence from other creditable sources (e.g., Pajares, 2002) backs up Bandura's (1977, 1986, 1997) assertion effectiveness contributes to intrinsic motivation and internal feelings of accomplishment. Additionally, evidence shows "self-efficacy is linked to human functioning, which is influenced by many factors" (Pajares, 2002, p. 2). Pintrich (2004) outlines a framework in line with Bandura's ideas (1977, 1986, 1997) assessing student motivations and self-regulated learning through the use of several instruments which may be useful in conducting future research on motivation's relationship with growth. Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2002) frame "motivation as an

enabler for academic success" (p. 313) and argue there is a positive correlation between feelings of competence and positive results in schools. The common theme among these stakeholders is feeling useful and effective determines overall progress and success.

Qualitative Study

There is some general guidance regarding the time and depth necessary to conduct a valid and reliable qualitative study in the field of education (Mertens, 2020). Mertens (2020), in a discussion of phenomenological research, asserts "The key characteristic is the way in which members of a group or community themselves interpret the world and life around them" (p. 255). Thus, my goal as the researcher behind this qualitative study is to understand my participants' views. As an ethical researcher, it is vital for me to be cautious in presenting the voices of the participants.

This study examines the qualitative components underlying the potential impact of the global spread of COVID-19 on the self-efficacy of school principals in one South Carolina school district. Each participant engaged in a survey and interview. The atmospheric encounters and experiences of school principals who have participated in this study have strengthened my research process. As already established, I employ social cognitive theory to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the self-efficacy of school principals in a South Carolina school district. The benefits of heightened feelings of personal value include cognitive reasoning, feelings of empathy, self-regulation, and a clearer understanding of human functioning (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997).

As described by Dadaczynski et al. (2020), cognitive and emotional irritation, a lack of work-related resources, and low work satisfaction collectively lead to low feelings

of usefulness, negatively impacting performance. This lack of resources and hampered emotions make operating a school difficult for managerial leaders. Ng (2016) would likely find value in Dadaczynski's (2020) findings, as he has identified numerous ideas framed on social cognitive theory proposing if school principals do not have a strong belief in themselves and their resources, it would be highly challenging for their followers to operate efficiently and effectively. Koonce et al. (2019) discuss similar ideas regarding principals' self-efficiency as it pertains to social cognitive theory and show principals having the autonomy to be active and engaged in decision-making is constructive to their performance and overall school success. In this study, I follow the complex steps to conduct productive interviews outlined by Mertens (2020). Directly administering the surveys and interviews enabled me to identify common themes, closely interpret the data, and determine the validity of my hypotheses. This study has the potential to produce findings guiding the future of education research.

The qualitative nature of my study was employed to mold my three research questions and provide three working hypotheses. My data-collection process served to produce a premise for conclusions and projections. Bandura's self-efficacy theory (1977, 1986, 1997) played a significant role in the development of this study's theoretical framework, which offers an opportunity to examine the self-efficacy of school principals with the aim of, more broadly, assessing success among school leaders during crises.

Operational Definitions

This study employs specific terminology to elaborate on the three research questions. I evaluated the self-efficacy of school principals through their feelings and beliefs regarding their ability to lead based on the recent circumstances effected by the

COVID-19 pandemic. The shortage of teachers in brick-and-mortar school buildings and the shortfall of student attendance are both directly correlated with the COVID-19 pandemic and have both negatively influenced the routines and responsibilities of school principals, damaging their feelings of self-value. School principals should collaborate with and communicate their needs to district and state officials; otherwise, development may not occur in schools. This investigation has the potential to serve as a foundation for a future longitudinal study assessing schools throughout South Carolina. Operationally, the variable "self-efficacy" was defined by personal beliefs from the principal survey and interviews.

This study discusses the concept of "crisis" specifically as it pertains to the COVID-19 pandemic. Gainey (2003) declares, "While crisis management is frequently thought of as responding to violence, crisis management in its broadest sense involves consideration for any event negatively affecting an organization's reputation or ability to accomplish its mission or purpose for existence."

- *Crisis*—Any type of event negatively affecting an organization's reputation or ability to accomplish its mission or purpose for existence (Gainey, 2003).
- *Social Cognitive Theory*—The critical role of self-beliefs in human cognition, motivation, and behavior (Bandura, 1986).
- *COVID-19 Pandemic*—A pandemic which began in 2019 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).
- *Managerial Leader*—An effective educational leader who fosters the academic success and well-being of each student by managing their school's organization,

operations, and resources to facilitate a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment (South Carolina Department of Education, 2022).

- *Principal Self-Efficacy*—A principal's judgment of their own capacity to structure a particular course of action in order to produce desired outcomes at the school that they lead (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004, p. 573).

- *Self-Efficacy*—A measure of one's confidence and belief in their own actions and performance (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997).

- *Brick-and-Mortar*—Education occurring at a physical school as opposed to a virtual or cyber-school environment (Ballotpedia, 2022).

- *Novice Principals*—Five years of experience or less as a school principal (L. Hunter, personal communication, September 27, 2022).

- *Experienced Principals*—Six to 10 years of experience as a school principal (L. Hunter, personal communication, September 27, 2022).

- *Veteran Principals*—11 or more years of experience as a school principal (L. Hunter, personal communication, September 27, 2022).

- *Early Childhood*—Child development and kindergarten.

- *Primary*—First grade and second grade.

- *Elementary School*—Kindergarten through fifth grade.

- *Intermediate School*—Fifth and sixth grade.

- *Middle School*—Sixth grade through eighth grade.

- *High School*—Ninth grade through twelfth grade.

Assumptions, Limitations, Scope, and Delimitations

All researchers must inevitably confront the presence of assumptions, limitations, scope, and delimitations in their work. However, as an ethical researcher, I have sought to minimize such imperfections. Any plans made by school principals prior to the COVID-19 pandemic should be assumed to have been unfeasible or impossible following the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ng, 2021). The first assumption made in the development of this study was implementing a qualitative approach for measuring school principals' self-efficacy is the most effective possible design method to achieve the desired results. Additionally, I assumed the reactions and information gained from the survey and interviews constitute a true representation of the respondents' experiences. Finally, I assumed school principals, as managerial leaders, abided by national, state, and district COVID-19 guidelines even if they did not agree with them.

Prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, school principals felt efficacious and well-supported by their district's leaders, structures, and processes (Jackson, 2022); however, this may not be true in the post-pandemic era. The limitations of this study are minimal. However, it may still be limited by the absence of crisis plans to combat the unique COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of preparedness among principals at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the expectations of the managerial framework in place for years prior to the pandemic.

The scope of the study recognizes the relevance of the impact of self-efficacy on managerial leaders. The delimitations in this study are minimal, as the participants are school leaders at early childhood, primary, elementary, intermediate, middle, and high school levels. However, due to the pandemic still being a factor when the research was conducted, I examine only one school district in this qualitative study.

The Significance of the Study

Leadership among principals influences student achievement and sustained school success (Jacobson, 2011). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many new challenges arose for school leaders and their schools (Khuluqo & Tenkahary, 2021). Post-pandemic issues interfered with school principals' ability to perform their managerial duties, impacting the daily routines of both teachers and students (Khuluqo & Tenkahary, 2021).

Marzano et al. (2001) show "leaders' actions determine the attitudes of parents and students about the school" (p. 6). The failure to complete a mission can be challenging for any stakeholder. According to the literature, the most common concerns reported by principals since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic have been as follows:

- Managing the chaos of operating schools (McGoron et al., 2022; Nerlino, 2022)

- Receiving constantly shifting protocols (Donohue & Miller, 2020)

- Interpreting contradictory guidance from officials (Donohue & Miller, 2020)

- Conveying confusing guidelines to teachers (Donohue & Miller, 2020)

- Displaying accountability in prior domains which have changed due to the pandemic (Nerlino, 2022)

- Attempting to meet unrealistic requirements set by officials (Donohue & Miller, 2020; Nerlino, 2022)

- Being blamed by parents and community members (Burgess et al., 2021).

- Undergoing mental pressure (ethically concerning) (Karakose et al., 2022).

- Being responsible for making life-altering and ethically impactful decisions (Ghasemzadeh et al., 2021).

- Awaiting the results of research on school principal action since the beginning
  of the pandemic (Mutch, 2020).

School principals have long had a significant impact on decision-making and learning in education (Rousmaniere, 2013). They serve as the cornerstone for school success (Jacobson, 2011). Thus, this study is significantly relevant to schools and their operations moving forward.

Conclusion

The remainder of this dissertation comprises four chapters. Chapter Two reviews the existing research and literature and details this study's methodology. Chapter Three, which is specifically designed to meet the criteria of a mixed-methods study, outlines the research design and approach, the role of the researcher, the focus questions, the setting, the population sample, the data-collection, instrumentation, and data-analysis processes, and means of protecting the participants.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Introduction

Based on my observations of the literature, the COVID-19 pandemic is a highly researched topic, and the research covering the COVID-19 pandemic is partially composed of its impact on the field of education. This specific body of literature has detailed the experiences of school principals as managerial leaders and the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on their self-efficacy. This widespread disease has had a significant impact on public education in the United States, as "every state had mandated the closure of public-school campuses" (Jameson et al., 2020, p. 1). Schools were forced to continue their operations in virtual settings (Jameson et al., 2020). "During the initial period of the COVID-19 pandemic, the intense demands associated with the seemingly constant closing and reopening of schools and the enforcement of social distancing rules in schools exacerbated the burnout experienced by school administrators" (Karakose et al., 2022, p. 13). Additionally, many post-pandemic factors have continued to interfere with school principals' ability to operate schools as managerial leaders; as a result, their self-efficacy has suffered.

Review of the Literature

Schools around the world were forced to close due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Esposito & Principi, 2020). The purpose of school closures was to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus and maintain the safety of educational stakeholders; still, school closures caused controversy (Esposito & Principi, 2020). Principals' intentions and plans for action were immediately questioned when schools began to close (Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020). Many scholars have discussed the significant impact school principals have on multiple groups of stakeholders (e.g., Morris et al., 2009). Evidently, state officials must work endlessly to ensure school principals have the training and resources

necessary to overcome the obstacles brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and properly care for their followers. Principals serve as the public face of their school; hence, their role is of great significance (Moller, 2012). The literature suggests principals' greatest concerns with regard to public relations are population growth, differences in community demographics, and low parental support (Morris et al., 2009).

History of the Role of School Principals

School reforms have occurred rapidly over the last ten years (Dimmock & O'Donoghue, 1996). History shows the role of school principal was created to link individual schools with their school district (Rousmaniere, 2013). School principals became a critical factor in the success of newly designed school systems in the early twentieth century. However, Rousmaniere (2013) notes historical research on school principals is limited due to the long-standing assertion education research should always aim primarily to benefit students and communities.

In the 1970s, data came to light on leadership styles becoming popular, and the influential "school effectiveness movement" emerged, which identified principals as the key predictors of school success (Dimmock & O'Donoghue, 1996). Dimmock and O'Donoghue (1996) asserted in the 1990s, new teaching and learning processes began to arise, widening the role of school leaders. Traditionally, the goal of an assistant principal has been to become the principal (Rintoul & Bishop, 2019). Dimmock et al. (1996) show modern life events and experiences have altered the strategies used by school principals. Ongoing changes in school curricula and teaching and learning processes have caused school principals to alter their plans for teachers and students (Rousmaniere, 2013). Over

the past two decades, the policy and research landscapes of school leadership have experienced major shifts (Grissom et al., 2021, p. 1).

Kafka (2009) highlights the historical perspective of principalship by emphasizing the importance of the individual in the role of school principal, explaining the person in the role defines the role. In the second half of the 20th century, the role came to be increasingly dominated by White men (Kafka, 2009). Wrushen and Sherman (2008) support this pattern and emphasize women generally constitute a minority in leadership positions; additionally, they express concern about the lack of women's voices in the literature on educational leadership. Hansot (1981) asserts there has been a distinct pattern of male hegemony in school administration over the last century but there have been changes: She further explains history has altered:

> Female school leaders have become more valued in society, possibly as a result of viewing themselves as part of a social and political movement seeking greater equality for women, not only for themselves but also for the betterment of society and women in the early twentieth century seemed to be capturing an increasing percentage of supervisory positions; the number of women administrators was rapidly rising. (Hansot, 1981, p. 9)

Workforce issues have risen dramatically following the COVID-19 pandemic. Grissom et al. (2021) identify the techniques principals have chosen to implement when their school leadership has been influenced by factors such as policies and demographics. Principals' circumstances are likely to continue to shift over time, so noticing past and current trends is critical to future success. Based on other education researchers' suggestions (e.g., Grissom et al., 2021; Hansot, 1981) to continue maintaining school principals' self-

efficacy, we must refer to historical patterns while still considering advancements and challenges evolving over time (Hansot, 1981; Grissom et al., 2021).

Modern Role of School Principals as Leaders

The COVID-19 pandemic has made management strategies more critical than ever before (Longmuir, 2021). Dimmock et al. (1996) indicate there is often a discrepancy in the role of a school principal. Stone-Johnson and Weiner (2020) describe the role of a school principal as a position vital to the community, framing school leadership as the practice of growth while mastering unique styles. The leadership structure of schools has transitioned from a group of students being overseen by one teacher to a collection of teachers managed by one leader—the principal (Rousmaniere, 2007). The principal aims to boost students' academic and social learning (Rintoul & Bishop, 2019). The leading responsibilities of school leaders include supervision, professional development, and the provision of classroom resources; Sindhvad (2009) identifies flexibility and resourcefulness as two of the most critical traits for a school principal. Improving education in their school is the primary obligation of a school principal (Thahir et al., 2021).

The evolution of leadership practices has forced school principals to adapt to changing social, political, and economic factors (Blount, 2008). Blount (2008) asserts educational stakeholders must understand the history of leadership and leadership practices to drive growth. Asking effective questions, motivating followers, implementing deeper principles, and understanding social dynamics all contribute to refining principals' management and leadership practices (Blount, 2008; Khuluqo & Tenkahary, 2021).

The role of a school principal is constantly evolving alongside management and school responsibilities, though the long-standing major roles of a school principal include accountability, civic capacity, and fostering social relations among teachers (Crow et al., 2002). School principals must be accountable for their decisions and be able to work well with others; of course, they must also be able to manage effectively (Caldwell, 1993; Khuluqo & Tenkahary, 2021). The literature points to several models of successful school leadership emphasizing the importance of school principals' values and reasoning skills, both of which are key factors in effective decision-making (Gurr, 2006). High-achieving districts should examine school principals' behavior to measure school growth (Gurr, 2006; Khuluqo & Tenkahary, 2021). The modern role of school principals, while still evolving, has become more structured to meet the needs of all educational stakeholders (Khuluqo & Tenkahary, 2021).

Effective Leadership Strategies

Leadership is the main characteristic needed to serve as a school principal (Andrews & Soder, 1987). Efficient leadership has positive effects on all stakeholders, while poor leadership can infringe on stakeholders' livelihoods; thus, principals' behaviors play a substantial role in overall school success (Andrews & Soder, 1987). The role of school principals is often political in nature (Amirrachman, 2014). Skinner et al. (2021) discuss the political factors faced by workers in the field of education, including requirements to meet the needs of politically driven agendas and the expectation that schools should immediately respond to societal challenges. They assert this dynamic "diverts school leaders from the delicate and complex work of promoting long-term student success, well-being and growth, towards a culture of the quick fix" (p. 30).

Effectively managing a school entails attempts to meet the expectations of all stakeholders (Katog, 2022; Khuluqo & Tenkahary, 2021). "Today's principals are technology leaders who must partake in essential professional development and knowledge sharing to create innovative ways of implementing technology into the curriculum" (Jackson, 2022, p. 35).

Active leadership strategies were vital during the pandemic, specifically because "Communication and crisis planning were rated the most useful pandemic leadership skills" (Flack et al., 2021, p. 7). Flack et al. (2021) show principals rely most heavily on their work colleagues for professional support; while 90% of the principals surveyed reported relying on colleagues for support, only about 40% of reported reaching out to local, state, or national associations for guidance. In their study, principals were asked about their school's academic, social, and emotional priorities for the 2021/22 school year and how they intended to maximize the potential of relief funds; the top priorities included digital pedagogy for staff and students and the well-being of all human capital in their schools (Flack et al., 2021).

As the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in countless complications for schools, stakeholders demanded strong, effective leadership from school principals, who were forced to work harder and formulate new tactics to adapt to evolving circumstances (Flack et al., 2021). Still, trust was often compromised on account of incessant pivots, or real-time adjustments, to changing local circumstances.

Along with crisis-era long-distance education, teachers were asked to utilize information technologies in online educational environments regardless of their level of digital literacy (Karakose et al., 2022, p. 2), causing exasperation among teachers.

Effective leadership was and still is needed to overcome the negative results of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most notably, it was vital for principals to notice the weight put on teachers via the need to prepare virtual lessons (Katog, 2022; Schleicher, 2020). The feelings and morale of teachers inevitably influence their classroom performance (Mulholland et al., 2017).

Rohrlich's (2021) research showcases the lack of support school principals had from angry community members during the COVID-19 pandemic. Without community support, school principals may struggle with limited resources and false portrayals. Being quarantined as a result of having contracted COVID-19 or coming in contact with someone who had constituted another significant inconvenience for school principals. School principals around the world were frequently forced to be absent from the brick-and-mortar school setting. Such absences presented a severe challenge, as not being visible hinders successful leadership, school safety, and overall school success (Fryer, 2022). An article from the *Toronto Star* (2021) reveals monitoring social distancing constituted school principals' biggest hurdle during the COVID-19 pandemic. Constantly dedicating time and attention to enforcing social distancing guidelines leaves school principals with little time to perform their normal duties. Evidently, the challenges presented to school principals by the pandemic are significant. Koonce et al. (2019) note school districts must support their principals by offering professional development. Such support is desperately needed in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, as there is a pervasive sense of hopelessness among all school stakeholders, especially principals. Still, they are working tirelessly to overcome these obstacles. Most importantly, school principals must identify remaining obstacles and collaborate with other leaders to devise

a plan to overcome them (Crumbley, 2021). The additional managerial responsibilities put on school principals have reduced their self-efficacy (Khuluqo & Tenkahary, 2021; Longmuir, 2021; Nurdin, 2021; Robertson, 2017; Skinner et al., 2021). The literature largely agrees effective leadership strategies are critical to school success.

Pre-COVID Leadership

In 2015, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), 42.8% of school principals reported they plan to remain serving as a school principal until they are eligible for retirement. Notably, however, this statistic predates the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning that the surveyed principals generally had high job satisfaction and strong self-efficacy. Bandura (1977, 1986, 1997) argues self-efficacy has long been the main indicator of success or failure in the workplace. Ritchie, Cervone, and Sharpe (2021) outline the differences in self-efficacy beliefs between the pre- and post-pandemic eras. Notably, the efficacy of stakeholders did not constitute a significant concern prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Adams, 2013; Khanyi, 2020).

Before the start of the pandemic, many schools reported working for leaders with effective skills and precise decision-making abilities (Schmoker, 2016). Schmoker (2016) outlines pre-COVID-19 tactics school leaders employed to lead effectively and positively influence school growth. They emphasize the critical need to lead with a specific vision and mission to ensure all stakeholders understand and can contribute to the educational process. These strategies can still be applied in schools even in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Bambrick (2018) communicates similar ideas about leadership and the impact of leaders on students and teachers. They detail school principals' significant responsibilities, emphasizing their role is to create and maintain safe and effective

schools. Research indicates school leaders who are conscious about how they spend their time are able to accomplish more tasks (Bambrick, 2018).

In line with Bambrick (2018), Whitaker (2009), an expert on principal leadership and effectiveness, offers insight into means of strengthening school leaders' accomplishments. They assert leaders can enhance their abilities by leveraging their knowledge and tools to yield greater personal and professional success. The common theme between Whitaker (2009) and Bambrick (2018) is how self-efficacy influences leadership. Both argue self-efficacy determines one's effectiveness as a leader and feeling confident in one's own efficacy is vital in confronting challenges. School principals have historically been expected to find creative solutions in tough situations; however, there is no way they could have known the unprecedented situations they would need to face during the COVID-19 pandemic (Katog, 2022; Schleicher, 2020).

Pre-COVID to Post-COVID Transition

A recent study of principals' self-efficacy shows "over 96% of principals rated their confidence as 'high' or 'very high' in traditional instructional settings" (Westberry & Hornor, 2022). School leaders can consider this fact when considering the work of Cutting (2021), who conducted interviews with school principals about their self-efficacy before, during, and after the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of these interviews detail principals' perceptions of their self-efficacy over time and provide an outline of principals' critical decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through these interviews, Cutting (2021) reveals a notable transition to a less chaotic system as the pandemic lessened, allowing principals time to reflect and form a plan to combat the residual effects of the pandemic. Jackson (2022), using similar methods, concludes

school principals became instantly stressed as a result of the transition to hybrid learning. Principals sharing their beliefs about this transition enables us to develop strategies for how to proceed in future situations which may call for a virtual or hybrid educational setting. The school principals in Jackson's (2022) study explains many teachers were worried, pressured, and, in turn, resistant to the changes forced on them by the pandemic. Blended learning, a hybrid teaching and learning approach which takes place across both brick-and-mortar and virtual settings, interfered with schools' routines, impacting the feelings of school leaders (Cutting, 2021; Jackson, 2022).

Evidently, the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant influence on schools. Johnson (2021) adds to the literature on COVID-19's impact on schools by sharing specific information on principal retention. Jackson (2022) effectively summarizes the growth of the role of school principals following the COVID-19 pandemic, asserting "Principals have also taken on many roles to ensure teachers and students accomplish their academic goals and the school district's mission" (p. 36). Modern researchers agree school leadership has evolved since the emergence of COVID-19, adapting to the post-pandemic effects (Katog, 2022; Schleicher, 2020).

Expectations from Officials

The rapid onset of the COVID-19 pandemic did now allow for the steady design of educational plans, meaning most stakeholders were not afforded the luxury of a proper understanding of people's evolving needs (Fancera & Saperstein, 2021). School principals were not seeking profound educational solutions during the COVID-19 pandemic; they were merely seeking consistency and clarity, as school leaders effectively served as a buffer—a translator—between their government (i.e., the state government,

local government, and school district) and their schools. Oftentimes, principals received

contradictory pandemic-era guidelines from different state officials (Donohue & Miller,

2020). Confusion was common among many school leaders, harming their motivation

(Fancera & Saperstein, 2021).

According to school principals, their decline in self-efficacy largely stemmed

from the unsteady expectations and tumultuous changes during the COVID-19 pandemic

(McGoron et al., 2022; Nerlino, 2022). Donohue and Miller (2020) add there are

conflicting expectations from different levels of education officials also contributed to

frustration among school principals, many of whom followed official guidelines despite

often viewing them as impractical or unclear (Donohue & Miller, 2020). Additionally,

school principals were frustrated by their school districts giving them managerial tasks

but not providing them with professional development to assist them in completing these

tasks (Jackson, 2022; Khuluqo & Tenkahary, 2021; Nurdin, 2021).

Despite many school principals thinking guidance from government, state, and

district officials was inappropriate, they did not divert from the formal protocols because

they lacked proper context during the unique situation referred to as the COVID-19

pandemic. Notably, while officials may have all shared the same end goal, they often

differed in how they sought to achieve that goal (Ritchie et al., 2021). Perino et al. (2021)

show families were uncertain about how to establish a routine for their children and if

they would be able to return to work based on evolving school protocols. While the

Centers for Disease Control (CDC) offered universal suggestions for reopening schools,

many state officials devised their own plans (Perino et al., 2021). According to Perino

(2021), "a report suggested that the Biden administration allowed a powerful teachers union to influence school reopening guidelines."

The South Carolina Department of Education (2022) holds school principals accountable by assigning them an annual score based on their performance in implementing, evaluating, and refining procedures to ensure the security and safety of their students and personnel. It is vital for students' parents to be able to trust their child is protected at school. Parents constitute a significant group of stakeholders at each school. Wheldall et al. (2019) explain these stakeholders put their faith in teachers and the education system to meet the needs of their children. School principals are responsible for making impactful decisions daily to support teachers, students, and families. During the COVID-19 pandemic, South Carolina's education officials opted to continue holding school principals responsible for maintaining students' social and academic growth despite students needing to perform under abnormal and unforgiving circumstances. Effectively, all stakeholders were expected to perform as normal (South Carolina Department of Education, 2022).

The lack of clarity in the expectations laid out by officials for school principals proved to be a significant challenge, hindering principals' belief in themselves and their ability to lead (Donohue & Miller, 2020; McGoron et al., 2022; Nerlino, 2022). These officials should collaborate to mitigate hindrances by setting clear and obtainable expectations for school leaders. Because principals lead teachers, staff, and students, their feelings of self-efficacy influence their own professional development as well as the development of others (Money & Pacifici, 2020). However, school districts across South Carolina continue to convey unclear and unreachable expectations and push their own

agenda, mission, and vision with accountability firmly in place (McGoron et al., 2022).

Noting the research on the frustrations school leaders felt when receiving what they

perceived as unreasonable expectations from officials (e.g., Donohue & Miller, 2020;

Jackson, 2022; McGoron et al., 2022; Nerlino, 2022), it is clear school leaders' self-

efficacy has suffered. Education officials should seriously consider post-COVID-19

challenges when aiming to pacify the concerns of school principals in South Carolina

(Money & Pacifici, 2020). School principals' trust in officials is a critical component of

school success (McGoron et al., 2022). In fact, school principals have expressed similar

beliefs regarding the pandemic-era expectations from officials being confusing and rarely

tailored to the needs of individual schools (Donohue & Miller, 2020; Jackson, 2022;

McGoron et al., 2022; Nerlino, 2022).

Principal Preparedness

Many communities questioned whether local principals were ready at the start of

the COVID-19 pandemic (Schleicher, 2020). Schleicher (2020) explains such concerns

rooted from school principals not being trained to combat this type of crisis. Stakeholders

also worried about school principals' potential biases when it comes to pandemic-era

infringements on education. Risk communication was new to school principals, but

communities demanded early communication and plans of action once COVID-19

became a clear threat (Ramos-Pla et al., 2021; Sauer et al., 2021). Research indicates

many principals were already struggling with their capabilities and autonomy prior to the

COVID-19 pandemic (Stone-Johnson; Weiner, 2020). Stone-Johnson and Weiner (2020)

assert professionalism and preparedness are crucial factors for school principals,

especially when they must make decisions aligned with countless district, state, and federal mandates.

The literature on this topic houses several studies on principals' pre-pandemic perceptions of their own functional capabilities. According to Sindhvad (2009), 75% of respondents reported the hands-on guidance and training they received significantly enhanced their overall ability to lead. Notably, student growth requires sufficient academic materials (Marzano et al., 2001)—and the COVID-19 pandemic limited the availability of such materials. The literature highlights some of the ethically concerning situations school principals were forced to confront during the pandemic (e.g., Ghasemzadeh et al., 2021). Despite the COVID-19 pandemic being a novel crisis, communities immediately expected effective crisis responses from school principals (Crumbley, 2021; Ramos-Pla et al., 2021). Principals were not given the opportunity to prepare due to the rapid spread of the virus (Crumbley, 2021; Schleicher, 2020), and their existing crisis-response protocols did not apply to the pandemic (Crumbley, 2021; Ramos-Pla et al., 2021). As school principals were not ready to react to the crisis, students were ill-prepared alongside them. Perino et al. (2021) discuss President Joe Biden's visit to a school, during which students expressed the challenges of remote learning. Overall, it is clear school principals felt unprepared to combat the COVID-19 pandemic (Crumbley, 2021; Ramos-Pla et al., 2021).

Current Leadership Actions

School principals' instructional leadership was compromised by the COVID-19 pandemic (Skaalvik, 2020), which forced them to operate via managerial leadership to ensure stakeholders' organization and safety (Khuluqo & Tenkahary, 2021). School

principals were expected to execute a carefully considered crisis-response plan without the necessary resources and guidance all while conveying time-sensitive information to teachers, students, and families (Fancera & Saperstein, 2021). School principals experienced a stark increase in responsibility as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Thahir et al., 2021). The sudden limitations and restrictions brought about by the pandemic forced school principals to make immediate critical decisions (Crumbley, 2021; Schleicher, 2020). Metcalfe and Perez (2020) note the "state-level elected leadership [in South Carolina] announced schools would close for the rest of the spring 2020 school year due to the unsafe and unknown nature of COVID-19" (p. 50). This announcement immediately effected chaos throughout the state (McGoron et al., 2022; Nerlino, 2022), and principals needed to react to it immediately with little to no knowledge of proper protocol. Oftentimes, principals were forced to rely on their instincts and make rapid decisions throughout the entire COVID-19 pandemic but especially at its peak (Nerlino, 2022).

Fencera and Saperstein (2021) detail the strategies school principals implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and discuss the obstacles still present in schools today. Changing rules, regulations, and routines required responsive school leadership, hampering school principals' comfort in their positions (Fancera & Saperstein, 2021). Responsive school leadership is almost universally considered to be less preferable than a well-prepared plan; however, school principals were not given the luxury of a well-thought-out crisis-response plan during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fancera & Saperstein, 2021).

The ability of school principals to manage their school was tested by the COVID-19 pandemic (Mutongoza et al., 2021), and the same can be said for their ability to cope with post-pandemic factors (Fancera & Saperstein, 2021; McGoron et al., 2022; Nerlino, 2022; Thahir et al., 2021). Mutongoza et al. (2021) detail managerial leadership actions taken by school principals to minimize the residual effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers emphasize the choices made by principals during the pandemic demonstrated their endurance as managerial leaders (Fancera & Saperstein, 2021; McGoron et al., 2022; Mutongoza et al., 2021; Nerlino, 2022; Thahir et al., 2021). Principals' managerial decisions enabled schools to recoup their losses from the COVID-19 pandemic (Mutongoza et al., 2021). These researchers offer strategies school principals can employ to cope with unique crises. These researchers argue, for example, principals should set obtainable and measurable goals with clear time horizons. Thus, it is vital for principals to employ a leadership style fitting the unique situation at hand and for their followers to understand crisis protocols and respond quickly and appropriately (Ramos-Pla et al., 2021).

Research indicates school principals did their best at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic to follow orders from their district and state officials (Donohue & Miller, 2020; Katog, 2022), but there were frequent debates regarding principals' readiness for this type of crisis (Ramos-Pla et al., 2021). These accusations are valid, as many school leaders have reported feeling unprepared to face the workforce issues and other problems caused by the pandemic, especially at its peak (Katog, 2022; Ramos-Pla et al., 2021; Schleicher, 2020). Research on principals' behavior and actions while navigating the unknown territory of the pandemic indicates they were caught off-guard but still acted to assist

teachers and students, especially amid school closures (Metcalfe & Perez, 2020). Students' safety constituted a primary concern, so the role of principals as managerial leaders became more critical (Argyropoulou et al., 2021). The unplanned, unguided transition to virtual teaching and learning was stressful for all education stakeholders (Lavonen & Salmela-Aro, 2022), and school principals were responsible to support those who were struggling.

Coping was a mechanism implemented by school leaders during the pandemic. Popular coping tactics used by principals included being flexible and creative, fostering cooperation among staff members, and maintaining strong community relationships (Katog, 2022). Employing these coping strategies during any challenge may aid in maintaining self-efficacy. Insufficient trust can represent a significant challenge for school principals (Cranston, 2011). Cranston (2011) asserts a "lack of trust could foster cultures of fear or defensiveness inhibiting their development" (p. 65). Additionally, Cranston (2011) argues a paucity of trust may hinder relationship development, so it is useful for school leaders to maintain authentic trust with all stakeholders. This aligns with the suggestions of Dimmock et al. (1996), who recommend addressing cognizant factors parallel to school leadership. As the role of school principal is multifaceted, there is often an inconsistency between opinions of their image and opinions of the actual work done by principals (Rousmaniere, 2013). School principals begin to worry if too much pressure is put on their productivity, as this could prevent them from being able to effectively meet students' needs (Dimmock & O'Donoghue, 1996). School principals' individual professional identities impact their actions. Robertson (2017) offers some examples of

transformations in school leaders' professional identities, highlighting their performance often develops the most following challenging situations.

As school districts in South Carolina continue to hold school principals directly accountable for meeting requirements, administrators are voicing their opinions about the toxic pressure they feel from officials regarding strict adherence to formal guidelines (Donohue & Miller, 2020). Prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the South Carolina Legislative Audit (2004) revealed facts and perspectives pertaining to principal accountability in K–12 education, identifying many concerns surrounding testing versus school safety. The COVID-19 pandemic altered many school principals' priorities, and their leadership is now centered around reacting to the academic and safety-oriented residual effects of the pandemic (Pressley, 2021). The broad-bush criteria being applied to school regulations and guidelines in South Carolina has been discouraging to administrators in South Carolina, as different demographic groups have historically had different needs, warranting tailored routines (Cheema et al., 2017).

Anxiety and confusion were common among school principals during the COVID-19 pandemic (Skinner et al., 2021). The incessant policy revisions and updates were puzzling for principals—and even researchers—but what was even more challenging was needing to convey these updates to teachers, students, and families (Fancera & Saperstein, 2021; Karakose et al., 2022; McGoron et al., 2022). The negative impact of the pandemic on principals' self-efficacy was clear, as school leaders began to exhibit signs of annoyance and worry (Argyropoulou et al., 2021).

As noted by the Data Quality Campaign (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic introduced contradictions in educational settings, and the challenges stemming from these

contradictions directly impacted school principals. The Data Quality Campaign (2021) explains from the start of the pandemic, state officials struggled to support stakeholders. Donohue and Miller (2020) support this assertion, suggesting superintendents and district officials support administration teams. They emphasize the importance of these leaders collaborating to devise both proactive and reactive plans to overcome disputes and crises.

A glaring trend in the data demonstrates the need for heightened awareness of "social justice," which refers to people in society being categorized based on their level of financial stability and benefits (Miller, 1979). The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in severe impediments to work in pursuit of social justice and inclusive leadership. School principals are increasingly prompted to report on social justice indicators among their students (Dimmock & O'Donoghue, 1996). While numerous trends in the data illustrate various problems, specific steps are being taken to better ensure inclusive leadership and social justice in schools. In line with the Data Quality Campaign (2021) and Donohue and Miller (2020), Kuhfeld et al. (2021) offer insight into how communities of color have experienced the pandemic differently than others.

A challenge of this magnitude impacting self-efficacy among school principals was likely inevitable, but being insufficiently prepared to handle the crisis slowed down the recovery process for all stakeholders, and the resultant long-term concerns created a "new normal" (Crumbley, 2021). After having experienced the detrimental effects of COVID-19 (e.g., psychological distress, low efficacy, high burnout), school principals may be more capable of self-evaluating their actions and making appropriate decisions in future crises. At the time of this study's publication, school principals' current leadership

decisions primarily serve to overcome the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Crumbley, 2021; Donohue & Miller, 2020).

Overcoming Challenges

It is vital for all leaders in the field of education to work to overcome current obstacles and potential future barriers in pursuit of recovery efforts (Data Quality Campaign, 2021). Crumbley (2021) reassures us "school principals can improve their self-efficacy around school crisis response by emulating vicarious experiences of educational leaders who have coordinated crisis-response protocols and practices in place" (p. 8). It would behoove federal, state, and district officials to pay attention to the responses which were most effective during the pandemic to help them prepare for future crises.

Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay (2021) express discontent at the turnover rate of principals, as "several studies document the negative impacts of principal turnover on student achievement and other outcomes" (p. 51). As a result of the lack of opportunity to maintain healthy relationships with teachers, school principals across America are trying to determine their next steps—and whether teachers will even show up (Snow, 2020). Rehm et al. (2021) argue school principals should "start over," aiming to rekindle their trust and relationships with teachers. Coping mechanisms are necessary for school principals to continue performing to the best of their ability (Rehm, 2021). The capacity to remain authentic and develop meaningful relationships across multiple blended platforms was critical during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Notably, however, political changes in schools have also brought about opportunities. Day-to-day life became unstable for many educational stakeholders as a

result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Paul et al. (2021) reveal pleasure among educators during the transition to relationship-focused education and a healthier work-life balance following the pandemic. The focus on relationships became more prevalent after efforts were made to combat the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, the demand for virtual leadership skills was not as significant; however, since the start of the pandemic, school principals have had to gain digital knowledge and skills to effectively support their teachers (Xia, 2020). As shown by Xia et al. (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic made school principals realize the importance of creating and maintaining authentic relationships with their teachers.

Chriest (2021) and Rolandson et al. (2022) share a common theme. Rolandson et al. (2022) point out there may be value in virtual professional development if done strategically. They offer ideas to aid principals in finding funding and other resources to construct professional development programs, especially those pertaining to mental health based on the new wellness demands brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Training staff to overcome challenges is a vital responsibility of school principals. To combat modern crises, school principals must engage in accountable and clear communication. Rehm (2021) emphasizes focusing on stakeholders who need immediate support is a helpful practice. All stakeholders must be active and intentional to meet the demands of the COVID-19 pandemic. Overcoming learning losses and other limitations will take planning, execution, and time on the part of school principals (Crumbley, 2021).

Planning for the educational future of students, teachers, and themselves, school principals must rely on valid data, as data constitutes a vital resource for informing recovery efforts (Data Quality Campaign, 2021). Metcalfe and Perez (2020) argue school

leaders should work to create and maintain a strong community and positive climate and they should network with other school leaders to share their challenges and achievements in order to maintain their self-efficacy while still generating school success. Overcoming pandemic-era challenges has been difficult for school leaders, but their role requires persistence to ensure the safety and success of all stakeholders in the field of education (Crumbley, 2021; Metcalfe & Perez, 2020; Rehm, 2021).

Self-Efficacy Among School Principals

Scholars have produced multiple distinct definitions of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997; Fancera & Saperstein, 2021; Karakose et al., 2022; Lunenburg, 2011; McGoron et al., 2022). Lunenburg (2011) defines self-efficacy as beliefs about one's own ability to accomplish specific tasks. He emphasizes the importance of these beliefs, asserting they dictate the likelihood of one's goals being met. Further supporting the relevance of self-efficacy to work performance, Stajkovic and Luthans (1998) show 28% of performance growth is based on one's confidence level.

Versland (2018) reports the self-efficacy of school principals serves as their professional identity—it represents them as leaders. Principals perceiving themselves as lacking in preparedness hinders their self-efficacy (Fancera & Saperstein, 2021; Karakose et al., 2022; McGoron et al., 2022). "Principals viewed the COVID-19 pandemic as a waste of time for becoming productive individuals" (Katog, 2022, p. 2365), lowering their confidence both personally and professionally. Many factors have historically influenced self-efficacy among school principals. However, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic's effects have largely dictated the self-efficacy of school principals as managerial leaders. Hesbol (2019) emphasizes the significance of school

principals' self-efficacy, asserting school leaders' self-efficacy can influence overall school success.

Feeling unprepared or unconfident, especially when responding to a crisis, can damage one's self-efficacy (Ramos-Pla et al., 2021; Schleicher, 2020). Self-efficacy among principals is defined by Hillman (1983) as principals' self-perceived ability to influence their teachers' performance and their students' achievements. Hillman (1983) highlights the importance of school principals' self-efficacy and their influence on teachers' and students' morale even in the pre-pandemic era. In essence, researchers largely agree school principals must be confident in their attitudes and actions, as teachers are influenced by the leadership model they observe (Hillman, 1983; Skaalvik, 2020).

Lyons and Murphy (1994) assert school principals are impacted by the implementation of power. They argue that (1) as principals' experience increases, they are more likely to align their behavior with their district's strategic vision and mission; (2) the longer principals spend in one location, the more likely they are to perceive the implementation of district-suggested tactics and policies as easier and more effective (Lyons & Murphy, 1994). These factors may influence principals' self-efficacy over time. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, school principals have reported community members insinuating they have not made the best decisions to keep students and teachers safe (Miller, 2021), damaging their self-efficacy, as their primary role is to do what is best for students' safety.

Skaalvik (2020) expresses ideas similar to those of Bandura (1977, 1986, 1997) on self-efficacy among school principals. She explores school principals' self-efficacy as

it pertains to engagement, emotional exhaustion, and motivation to quit. In doing so, she reveals self-confidence is negatively linked to emotional exhaustion and motivation to quit and positively associated with engagement. These findings indicate staying engaged and collaborating with other stakeholders is productive for efficacy and efficacy can be easily harmed when school principals are overworked or feel undervalued. Gulmez et al. (2020) would likely add to Skaalvik's (2020) study information on the correlation between school principals' self-efficacy and their leadership style. He asserts principals' belief in themselves influences their willingness, their goals as a leader, their efforts, and their determination to complete a task. It is clear willingness can be negatively influenced by extenuating factors, hindering school principals' performance.

Many hurdles are contributing to the worsening of school principals' self-efficacy. Skinner et al. (2021) show policy developments in education are often the cause of stress and low morale. It is imperative for school principals to be aware of this challenge and protect themselves and their teachers from suffering from the negative impacts politics can have on their efficacy. According to many scholars, school principals report the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on their self-efficacy, but these leaders may be able to combat the negative impact through resilience, ability, and determination (Katog, 2022; Skinner et al., 2021).

Crumbley (2021), in assessing principals' confidence levels through a post-pandemic lens, asserts by acknowledging the needs of school principals to confidently respond to crisis-response protocols, we can achieve an understanding of the components having the greatest impact and the weakest impact on leaders' self-efficacy. Dimmock and Hattie (1996) report the stress levels of school principals are often elevated by

constant refinements to rules and regulations—and this assessment comes from the pre-pandemic era. They note the stress caused by these refinements can negatively influence a school leader's feelings. Several theorists emphasize the importance of self-efficacy (e.g., Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997; Crumbley, 2021; Dimmock & Hattie, 1996; Lyons & Murphy, 1994; Skinner et al., 2021). These scholars argue it is the role of school principals to serve as a communication vehicle for all relevant stakeholders during a crisis, including the modern COVID-19 pandemic, in order to maintain collective efficacy (Jackson, 2022; Khuluqo & Tenkahary, 2021). It is clear from the literature the self-efficacy of school principals has been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic (Crumbley, 2021; Jackson, 2022; Katog, 2022; Khuluqo & Tenkahary, 2021; Skinner et al., 2021).

Impact of Managerial Leadership on Teachers

Eden (2003), a self-efficacy theorist, offers suggestions aligned with those of Bandura (1977, 1986, 1997). Eden (2003) acknowledges the influence leaders have on their followers. In other words, teachers learn from school principals with regard to decision-making and management practices. Eden (2003) also highlights the critical role of trust in an organization. Similarly, Nerlino (2022) asserts school leaders' choices influence students' learning, school refinement, and teachers' efficacy.

Watkins (1969) stresses the importance of principal-teacher relationships well back in the pre-pandemic era. Banjarnahor et al. (2018) contribute similar sentiments to the literature, asserting the leadership strategies enacted by school principals greatly influence motivation and morale among teachers, both of which are indicators of students' classroom performance. Teachers' daily stresses were greatly intensified at the

start of the pandemic (Nerlino, 2022). Nerlino (2022) and McGoron et al. (2022) show within a year of the pandemic's start, turmoil in schools and disorderly guidance from federal, state, and district officials left teachers scrambling from one challenge to another. Marzano et al. (2001) emphasize school leaders are obligated to protect teachers from outside influences, enabling them to stay focused on students' needs.

Khanyi et al. (2020) outline school principals' roles in modeling and delegating responsibilities. Assuming the success of a school and its students depends largely on good leadership, they argue it is the responsibility of school principals to ensure teachers have adequate opportunities for leadership development. Mulholland et al. (2017) discuss the challenges teachers were facing prior to the pandemic, reporting teachers sought to "detach" from the school day following its conclusion. These feelings were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with educators routinely seeking guidance from their school principals, who were also forced to learn in the moment. Many teachers sought assistance from their school principals with measuring students' academic progress and ideas for how to monitor and support students' social and emotional well-being while maintaining curriculum accountability through virtual learning activities and assessments (Nerlino, 2022). Bambrick (2018) offers some suggestions for how school leaders can guide teachers to plan and deliver data-driven instruction and assessment. This type of leadership is crucial for teachers to feel successful.

Qian and Walker (2021) explain relationships between administrators and teachers involve building emotional connections. Sharing data with teachers enables them to teach more effectively, boosting students' academic achievement (Glasman, 1984). Price et al. (2015) assert without such principal-teacher relations, teachers are less likely

to perform to their maximum potential. Whitaker et al. (2013) highlight the importance of teachers feeling supported and maintaining healthy morale. Burkhauser (2017) shows principals wield a great deal of influence over teachers' morale and performance. Notably, teachers are less receptive to guidance from their principal if they don't have a pre-existing relationship with them (Hoy, 2006). Rehm (2021) and Hoy (2006) both express the belief the principal-teacher partnership is a critical relationship and must not be violated. Nurdin (2021), concerned about teachers' mental health during the pandemic, suggests school leaders should build leadership capacity as managerial leaders in their school by delegating appropriate tasks to teachers; this approach could also help teachers to overcome their post-pandemic problems.

Gláucia and Everton (2019) argue school principals must create training programs tailored to the needs of each teacher, meaning school principals should intentionally plan and execute professional development. Bandura (1977, 1986, 1997) tells us of the importance of observing and modeling. According to Riley (2010), student-teacher relationships are vital for student success. Thus, to model this practice for teachers, school principals must demonstrate effective relational skills with their teachers. Providing tailored professional development for all teachers—specifically for virtual teaching strategies—was necessary to maintain teachers' morale and the integrity of the learning process (Metcalfe & Perez, 2020).
Lambersky (2016) advocates for both teachers and school principals by asserting principals' feelings and behaviors influence teachers' morale. This highlights the importance of principals' self-efficacy, as it is a crucial driver of morale and performance among teachers. It would be helpful for Pressley (2021) to refer to Lambersky's (2016)

findings regarding principals' strong influence on teachers, as an evaluation of principals provided Pressley with the notion returning to teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively influenced teachers' self-efficacy. School principals should work toward strengthening their own self-efficacy to ensure they can help teachers to feel useful and effective. Researchers largely agree managerial leadership is essential when aiming to hold teachers accountable (Khuluqo, & Tenkahary, 2021; Nurdin, 2021; Skinner et al., 2021).

Impact of Managerial Leadership on Students

Research indicates school principals' leadership actions influence the actions of students (e.g., Grissom et al., 2021; Metcalfe & Perez 2020; Welsh, 2022). This is significant; while principals have been impacted by the pandemic, so too have students. Welsh (2022) describes recent patterns in student discipline since the start of the pandemic. He suggests the rise in disciplinary infractions stems from students spending less social time at school due to school closures. Oyugi and Gogo (2019) argue students' performance is impacted by school leaders' leadership styles. Metcalfe and Perez (2020) express similar beliefs regarding principal leadership and its impact on students; they elaborate on this topic by assessing the effects of principal leadership on the overall well-being of students and their families. Nurdin (2021), in discussing managerial leadership, focuses on students' safety principals' top priority. Notably, the literature shows principals have a significant impact on students' performance (e.g., Khuluqo & Tenkahary, 2021; Nurdin, 2021).

Students may be more aware of their school principals than they seem to be. Gentilucci and Muto (2007) emphasize the importance of the principal-student

relationship, noting students feel safer and more comfortable when principals are approachable, visible, and respected (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007). Glasman (1984) similarly implies the principal-student relationship should be a top priority (Glasman, 1984).

Metcalfe and Perez (2020) assert "the most important effort [for school principals] was to connect with every student and to keep every teacher accountable [while] doing our best to provide a quality education online" (p. 52). School leaders can apply Dhuey and Smith's (2014) ideas on maintaining student discipline to ensure student safety, which is the most important responsibility of school leaders (Dhuey & Smith, 2014). For example, remaining cognizant of the impact managerial leadership has on students can help school leaders to prepare for future events causing safety concerns. Overall, there is a widespread consensus in the literature managerial leadership helps to keep students safe (Grissom, 2021; Khuluqo, & Tenkahary, 2021; Nurdin, 2021; Skinner et al., 2021).

Trust and Safety

Creating and maintaining school safety is the primary responsibility of school principals as managerial leaders (Grissom, 2021). Public criticism of school principals began at the very start of the COVID-19 pandemic, with community stakeholders immediately questioning their intended response (Miller, 2021).

Marzano et al. (2001) detail specific leadership behaviors needed to serve as a liaison between a school and its community. Community trust and support immediately became more critical at the start of the pandemic (Burgess et al., 2021). School principals looked to district, state, and federal officials for guidance and support; "however, their

empathetic communication was contradicted by their actions" (Sauer et al., 2021, p. 70), leading to a decline in both school principals' self-efficacy and their trust in officials (Burgess et al., 2021; Sauer et al., 2021).

Research in the pre-pandemic era indicates the significant impact of family and community factors on students feeling safe at school (López et al., 2017)—but researchers could not anticipate the many upcoming changes in both communities and schools. The COVID-19 pandemic caused disarray in schools, stakeholders' daily routines, and families' mental well-being. Anxiety and depression were commonly reported by students' caretakers (Fancera & Saperstein, 2021; Karakose et al., 2022; McGoron et al., 2022). Thus, school leaders should aim to support families, especially those who have been highly impacted by the negative effects of the pandemic.

Tschannen-Moran (2014) defines school-community trust as an "interconnectivity" and focuses on the correlation between parents' trust in schools and students' trust in teachers. The community's perception of its schools' safety is crucial, and school principals are responsible for creating a school environment supporting the generation of solutions to predicaments, the creation of strong community ties, and the promotion of citizenship (Burgess et al., 2021; Weare, 2002). Murphy (2015) and Tschannen-Moran (2014) elaborate on this idea further.

Murphy (2015) asserts with rising cultural barriers, it is critical for school principals to gain the trust of their community by considering all relevant dynamics and serving as an advocate for students and community members. According to Sauer et al. (2021), "Respectful communication promotes cooperation and rapport and engages and values community inputs, [which are] essential to promote adherence to public health

recommendations" (p. 40). Insufficient community engagement among school principals, teachers, and families has resulted in a decrease in the efficacy of all stakeholders, sparking concerns about trust and safety **(**Burgess et al., 2021). The inability to be present in the community due to COVID-19-related factors has limited principals' ability to interact with and maintain relationships with members of the community (Burgess et al., 2021). School principals are often the face of the school to community members (Katog, 2022). As schools are at the forefront of local institutions, they need to maintain close relations with the local social environment (Çoruk, 2018). Throughout history, many principals have tailored their vision of student learning to the needs and interests of the local community (Rousmaniere, 2013).

Community involvement is one of school principals' most critical responsibilities. According to Barr and Saltmarsh (2014), fostering parent-school engagement is an effective means of building strong community-school relationships. A school principal is a public figure who is responsible for a local institution with its own group of stakeholders. The public components of the school principal's role play an important part in the culture of school principals (Lortie, 2009). Çoruk (2018), after asking a group of school principals about their public relations strategies, shows school principals were aware of the necessity of public relations and acknowledged the approaches necessary to engage in them effectively (Çoruk, 2018).

Sindhi (2013) refers to the creation of a safe school environment as the primary responsibility of school principals, noting, however, school principals play multifaceted roles. The demands of the role are immense—especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic—and contribute to school leaders experiencing a loss of scope and self-

efficacy. Carino (2020) would appreciate Rolandson et al. (2022) ideas about how school principals could employ funding and resources to support the mental health of all stakeholders in the field of education, including themselves, as Carino (2020) discusses how mental health has been a serious risk and concern for many stakeholders since the start of the pandemic. Several researchers indicate students can be made to feel safe and secure inside their school by the school principal making them feel comfortable (e.g., Kutsyuruba et al., 2015; Noonan et al., 2008). School leaders should actively investigate whether certain groups of students feel unsafe and work toward meeting their unique needs. Most students who feel unsafe feel that way due to bullying (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015; Noonan et al., 2008).

According to Cranston (2011), "It is evident among faculty members looking to improve their schools as professional learning communities, a commitment to trust is frequently regarded as an important precondition" (p. 61). Cranston (2011) asserts trust helps teachers to collaborate more effectively. Other investigations, such as those conducted by Tschannen-Moran (2014) and Kosar (2015), further Cranston's (2011) research. Noonan et al. (2008) shares "School principals have an obligation to foster trust in schools" (p. 1). Koşar (2015) shows teachers' trust in their school principal affects their professionalism. Tschannen-Moran (2014) would most likely agree with Kosar (2015) but emphasize teachers trusting principals is dependent on students trusting teachers. Devoe (2002) claims safety issues represent a substantial problem in schools and advise school leaders to be visible at all times to mitigate them while staying aware of indicators of school safety. Fiore (2016) widens the scope of community-school relations and provides suggestions and strategies for how school principals can

effectively connect with all stakeholders, including the public, especially during challenging times. Notably, the recruitment and retention of teachers have suffered from a lack of community involvement and self-efficacy among school leaders.

Disagreement over how crisis communication should be handled has greatly contributed to the impairment of community engagement. Sauer, Truelove, Gerste, and Limaye (2021) provide us with several examples of the dearth of effective communication between school principals and federal, state, and district officials. They assert communication during a crisis should be immediate, valid, and reliable. Explaining the necessary component of empathy during crises further supported their guidelines for the actions of officials who make decisions for school principals and their schools (Sauer et al., 2021). The failure to communicate effectively during a crisis interfered with the trust and safety of all stakeholders in the field of education (Crumbley, 2021; Ramos-Pla, 2021; Sauer et al., 2021).

Principals appear to have gained new tactics for upholding safety and overcoming conflicts in crisis scenarios over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic (Khuluqo & Tenkahary, 2021; Ramos-Pla et al., 2021). The dynamics of remote learning "made students' home environments more visible to teachers and principals, increasing awareness of family struggles" (Flack et al., 2021, p. 5). Flack et al. (2021)share communication is a domain in which increased awareness and demand has arisen in the aftermath of the pandemic. Fortunately, "many schools responded to the crisis by expanding support services to school communities" (Flack et al., 2021, p. 5). Consequently, the pandemic brought school communities closer together. The school principals in Flack et al.'s (2021) study "supported community engagement by providing

culturally responsive communication in their leadership practice" (p. 6). Shifting behaviors enabled these leaders to meet the needs of all stakeholders in the field of education during the COVID-19 pandemic. A more advanced perception of leadership may have emerged in schools across the United States in the post-pandemic era. Principals' newly heightened awareness and adaptation of new plans may enable them to regain the trust of their communities, and, in turn, allow current and future teachers to feel safe in schools. Researchers agree trust and safety must always be the priority of school principals (Cranston, 2011; Koşar, 2015; Noonan et al., 2008; Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

The New Normal

In 1985, Theodore Levitt coined the term "globalization." The globalization of education refers to international discussions, procedures, and institutions influencing local education practices. The globalization of education has been altered as a result of the pandemic (Crumbley, 2021). The recent implementation of new federal, state, and district regulations and daily routines was a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Crumbley, 2021). Crumbley (2021) explain the outcomes of COVID-19 have influenced the mindset of many stakeholders in the field of education, including school principals, who were frequently obligated to adapt to new protocols and routines (Katog, 2022; Lavonen & Salmela-Aro, 2022).

Katog (2022) offers suggestions on how school principals can thrive amid the pandemic-era procedures. Through interviews with school principals, Katog (2022) reveals "Being flexible and creative are the ways of responding among the school principals in order to cope with the new normal education" (p. 2364). Notably, school

leaders are able to cope more effectively than others (Katog, 2022). This knowledge can be applied to the rebuilding of school principals' self-efficacy. The solution to move forward as usual creates a logical problem, as many post-pandemic factors warrant revisions (Crumbley, 2021). Lavonen and Salmela-Aro (2022) tell us uncertainty prevailed throughout the pandemic and is, to a degree, ongoing. They describe the most significant stressors impacting school principals, including a drop in the availability of education services, a decline in access to education services, a reduction in the utilization of schools, and lower-quality education. Given these new stressors, school principals had to quickly devise a post-pandemic plan (Crumbley, 2021). This represented a challenging responsibility ultimately harming principals' self-efficacy, as many felt they were failing to overcome the adversity presented to them by the COVID-19 pandemic (Casali et al., 2021). The literature indicates pandemic-era psychological distress and drops in self-efficacy continued even after schools were reopened (Casali et al., 2021; Fancera & Saperstein, 2021; Karakose et al., 2022; McGoron et al., 2022). Karakose et al. (2022) assess psychological distress among school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic by investigating the relationship between psychological distress, COVID-19-related burnout, and depression among school principals. Other scholars also highlight exhaustion as an effect of the pandemic and note this exhaustion has lowered school principals' capabilities and drive (Casali et al., 2021; Khuluqo & Tenkahary, 2021). Having to face these personal and professional encounters as school principals may limit their ability to guide their followers as managerial leaders.

The reopening of schools was stressful for teachers because, "In addition to their new responsibilities as part of the online learning-teaching process, teachers are expected

to take on more responsibilities with the reopening of schools" (Karakose et al., 2022, p. 3). School principals report their self-efficacy was compromised by the pandemic as a result of it creating unstable conditions in education (Katog, 2022). They identify an optimistic attitude as the most helpful mindset for maintaining a strong sense of self-efficacy and coping with the new normal (Katog, 2022). Katog (2022) frequently mentions "having a positive outlook among the school principals is very crucial in performing their managerial roles" (Katog, 2022, p. 2366).

Post-pandemic school principals bear more responsibilities than pre-pandemic school principals. More specifically, the role now requires a more sensitive approach (Rehm, 2021). Carino (2020) suggests the COVID-19 pandemic increased the risk of mental health issues among educators, which is vital for school principals to be aware of. Additionally, according to Golden (2020), principals are now often tasked with monitoring COVID-19 case counts and ensuring their school meets government health guidelines. Saffren (2021) compliments Golden's (2020) work by asserting school principals are facing the "ultimate educational challenge" in terms of social and emotional loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic and principals' new responsibilities have made it increasingly difficult for them to maintain healthy relationships with their teachers. Dadaczynski et al. (2022) argue more attention and care must be given to working conditions, participation, and community cooperation. Dindar et al. (2021) believe it is vital for school principals to examine how teachers have interacted with technology throughout the pandemic. Overall, the literature indicates the COVID-19 pandemic has dictated the field of education all over the world, forcing it to function in a

new and less optimal way (Carino, 2020; Golden, 2020; Dadaczynski et al., 2022; Dindar et al., 2021; Rehm, 202; Saffren, 2021).

School Principals as Post-COVID Managers

Achieving optimal managerial leadership can be challenging (Lunenburg, 2011; Skinner et al., 2021). The South Carolina Department of Education (2022) defines a managerial leader as "An effective educational leader who fosters the academic success and well-being of each student by managing the school organization, its operations, and its resources to create a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment." The South Carolina Department of Education (2022) requires school principals to serve as role models—as managers who lead by example and create a support system for all stakeholders in the field of education. This department also ensures school principals follow the safety systems and protocols in place to ensure the safety of all people in school settings. The self-efficacy of school leaders impacts their ability to manage effectively (Lunenburg, 2011). Through empirical tests, McCormick et al. (2002) demonstrate a positive relationship between a leader's self-efficacy and a mission being completed, indicating school principals with a high degree of self-efficacy are likely to be more effective managers.

Managerial practices and direct leadership became more essential at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Cutting (2021) outlines how principals in one school district had to manage sudden changes in routine when the COVID-19 pandemic began and access to managerial and human resources became scarce. Cutting (2021) also highlights "the high stress of operating and leading a school district safely during the pandemic

given fluctuating community infection rates, health and safety guidelines and personal experience with the COVID-19 virus" (p. 8).

The need for managerial leadership in principals became clear once stakeholders realized they would need to overcome losses; notably, many school principals were quickly tasked with keeping their teachers safe from mental health concerns (Flack et al., 2021; Khuluqo & Tenkahary, 2021). Flack (2021) shows "Most principals perceived a negative impact on teachers' mental health (81.2%) and social emotional health (76.5%). This mirrored findings from educators who responded to Pivot's national survey in April 2020" (p. 6). Flack (2021) continued as follows: "A large majority of principals (79.5%) reported the pandemic had negatively impacted students' mental health and well-being; isolation and lack of routine and structure was the culprit of these deficiencies." This dynamic warranted a more intensive managerial approach by principals to ensure the mental, social, and emotional safety of their students. Based on the emotional challenges school principals faced on a personal level during the pandemic and their ongoing insecurities, Collie (2021) predicts a lack of optimism among them, highlighting their lack of buoyancy.

In one study, a group of principals expressed their ability to support teachers was reliant on their views regarding whether the support would benefit the learning process; ultimately, the investigation revealed their management strategies were more impactful on their perceptions of their own magnitude than the instructional factor (Khuluqo & Tenkahary, 2021; Sindhvad, 2009). Huggins (2017) expands on the work of Tschannen-Morgan and Gareis (2004) and Sindhvad (2009), who discuss school principals' self-efficacy as well as principals developing leadership qualities in others, revealing both

formal and informal leaders in schools rely on school principals to build relational and organizational managing capacity in a strategic and intentional manner. Other studies follow suit, discussing the development of managerial leadership over time (Cutting, 2021; Khuluqo & Tenkahary, 2021; Skinner et al., 2021). Skinner et al. (2003) emphasize the importance of managerial leadership, concluding it is a specific style of leadership necessary to combat crises.

South Carolina holds school principals accountable with regard to their professional development. The South Carolina Department of Education (SCDOE) measures administrators' performances using principal-evaluation standards, one of which is effective management (SCDOE, 2022). The South Carolina Department of Education (2022) asserts an effective educational leader fosters the academic success and well-being of each student by managing the school organization, its operations, and its resources to create a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. The department monitors principals' management actions, requiring them to screen, recommend, and assign staff in a timely manner based on school needs, assessment data, and local, state, and federal requirements in order to optimize their professional ability to facilitate student growth.

It is crucial for school principals to be visible in classrooms (Khuluqo & Tenkahary, 2021). Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the reason for principals' presence from instructional intent to managerial intent due to the increased need for managerial attention for safety reasons (Cutting, 2021; Khuluqo & Tenkahary, 2021). Robertson (2017), in their study of resistance in schools, identifies a pattern: longer-serving principals transformed their professional identities the most as they faced

harsh decisions and critical conversations with other stakeholders. In line with Robertson's (2017) study, the findings indicate staff trust in the principal was the main indicator of the competence of both the teacher and the school leader. Banjarnahor et al. (2018) highlight the value of school principals' self-efficacy, which they believe is likely to determine overall school success. Cutting (2021) emphasizes the COVID-19 pandemic forced school principals to operate in a vastly different manner than they were. Khuluqo and Tenkahary (2021) advance this idea by adding managerial leaders were forced to implement managerial actions in an unfamiliar situation. Creating action plans and leading schools safely immediately became their top priority (Cutting, 2021); this, in turn, influenced school principals' self-efficacy. The role of post-COVID manager is a new and involved task for school principals (Cutting, 2021; Khuluqo & Tenkahary, 2021; Skinner et al., 2021).

Post-Pandemic Recruitment and Retainment

Many schools were already facing a teacher shortage—a major safety concern—prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Aragon, 2016). Staffing, once a routine task, now constitutes a challenge for school principals (Tribune, 2020). In the aftermath of the pandemic, teachers have reported having feelings of depression and anxiety and fearing for their lives and those of their families (Skinner et al., 2021); unsurprisingly, many teachers have left the profession, limiting the number of teachers who are present in school. School principals are now attempting to retain teachers already in the role, but many are still actively considering leaving the profession (Karakose et al., 2022; Skinner et al., 2021; Tribune, 2020).

The hiring and firing of teachers constitute a significant responsibility of school principals as managerial leaders (Dhuey & Smith, 2014). Hiring a productive teacher represents a major opportunity to improve a school (Kimbrel, 2019). According to Kimbrel (2019), "Most principals agree [that] hiring qualified and effective teachers is one of their most important roles" (p. 13); conversely, hiring an ineffective teacher can be detrimental to students' success. In her work, Kimbrel observes discontent between research-based best practices and frequently applied strategies. Thus, she asserts "Hiring effective teachers can be a challenging task that is made even more difficult because most principals do not have human resources training and they often create different hiring processes even in very similar schools" (p. 1). Importantly, these challenges were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Kimbrel (2019) continues this point as follows: "Hiring teachers with the highest likelihood of success would likely reduce the need for time-intensive and costly remediation, or, in the worst-case scenario, implementation of a teacher non-renewal process" (p. 13). She believes when school leaders aim to hire new teachers, they should pay attention to candidates' qualifications and experience, operate with a structured interview strategy, and ask specific questions designed to measure desired qualities specific to their school (Kimbrel, 2019). These suggestions are even more critical in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has greatly reduced the number of available high-quality teachers (Thahir et al., 2021). Young (2018) emphasizes the importance of teacher retention since high-quality teachers facilitate students' success and offers ideas on how to recruit and retain them.

Through interviews with school principals, Ingle et al. (2011) reveal monitoring the job performance of teachers—both new and veteran teachers—is critical to their development and being visible and conducting frequent observations are both effective tools for supporting teachers (Ingle et al., 2011). Goldring et al. (2015) assert it is critical for school principals not only to self-assess but also to be receptive of feedback from teachers. Of the many changes stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, the loss of high-quality teachers was one of the most significant (Skinner et al., 2021). This study can aid in the future recruitment and retention of teachers. School principals must continue to engage in recruitment efforts, as doing so constitutes one of their most important roles as managerial leaders, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Grissom, 2021; Kimbrel, 2019; Metcalfe & Perez, 2020; Skinner et al., 2021; Tribune, 2020).

Residual Effects

Student accountability and management are the critical areas of focus in the literature at the time of this study's publication. The COVID-19 pandemic stripped students of their structure and routines, negatively impacting their performance (Jackson, 2022; Khuluqo & Tenkahary, 2021; Nurdin, 2021). Educational leadership has continually evolved since the turn of the 21st century (Jean-Marie et al., 2009), but the COVID-19 pandemic caused a relatively drastic shift. Rehm et al. (2021) assert the pandemic introduced new obstacles—many of them time-sensitive—for school principals. For example, the weakening of principal-teacher relationships constitutes a severe challenge stemming from the pandemic. According to Fagell (2022), many teachers have felt pressured since the start of the pandemic to teach while sick so long as

they were not diagnosed with COVID-19. This type of discomfort may breed resentment, causing long-term harm to the principal-teacher relationship.

Trust between teachers and school principals may have also been compromised by the pandemic. Crumbley (2021) explains teachers' initial confusion about their role in their school's COVID-19 response plan resulted in an early loss of trust, leading to uncertainty when it comes to updated protocols and policies. Crumbley (2021) also claims "principals are expected to provide crisis response as a part of their overall school operations plan, [but] few studies have reviewed how to best support a school leader to respond effectively" (p. 2). He adds, "if schools do not have an adequate crisis response plan in place, and staff is unsure of what steps to take to handle an emergency, students' academic and emotional growth could be compromised" (p. 4).

Martinez et al. (2021) describe the experience of schools reopening from the perspective of school principals. Self-efficacy among school principals was significantly impacted both personally and professionally by the COVID-19 pandemic via technological struggles, limited resources, unclear directions, fuzzy descriptions of teachers' roles, and poor communication from district and state officials (Donohue & Miller, 2020).

Preparing teachers to lead a virtual classroom constitutes a major adjustment for many administrators (Schleicher, 2020). Gao and Sai (2020) advocate for teachers—especially single female educators—by focusing on their feelings of isolation throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. At the peak of the pandemic, school principals struggled to maintain their professional relationships with teachers due to their inability to meet in person (Rehm, 2021). Gao and Sai (2020) describe how many teachers began to feel

isolated during the pandemic; they were not receiving the leadership support they needed to be successful virtual educators. The COVID-19 pandemic challenged the confidence of teachers without digital skills (Herman et al., 2021). Therefore, school principals had to dedicate time and attention to educators who may not have previously needed a high level of support in the traditional brick-and-mortar school setting (Herman et al., 2021). Teachers quickly became discouraged and turned to school principals for guidance, who were oftentimes just as discouraged and unprepared as they were (Rehm, 2021).

Rehm et al. (2021) describe the excess responsibilities the COVID-19 pandemic put on the shoulders of school principals. These responsibilities caused significant problems for school principals, as it gave them less time to maintain their relationships with teachers while simultaneously upholding their leadership standards. Mian et al. (2020) note social distancing procedures disrupted daily activities. Many principals' routines were altered by pandemic-era influences, especially evolving demands from their school district. It has been challenging for school principals to collaborate with their support network of other school leaders due to social distancing guidelines (Katog, 2022; Rehm, 2021), resulting in a lack of brainstorming opportunities and collaborative self-evaluation. In other words, the pandemic made it very difficult for school principals to reflect. COVID-19 is still present at the time of this study's publication, and the residual factors are still influencing school principals' decisions and daily routines (McGoron et al., 2022; Nerlino, 2022)

State policy adaptability has long been a concern in the pre-pandemic era. Gall et al. (2022) discuss the school closures following the 2015 flood in Richland County, South Carolina and the subsequent crisis in public policy. This situation exemplified the

need for school principals to respond effectively to a crisis. School principals in such unplanned school closures have typically expressed these measures should be mitigated whenever possible to keep the community and economic system in mind. There is a historical pattern of brick-and-mortar school settings closing prior to pandemics and staying closed for a time following those pandemics to keep educational stakeholders healthy (Gall et al., 2022).

Prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Gainey (2003) advocated for public schools by discussing how South Carolina school districts could prepare for a crisis. They outline how crisis protocol can be managed by school leaders to minimize the impact of crises, revealing "school districts with a written crisis management plan are likely to have more crisis management processes in place and be more crisis-ready than districts without a written crisis management plan" (p. 20).

The South Carolina Association of School Administrators (SCASA) (2022), an advocacy group for school principals, outlines state policy on potential crises. Notably, there is a COVID-19 tab on the SCASA website to provide principals with resources and guidance for responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and upholding pandemic-era protocol. Fernandez and Shaw (2020) assess school principals, discussing the stresses they confronted during the COVID-19 pandemic; they suggest providing these principals with stress-regulation resources to strengthen the mindset of these leaders and, in turn, help them to combat crisis-level obstacles. Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2004), considering how school principals feel about crises and school policy, refer to crisis as a wounding experience to emphasize its harmful effects on principals, noting principals often experience a loss of power during times of crisis. During "changing times,"

however, school principals often speak of feeling like it is their duty to be prepared to care for teachers who are facing a crisis (Day & Hadfield, 2001).

Ever-evolving expectations of both school principals and teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic put a significant amount of mental pressure on them. Rehm et al. (2021) explain school principals hold a critical position where they are responsible for receiving, understanding, and conveying real-time policy changes. A virtual setting adds extra pressure to this role. Many teachers were not receptive to the changes being made at the start of the pandemic. Resolving the new issues as they emerged required substantial effort on the part of school principals. As stated by Price (2015), relationships constitute a relevant component of contemporary issues in education and represent a determining factor in school success.

Teachers and administrators did not always have the same opinions on how the learning process should operate. Marra (2021) shows teachers and school principals often disagreed on what the structure of virtual teaching should look like at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. This dynamic inflicted notable harm on many principal-teacher relationships. Making matters worse, principals were unable to observe and provide feedback to teachers, leading teachers to feel isolated (Qian, 2021). Jacob et al. (2008) assert it is more challenging now for school principals to meet the requirements of observing teachers and supporting them effectively due to the added responsibilities they have acquired. There is less time for administrators to determine which teachers are effective and which are ineffective, limiting their support capabilities and availability to build relationships with teachers (Pressley, 2021; Skinner, 2021; Tribune, 2020).

Teacher uncertainty stemming from administrative unreliability caused principal-teacher relationships to suffer at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (Qian, 2021). Many school principals did not have the time or the face-to-face luxury to clearly communicate their expectations and provide the necessary support (Rehm, 2021). Rehm et al. (2021) suggest school principals must rekindle their relationships with teachers to make up for the limitations and problems brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, teachers are unsure of how to combat learning losses among students and are looking to school principals for answers (Qian, 2021). Notably, however, principals and their district leaders are also looking for answers regarding how to support the learning process in crisis scenarios in order to boost student outcomes, particularly through collaboration with community partners (Burgess et al., 2021). It is clear the residual effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are still interfering with education, especially when it comes to school principals' leadership (Burgess et al., 2021; Pressley, 2021; Qian, 2021; Rehm, 2021; Skinner, 2021; Tribune, 2020).

Conclusion

The self-efficacy of school leaders has been severely compromised by the COVID-19 pandemic and its lingering effects (Crumbley, 2021), limiting their full potential as managerial leaders. Contemporary challenges often become relevant in the field of education (Hoy, 2006). Both on- and off-campus, school principals are responsible for upholding political obligations while building and maintaining productive relationships with learners of all ages. Notably, additional responsibilities being put on the shoulders of school principals during the COVID-19 pandemic have made it more difficult for them to focus on their relationships with teachers (Rehm, 2021). Xia et al.

(2020) demonstrate principal-teacher relationships are "win-win situations" if successful. Unfortunately, pandemic-era limitations on the creation and maintenance of such professional relationships have negatively impacted both school principals and teachers. Registering this concern, school principals are collaborating toward lessening the tension between teachers and themselves, as they know the negative impact poor relations between educational stakeholders can have on school success (Bhat, 2020). Flack et al. (2021) highlight the following goals held by principals in the post-pandemic era: being cognizant and supportive of teacher and student well-being, increasing digital training, minimizing learning loss among vulnerable students, and implementing positive change (Flack et al., 2021).

School principals should seek advice from other leaders while also considering input from teachers to rekindle the teacher-principal relationships lost at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Teacher-principal relationships boost teacher morale and, in turn, overall school success (Cheema, 2017). School principals are currently working to recover from their reduced self-efficacy so they are able to serve their schools more effectively (Crumbley, 2021).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Bissessar (2014) emphasized the importance of collaborative leadership and motivation. Now, there is a significant body of literature validating these ideas and urging school principals to adjust to the new normal. School principals must develop an understanding of the negative results of the COVID-19 pandemic and collaborate with other leaders and educational stakeholders to devise plans to overcome obstacles and survive future crises with fewer losses (Crumbley, 2021; Data Quality Campaign, 2021; Katog, 2022; Metcalfe & Perez, 2020; Rehm, 2021).

Literature-Based Descriptions

Potential themes and perceptions which may arise from this research include absenteeism/truancy among students (Fryer, 2022; Santibañez & Guarino, 2021; Tribune, 2020), teachers, and principals, poor teacher retention (Johnson, 2021; Young, 2018), and poor self-efficacy among principals (Casali et al., 2021; Crumbley, 2021; Gulmez & Negisisik, 2020; Pressley, 2021; Ritchie et al., 2021; Skaalvik, 2020).

Literature Methods

Conducting purely qualitative research comes with both advantages and disadvantages (Creswell, 2002). This study employs a qualitative approach to capture the narratives and lived experiences of the participants. The focus of this qualitative study is the essence of the experiences of school principals as managerial leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) offer several suggestions for how to execute qualitative research aligning well with my research questions and hypotheses.

This study is designed to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced school principals' self-efficacy through a qualitative lens. I aim to answer the following research questions:

- How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted school principals' self-efficacy as their schools' managerial leaders?

- How do school principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by school level (i.e., early childhood, primary, elementary, intermediate, middle, and high)?

- How do school principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by their years of experience?

Scholars offer several ways to understand qualitative research (e.g., Creswell, 2002; Mertens, 2020), including decision-making and the identification of variables, both of which are included in this study. Creswell (2002) suggests surveys should be open-ended to enable the in-depth exploration of topics and themes. He adds investigators should review vetted work to identify authors and approaches feeling natural as exemplars to guide their own structure. Katog (2022), recently stated "principals' decision-making has been challenged within the new normal situation" (p. 2366), would likely advise school principals to refer to Creswell's (2022) recommendations on decision-making. Evidently, a school leader must learn to understand situations and respond appropriately to their various demands.

Moustakas (1994), a trusted phenomenological research methodologist, serves as the foundation for many similar scholars, including Creswell and Poth (2016), Eddles-Hirsch (2015), and Phillips-Pula et al. (2011). Creswell and Poth (2016) offer suggestions on how to maintain an adhesive study, including through the delineation of precise steps to take in order to uphold validity and mitigate potential bias. This study is enhanced through the use of phenomenological research, which enables me to identify patterns in data stemming from multiple distinct data sources (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Creswell and Poth's (2016) methodological ideas are closely related to the suggestions of Eddles-Hirsch (2015), Moustakas, (1994), and Phillips-Pula et al. (2011). Eddles-Hirsch (2015) discusses phenomenology and how it plays a role in educational research, while Phillips-Pula et al. (2011) explain how to understand phenomenological approaches in a way facilitates effective data analysis.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) also offer suggestions on research design, emphasizing best practices for purpose statements. They discuss establishing the proper design for one's audience is essential. I incorporate this idea into my study, as the purpose statement should be clear and entice the reader. I also heed the advice of those who recommend reading other relevant studies to identify a desired writing style.

Creswell (2002), in discussing educational research, emphasizes planning, conducting, and evaluating as vital steps for successful research. Thus, I employ this research routine in my study. Executing a qualitative strategy has allowed me to grow a deeper understanding of the topic at hand and develop my data-analysis skills, enabling me to serve as an advocate for progress. This study examines the qualitative elements of the challenges school principals have faced and are facing with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic and their self-efficacy through the administration of a qualitative survey and interviews with participants.

The interview questions are largely based on Creswell and Creswell's (2018) research design tips. I pose six open-ended questions to 40 respondents to gain insight into the pandemic-era limitations of their role as a school principal. I examine these obstacles from a qualitative standpoint, allowing me to develop a strong understanding of how school principals feel in their current roles and what their goals are moving forward. Through these qualitative methods, I identify the types of challenges school principals are facing, the severity of their concerns, and the common themes in the participants' responses. The strong qualitative feedback I received from the participants lays the groundwork for a discussion of my initial predictions.

Conclusion

By examining school principals' self-efficacy with a focus on how it was influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, we can consider proposals for means of supporting school principals more effectively in the future. Versland (2018) discusses how social isolation and other similar factors can negatively impact individuals' confidence. In a similar article, Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of school principals feeling equipped to perform effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their findings highlight the need for more effective principal-preparation programs and other support programs aimed at meeting principals' evolving needs.

Chapter Three: Methods

Introduction

The qualitative approach guiding this research is phenomenological research, as it most effectively fits the needs of this study based on the suggestions of multiple scholars (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015; Moustakas, 1994; Phillips-Pula et al., 2011). Conducting phenomenological research enables me to describe the participants' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic as a specific phenomenon and, in turn, measure the impact of the pandemic on school administrators' self-efficacy as managerial leaders.

Creswell and Poth (2016) link phenomenological research to qualitative research. They both serve to explain the fundamental nature of a lived phenomenon. Many effective methodologists note the value of phenomenological research (e.g., Eddles-Hirsch, 2015; Moustakas, 1994; Phillips-Pula et al., 2011). I adhere to Eddles-Hirsch's (2015) specific suggestions with regard to the implementation of phenomenology in this educational research. Phenomenological research further aids the study in examining COVID-19's impact on school principals' self-efficacy as managerial leaders due to the educational nature of this topic. Pickler's (2011) guidance supports this research most effectively during the data-analysis portion of this study.

Notably, the phenomenon of school principals leading during the COVID-19 pandemic has yet to be explored in depth in the literature (Donohue & Miller, 2020). Such an exploration, as explained by Creswell and Poth (2016), could produce valuable information for school principals. This study recognizes and represents the voice of school principals through a survey and a series of interviews. The early childhood school in this study consists of child development through kindergarten. The primary school in

this study consists of first and second grade. The elementary schools in this study consist of kindergarten through fifth grade. The intermediate school in this study consists of fifth grade and sixth grade. The middle schools in this study consist of sixth grade through eighth grade. Finally, the high schools in this study consist of ninth grade through twelfth grade.

This study employs a pre-existing survey to ensure validity and reliability. After surveying the participating school principals for demographic purposes, I sort the participants into categories by school level and years of experience as a school principal. Using randomizer.org, I randomly select participants to interview without any bias. The interviews enable me to better understand the participants' concerns and needs. The use of multiple forms of data collection allows me to enhance my credibility and knowledge as an expert on this topic. The data collected may reveal school principals' self-efficacy has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Analysis of the data enables me to make suggestions for positive change in schools and potentially aid in the development of university-level principal-preparation programs. The results of this research may also guide district-level professional development, school-based structures, routines, and procedures, contributing to the success of all stakeholders in the field of education.

The instruments utilized in this qualitative study include a pre-existing survey and interview questions based on the study's research questions and problem statement. The use of a pre-existing survey ensures validity and reliability in the data-collection process. The employed qualitative survey was specifically designed to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted school principals' self-efficacy in a South Carolina school district. The digital accessibility of the survey respects the time of the participants. The survey

comprises demographic inquiries and open-ended questions, providing participants with the opportunity to elaborate on their responses regarding their self-efficacy at the start of the pandemic, the peak of the pandemic, and the resolution of the pandemic. While I converse with the participants via email, the survey does not directly collect participants' email addresses to help them feel secure their responses are anonymous.

Once the survey is administered, I employ randomizer.org to randomly select participants to be interviewed. I then transcribe the conversations and analyze the narratives in them for key outcomes, coding the scripts thematically. Creswell and Creswell (2018) offer different approaches to research design, helping researchers to develop a purposeful identity as a researcher. Interpreting qualitative components is vital to this research. I feel confident my findings are valid and reliable based on the steps I took as an ethical researcher to conduct this qualitative study.

Research Design and Approach

This qualitative study's framework characterizes its methodology. The qualitative procedure I employed was phenomenological research, which most effectively fits the needs of my study's exploration of human experiences and voices. The data-collection tools aligned with Creswell's (2009) suggestions for research design and Creswell and Poth's (2016) recommendations for qualitative inquiry and research design. I also consider suggestions from Eddles-Hirsch (2015), Moustakas (1994), and Phillips-Pula et al. (2011), who specifically discuss the use of phenomenological research in the field of education.

Research Questions

The research questions are based on qualitative factors. This study is designed to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced school principals' self-efficacy through a qualitative lens. Thus, I aim to answer the following research questions:

- How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted school principals' self-efficacy as their schools' managerial leaders?

- How do school principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by school level (i.e., early childhood, primary, elementary, intermediate, middle, and high)?

- How do school principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by their years of experience?

Notably, the survey effectively collects demographic information from the respondents.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

For this qualitative study, the criterion for the participants is school principals from a school district in South Carolina who have served as a school principal for at least five years in the same school district. I examine school principals specifically due to the significance of their role in the field of education. The South Carolina Department of Education (2022) provides education stakeholders with valid and reliable data on this study's partner organization, which is a school district in South Carolina. This school district consists of 54 schools. In this study, I qualitatively examine how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted self-efficacy among these schools' principals through the use of social cognitive theory.

I employ a qualitative study to understand the lived phenomena and narratives of the participants. This study examines the qualitative components of the efficacy-related

challenges school principals have been facing since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study began with the administration of a qualitative survey to collect demographic information of the respondents. The second data-collection process consisted of interviews, which I then transcribed, analyzed, and coded thematically. Creswell and Creswell (2018) offer a variety of procedures that qualitative researchers can employ, providing me with a solid framework through which to develop an effective and meaningful identity as a researcher. In analyzing the data, I categorized the participants into three subgroups:

Table 1 *Categorization of Participants*

Category of Principal	Years of Experience	Reference
Novice Principals	Less than six years	(L. Hunter, personal communication, September 27, 2022).
Experienced Principals	Six to 10 years	(L. Hunter, personal communication, September 27, 2022).
Veteran Principals	11+ years	(L. Hunter, personal communication, September 27, 2022).

Role of the Researcher

My role as a researcher is not to persuade but to understand. Creswell and Poth (2016) argue the primary role of the researcher is to generate knowledge through the

collection and analysis of data. They assert, to be credible experts, researchers must maintain an unbiased viewpoint. I maintained professionalism throughout this qualitative study by precisely communicating the participants' responses from the interviews. Creswell and Creswell (2018) state researchers must uphold the integrity of their studies via impartiality and grant participants full access to their responses. I followed their guidelines to ensure I acted as an ethical researcher. Additionally, while synthesizing this study's data and results, I carefully kept notes in a Microsoft Word Document to record my observations and thoughts.

My current role in education is serving as a fourth-grade teacher in a South Carolina school district. My experiences while earning my Master of Arts in Educational Leadership have provided me with valuable administrative insight. Through the application of my understanding of the role of a school principal, I remained unbiased to protect the veracity of the study. Notably, I secured approval for this study from the International Review Board to ensure the privacy of the participants and alignment with Coastal Carolina University's ethical guidelines.

Measures for the Ethical Protection of Participants

Throughout this qualitative study, I strictly upheld ethical protocols. I was granted a formal letter of approval from the participating school district (School District A) to gather information from their school principals (the participants). The identities of the participants are kept confidential through the use of alphanumeric codenames. No identifying information is shared in this study. The survey informs the participants they are providing me with consent by completing the survey. The data is kept confidential through the use of anonymous Microsoft Word documents and Google Forms

spreadsheets. All participants will have access to their results until the data is discarded in 2026—three years following the completion of the study—per Coastal Carolina University's Institutional Review Board (P. Carter, personal communication, November 28, 2022). This study presented no more than a minimal risk of harm and did not involve procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context. One potential benefit of this study is the participants having a voice in relevant education research. My findings may aid in the development of university-level principal-preparation programs and guide district-level structures and support mechanisms.

Coastal Carolina University's Institutional Review Board granted me permission to conduct this study. While I contacted the participants via email to administer the survey, the survey does not directly collect email addresses from the participants to maintain anonymity. The interviews with school principals from School District A were conducted and recorded via Google Meet.

Criteria for Selecting Participants

School District A houses the participants of the study. This school district comprises 56 schools and, in turn, 56 school principals covering a wide range of experience and school levels.

The South Carolina Department of Education (2022) provides educational stakeholders with valid and reliable data. The vision of School District A is "to be a premier, world-class school system in which every student acquires an excellent education" (School District A Strategic Plan, 2022, p. 3). School District A aims for its schools to be "welcoming centers organized around high-quality teaching and learning" with the following core values (School District A Strategic Plan, 2022, p. 3):

- We put service to students above all else.

- We take responsibility for the success of all students.

- We care passionately about our work with students.

- We build strong, positive relationships with students, staff, parents, and the community.

- We model and promote civility and integrity.

Selection of Data

The results of this study may be useful to school principals focused on the needs of their school and community. Many school principals are facing challenges stemming from a lack of self-efficacy they had not faced in previous years (Cutting, 2021). The results of this study may help officials to more effectively support school principals in combating the impacts of COVID-19 or other crises. My findings may be helpful to researchers aiming to yield growth in a school community. Asking strategic questions based on principals' narratives provided me with insight into the conflicts present in school principals' day-to-day lives as managerial leaders and showed me how these conflicts have influenced and continue to influence school principals. With this insight, officials and other stakeholders in the field of education can work to address the needs of their community and propose a plan for future crisis preparedness. Collecting the qualitative data at the core of this study strengthened my understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced school principals' self-efficacy, enabling me to advocate for positive change.

Data Analysis

This study is qualitative in nature to facilitate the inclusion of human voices in the research. In line with Creswell's (2002) guidelines, this study features an item matrix table to note participants' demographics from the pre-existing survey and identify potential interview questions. I conducted and thematically coded the interviews based on common trends and themes. In order to ensure the integrity of the data-collection process, I consistently followed Creswell and Creswell's (2018) suggestions to collect reliable data.

Chapter Four: Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study is to contribute to the limited body of research on the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on school principals' self-efficacy as managerial leaders. This study engages in phenomenological research to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016). More specifically, this study examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on self-efficacy among school principals in one South Carolina school district—School District A. Researching school principals' self-efficacy is relevant and valuable to the field of education due to the profound influence school principals have on all stakeholders in the field of education. This research may ultimately serve as the foundation for the creation of professional development programs for school principals aimed at boosting their intrinsic motivation and confidence.

Research Questions

The research questions directing and guiding the qualitative study are:

1. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted school principals' self-efficacy as their schools' managerial leaders?

2. How do school principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by school level (i.e., early childhood, primary, elementary, intermediate, middle, and high)?

3. How do school principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by their years of experience?

The hypotheses are:

1. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted school principals' self-efficacy as their schools' managerial leaders.

2. School principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by school level (early childhood, primary, elementary, intermediate, middle, and high).

3. School principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by their years of experience.

This chapter details the findings of this qualitative study and answers the research questions. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on school principals' self-efficacy as managerial leaders. The results of this study largely align with the existing literature on the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on school principals' self-efficacy. Most notably, the results point to the following conclusions:

- Principals feel vexed with post-pandemic factors and are displeased by how officials are handling the situation.

- It has been challenging for school principals to effectively support teachers in their school due to post-pandemic factors.

- School principals' self-efficacy has been compromised by the pandemic-era challenges facing them as well as those facing teachers and students.

Collectively, the participants' narratives indicate their self-efficacy as managerial leaders has been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. While their self-efficacy is stronger now than it was at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is still lower than it had been prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of this study are valid and reliable on account of the steps I have conducted in this qualitative study. This study's sample of seven school principals constitutes a strong contribution to the literature on COVID-19's impact on school principals' self-efficacy as managerial leaders. The sample comprises two elementary school principals, one intermediate school

principal, three middle school principals, and one high school principal, all of whom met the demographic criteria for participation and participated in the interview process.

The interviews offered insight into the lived experiences of the participants at the beginning, peak, and resolution of the COVID-19 pandemic. Common themes from the interviews include a lack of teachers present in the brick-and-mortar school setting, low student attendance, and a lack of support for positive change from state officials. The results of this study reveal, relative to the pre-pandemic era, school principals in the post-pandemic era exhibit lower self-efficacy. This change largely stems from the stress they endured throughout the pandemic as well as the residual effects of the pandemic, including the following factors:

- Poor student behavior and performance (socially and academically)

- Difficulty recruiting and retaining teachers

- Lack of future guidance from federal, state, and district officials

- Lack of support from families and community members

Results of Research Questions

The answers to the research questions are as follows:

1. The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted school principals' self-efficacy in leading their schools.

2. School principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by school level (elementary, intermediate, middle, and high).

3. School principals' experiences vary substantially in degree of impact by their years of experience.

The school principals who participated in this study communicated their missions and goals are aligned with the school district's vision. Collectively, they prioritize the construction of a safe and enriching learning environment for students above all else. The participants in this study voiced concerns over preventing unknown impacts at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Failing to achieve a mission can be challenging for any stakeholder. Many of the participants in my study contended it has been challenging for them to effectively support the teachers in their school due to the post-pandemic factors brought about by COVID-19. Many of the participants spoke of the managerial challenges they faced in attempting to support their teachers amid distance learning. Participant Two specifically mentioned the lack of support offered to teachers when highlighting consultants and learning specialists were not present in schools to assist teachers throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviewees collectively suggested their self-efficacy has been compromised due to their pandemic-era struggles.

The interviewees indicated they are aware of the type of support they need from certain stakeholders. The data gathered throughout this study may garner the attention of officials who can support school leaders more effectively through a foundation for positive change. Such growth may alleviate the challenges and frustrations school principals are currently facing. One common theme clearly apparent in every interview pertains to the current struggles school principals are facing. Based on the information the interviewees volunteered, the five primary causes of lower self-efficacy among school principals in the post-pandemic era are as follows:

- Lack of teachers present in the brick-and-mortar school setting

- Low student attendance

- Dilemmas now as compared to the past

- Negative effects

- Lack of support for vigilance and reaction from government officials

Overall, the results indicate school principals' self-efficacy declined as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Setting

I began the data-collection process by emailing a survey to school principals in School District A asking them to complete a survey. The survey served to gather demographic information, ensure the respondents met the study's criteria, and gauge the principals' perceptions regarding their self-efficacy as managerial leaders. I interviewed each participant who completed the demographics form, resulting in seven overall qualitative interviews.

Data Collection

Demographics

Seven full-time school principals who lead public schools in the same school district in South Carolina same participated in my qualitative study. Five were male (71.5%), and the other two were female (28.6%). All seven of the participants were Caucasian. Notably, however, the interviewed school principals are diverse in terms of their level of experience and the school level they currently serve. I contacted the participants via email, attaching the demographic survey to ensure they met the study's criteria. I later interviewed seven of the 54 emailed school principals. I interviewed four of the seven participants via Google Meet for approximately 30 minutes. The remaining

three participants opted to respond to the interview questions via email due to scheduling issues.

Table 2 displays the demographics as they relate to two of my research questions:

- How do school principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by school level (early childhood, primary, elementary, intermediate, middle, and high)?

- How do school principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by their years of experience?

Demographic Survey

In my initial recruitment email to 54 school principals in School District A, I provided a demographic survey and a consent notice. The survey served to ensure the potential participants met the criteria of the study and to gather demographic information. The survey did not directly ask for the email addresses of the respondents to reassure them their answers were anonymous. I analyzed the survey results, displayed in Table 2, for demographic purposes.

Table 2

Participants' Demographics

Participant	Leadership Role	Years of Experience as a Principal	Education Level	Current School Level
1	Principal	6	Masters +30	Middle
2	Principal	17	Masters +30	Intermediate
3	Principal	5	Masters	Elementary
4	Principal	7	Masters +30	Elementary
5	Principal	6	Masters +30	High
6	Principal	5	Masters+30	Middle

7	Principal	3	Masters	Middle

The respondents covered the elementary, intermediate, middle, and high school levels. None of the respondents represented the primary school level. The elementary school principals accounted for 28.6% of the participants, the intermediate principal accounted for 14.3% of the participants, the middle school principals accounted for 42.9% of the participants, and the high school principals accounted for 14.3% of the participants. Based on the collected data, 28.6% of the participants were 31–40 years old, 57.1% were 41–50 years old, and 14.3% were older than 50. The experience level of each participant as a classroom teacher fell into one of two categories: 57.1% of the participants served as a classroom teacher for five to 10 years, while the remaining 42.9% of participants served as a classroom teacher for 11 to 15 years. Additionally, 71.4% of the participants served as an assistant principal for one to five years before taking on the role of principal, while 28.6% of the participants served as an assistant principal for six to 10 years before becoming a principal. Regarding the highest degree obtained by the participants, 28.6% of the school principals held a master's degree, while 71.4% of the participants held a master's plus 30.

Although Participant Seven only had three years of experience as a school principal (when all others had at least five years of experience), he was not rejected from the study after thoughtful consideration, as the information he was willing to contribute to this study was compelling and in direct alignment with the research questions. Additionally, I thought this unique experience level could make him a valuable point of comparison. However, the number of years of experience serving as a school principal proved to have little to no influence on the challenges school principals faced or the self-

efficacy school principals experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, the diverse participant pool facilitated these comparisons, even if they were not particularly fruitful.

Data Analysis

Interviews

All of the participants reported experiencing a negative change in their self-efficacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. I conducted and recorded 30-minute interviews with the principals who responded to the demographic survey to gain insight into their challenges and feelings about their self-efficacy with a particular focus on the shift from the pre-pandemic era to the post-pandemic era. (Note, however, three of the interviews were conducted via email at the participants' request.) I reviewed and transcribed the audio recordings, analyzed the transcriptions, and thematically coded the responses, as suggested by Creswell (2018). To protect the identity of each participant, I assigned each principal an alphanumeric identifier. I used thematic coding to display the data more effectively, as shown in Table 3. The columns in Table 3 include the identified theme, the color assigned to each theme for coding purposes, the frequency at which the theme was represented by the participants, and the alignment of each theme with the hypotheses. The frequency of each theme is indicated by the percentage of participants who supported the theme. This chapter outlines the common thematic trends in the interview responses. Note some of the respondents' quotations throughout the remainder of this chapter may have been modified slightly to ensure clarity—but all such modifications are indicated by brackets.

Table 3

Thematic Coding Results

Identified Theme/Code	Assigned Color	Frequency	Alignment with Hypotheses
Poor Student Behavior and Performance	Red	100%	Expected
Pre- to post-COVID-19 pandemic transition	Orange	86%	Expected
Residual negative effects	Green	86%	Expected
Lack of support from federal, state, and district officials	Blue	100%	Expected
Lack of support from families and community members	Purple	72%	Expected

Evidently, poor student behavior and performance and lack of support from federal, state, and district officials were the two most commonly represented themes in the interviews. Based on the results of the thematic coding, 100% of the participants reported student behavior and performance has suffered both academically and socially through pre-pandemic, peak-pandemic, and post-pandemic lenses. One hundred percent of the participants stated poor student behavior impacted their perceptions of their own efficacy. This factor is key, as poor student behavior is the challenge has consumed and continues to consume the large majority of school principals' energy, negatively impacting their self-efficacy.

Comparisons between the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic eras played a significant role in this study. Notably, 86% of the respondents indicated the transition between these eras was challenging and harmed their self-efficacy. Residual negative effects were also shown to have impacted the self-efficacy of 86% of the interviewed

school principals. The shift from the pre-pandemic era to the post-pandemic era as managerial leaders proved to be challenging and frustrating for the interviewed school principals. It is interesting to note a lack of support from families and community members was the least-mentioned of the five themes discussed by the participants. Only 72% of the participants voiced major concerns regarding a lack of support from families and community members impacting their self-efficacy throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overall, the school principals highlighted poor student behavior and performance and lack of support from federal, state, and district officials as the two most stressful factors while serving as their schools' managerial leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic and, in turn, as the factors most negatively impacted their self-efficacy. Of the two, however, poor student behavior and performance was identified as the challenge lingering most heavily following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Poor Student Behavior and Performance

The participants in this study each warned about the increase in negative behavior and the decline in social and academic performance among students in their school. This constitutes a serious concern for them, as they know a student's behavior can influence their academic growth. Overall, the school principals in this study have noticed a profound increase in ineffective student behavior since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting the pandemic and its residual effects are responsible. As managerial leaders, school principals spend a significant amount of time on a daily basis working with students to improve their behavior and performance at school. According to Principal One, student discipline was fundamentally different in the virtual distance

learning setting used during the COVID-19 pandemic. Principals simply could not observe student infractions as they could in a normal face-to-face setting. Teachers were directed to kick students out of their virtual classroom if they failed to meet behavioral expectations. In the hybrid setting, discipline was not a particularly significant concern, as the class sizes were half the normal size. However, once students returned to face-to-face learning settings, many new behavioral challenges became apparent.

According to the participants in this study, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted negative performance among many students. Students not attending a brick-and-mortar school setting on a daily basis resulted in them missing the benefits of structure and routine. Therefore, according to the interviewed school principals, there was a notable decline in students' social skills upon their return to in-person learning. Principal Three, an elementary school leader, expressed a similar idea, stating "One of the biggest challenges I am facing now is primary children coming to school with extreme behavioral challenges and teachers not having the skills to manage those behaviors." He feels the pandemic-era restrictions resulted in students coming back to brick-and-mortar schools with new behavioral challenges, as they lacked opportunities to socialize with their peers and develop critical social skills. Principal Three went on to say the behavioral issues he is seeing in his school are "more prevalent than what I witnessed prior to the pandemic."

Principal One was eager to offer her thoughts on the topic of student behavior. She believed the high frequency and intensity of poor behaviors, such as self-harm and bullying, or what she referred to as "first-time behaviors", are generally most prominent among middle school students but have worsened as a result of the pandemic. Her assertion strikes right at the core of my second research question: How do school

principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by school level (early childhood, primary, elementary, intermediate, middle, and high)? She added combatting these behaviors as a middle school principal requires a different managerial style than combatting them as an elementary or high school principal. Notably, she asserts this difference would be present regardless of the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, she went on to express some of the new problematic behaviors she has witnessed since the start of the pandemic appear to stem from a lower maturity level among middle school students, which she believes is attributable to the pandemic. She believes these problems are rooted in the lack of attention students receive from teachers and other stakeholders in the field of education during distance learning. She also explained students seem to be unphased by in-school suspensions and, when students are the subject of disciplinary measures from a school official (e.g., having their phone taken away), their parents are often unsupportive of the administrator's chosen consequences.

Principal Four reported "Transitioning back from COVID-19 to rebuilding our community and routines while addressing learning loss has been a challenge. We are experiencing lots of behavior and social concerns, especially with the younger students." She clarified "some behavior issues were already occurring, but behaviors are increasing, which is not something we have dealt with a lot in the past. Younger students are coming to school without any exposure or having limited social interactions." Similarly, Principal One explained students were calm for the first few weeks following the full-time return to the brick-and-mortar school setting, but this brief period of calm quickly shifted to a state of chaos. She clarified her school was one of the last middle schools to return to full-time in-person learning, while the last high school in the school district to return did so

approximately one month later. Principal Five, a high school principal, also noted his students in ninth and tenth grade are showing an increase in disciplinary infractions. He believes this increase is "directly related to students being out of normal school for almost three years," adding "these students are very immature, and they do not know how to act in a social setting after having three years in middle school interrupted by COVID. Our discipline for ninth and tenth graders has increased significantly this year." Evidently, at least in School District A, there has been a negative shift in student behavior since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Principal Seven, a middle school principal, informed us of the challenges aligned with "helping students to continue to recover academically, socially, and emotionally." He builds on this idea as follows: "There are deficits due to the amount of time students have been out due to the pandemic [and] other events, such as hurricanes and flooding." The issues we see are more prevalent and have become more pressing due to the time outside of school. Participant Two, an intermediate school principal, shared his opinion regarding differences between him and other school principals stemming from their different school levels. After reviewing the data on his teachers' stressors, he came to believe the factor driving problematic student behavior may be the prepubescent age of his students, which strongly contrasts the younger age of students in primary and elementary schools. He explained:

> The biggest impact felt at the fifth- and sixth-grade level was on students' ability to socialize properly and make a connection to their school. The result was a drastic increase in more deviant behaviors such as vandalism in the building. Students were more connected to social media [than to] their school.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, Principal Two still notices heightened negative behavior among students relative to the pre-pandemic era. He links the poor social behavior to a decrease in academic behavior, explaining students' lack of drive to complete assignments. This increased level of poor social and academic behavior may hinder the efficacy of schools' adult staff.

The diverse responses from the school principals leading different school levels may help to answer my second research question—How do school principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by school level (early childhood, primary, elementary, intermediate, middle, and high)?—and my third research question—How do school principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by their years of experience? As managerial leaders who have combatted the COVID-19 pandemic and its residual effects, the school principals in this study noticed a profound decline in students' social and academic behavior and performance in school following the pandemic. They collectively believe poor social behavior has led to worsened academic behavior. This dynamic is significant to school principals as managerial leaders and has a strong ability to negatively impact their self-efficacy beliefs. All of the participants aim to mitigate poor student behavior in order to enable all stakeholders to return to their normal routines and make their school a safe and successful learning environment.

The Transition Between the Pre- and Post-Pandemic Eras

Although school principals have historically faced significant challenges, my thematic analysis has revealed obstacles not existent prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. All of the participants agreed students' social and academic behavior did not constitute as much of a problem prior to the start of the pandemic. The participants expressed the transition between the pre- and post-pandemic eras was challenging from a managerial

standpoint, noting there are still residual pandemic effects which were nonexistent or were not as prevalent before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The principals cited the lack of support from federal, state, and district officials as the most stressful factor in their work as managerial leaders—a problem that did not constitute a major concern in the pre-pandemic era.

Many of the current obstacles are distinct from those they faced prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Principal One asserted she is "still determining which of the enhanced procedures for safety and security are worth keeping and which procedures are no longer warranted," adding, while there are procedures she would likely to keep, she is looking for a way to "make it happen through the use of technology or other mechanical products instead of people." This concern did not need to be addressed in the pre-pandemic era.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a lack of teachers in the brick-and-mortar school setting came to constitute a severe daily challenge for many school principals. Teachers were frequently forced to stay at home as a result of contracting COVID-19 or coming in close contact with someone who had. My interviews revealed school principals are still facing challenges stemming from teachers being absent from work due to COVID-19-related issues at the time of this study's publication. Principal One stated her main concern on this matter pertains to the shortage of substitute teachers. In fact, her school is "continuing to experience a teacher shortage," though she clarifies this shortage is not as intense as others in her school district.

Principal Two expressed similar ideas regarding current challenges relative to those prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. He regretfully informed us "It is different, as the

issues are culturally based versus [being] about school performance. It is about perception of social issues versus academic issues." Additionally, Principal Five noted some changes which occurred during the start of the pandemic. He acknowledged "prior to COVID, if I asked my staff to assist with covering a class or assist with an extra-curricular activity, they would assist without hesitation, but that is not the case now." He continued, explaining he is experiencing "employees not wanting to do anything extra unless they are compensated for it." He noted "pre-COVID, we did not have extra money to pay employees to cover a class or assist with an activity. Now, that has become the norm and employees are no longer willing to assist when asked." Rather, they ask him directly to clarify if they are going to be compensated for the extra work.

Principal One asserted teachers at all school levels likely faced a technology learning curve over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. She concluded, based on her interactions with other school principals, middle school teachers were more willing to meet pandemic-era technological demands than elementary school principals but slightly less willing than high school principals due to the level of experience high school students had with technology prior to the start of the pandemic. All teachers and students in School District A were expected to use the Google Classroom platform with the same procedures and specific expectations during the pandemic. The hybrid learning model allowed for smaller class sizes, and teachers were able to give individual students more attention, which was critical during the transition back to full-time learning.

The varying perspectives of the participants may help to answer my second research question—How do school principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by school level (early childhood, primary, elementary, intermediate, middle, and high)?—

and my third research question—How do school principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by their years of experience? Most of the participants discussed teacher shortages being more prevalent now than they were before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. One respondent explained finding teachers has been difficult due to teachers pursuing other professions and a decline in the number of people graduating from college with a teaching degree. According to the school principals interviewed for this study, this challenge appears to be worsening. The results provide evidence there were several pre-pandemic needs which have become more apparent and exaggerated in the aftermath of the pandemic. According to the interviewed school principals, schools have experienced major transitions affecting all stakeholders in the field of education. Notably, the self-efficacy of the participants was negatively impacted during the transition from the pre-pandemic era to the post-pandemic era—and there are still many obstacles remaining from this transition.

Residual Negative Effects

The information gathered from interviews with the participants relates to my first research question: How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted principals' self-efficacy as their schools' managerial leaders? The participants indicated there are many lingering multifaceted problems stemming from the pandemic. Principal One recalled her experience during the 2021–2022 school year, which she described as the hardest year of her 22-year-long career: "There was a significant emotional impact experienced, and its residual effects have affected any future possibilities of incentivizing members of staff." She elaborated on some of the negative effects as follows:

When additional funds no longer feel like an incentive to staff members, and their response is to enter an absence because they cannot take what is going on, we are set back even further, and making management decisions based on [the] surface level needs to just get by within the building.

Echoing Principal One, Principal Seven spoke about the residual effects of the pandemic and, more specifically, the additional responsibilities borne by educational workers. He said it would be helpful to have "an additional administrator, teachers, support staff, guidance counselors, bus drivers, custodians, and aides." Principal One claimed the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major lingering effect on the hiring process. Her routine for hiring has changed dramatically due to the lack of high-quality employment candidates. She used to consider certification first and foremost—but now she is forced to first consider what type of candidates are available before asking about certification, which was never a matter of concern prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, she never had to worry about hiring someone who may not be a high-quality employee, as the applicant pool was plentiful. Now, she is forced to consider lower-quality options. She emphasizes schools inevitably take on major liabilities when they are desperate to find employees. She has personally experienced lawsuits being filed and is sad her resources have to be spent documenting and following such protocols instead of caring for her students. Teachers at Principal One's school have been resigning at a rapid rate relative to the pre-pandemic era, forcing her to search for candidates to fill the vacancies. She believes teachers are resigning due to an inability to handle the modern pressures of the job. The differences in responses from the interviewees help to answer my second research question—How do school principals' experiences vary in

degree of impact by school level (early childhood, primary, elementary, intermediate, middle, and high)?—and my third research question—How do school principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by their years of experience?

Currently, Principal One is in need of more personnel—specifically another front desk clerk and a second school nurse. Her school's lack of these resources constitutes a major limitation. She is also seeking a behavior coach to address the worrying and increasingly prominent issues among her students, including vaping, self-harm, and overall mental unwellness. Each of the principals discussed the residual effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and offered insight into how these effects continue to influence their school and their daily routine as the school's managerial leader. Although the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic has passed, the residual effects of the pandemic still interfere with the self-efficacy of school principals.

Lack of Support from Federal, State, and District Officials

In line with the literature (e.g., Donohue & Miller, 2020; Fancera & Saperstein, 2021; McGoron et al., 2022; Nerlino, 2022; Ritchie, Cervone, & Sharpe 2021), the participants in this study discussed the lack of a cohesive process among official stakeholders and the receipt of contradictory guidance from officials throughout the COVID-19 pandemic—and still today. Many of the participants implied hey feel oppressed by School District A, as they are being expected to operate their school as they did in the pre-pandemic era. The narratives of the managerial leaders in this study made it clear they felt obligated by government officials and the law to follow evolving COVID-19-related protocols, even when they felt policy changes would have little to no positive outcomes. Many of the participants felt policy responses were often confusing and

insufficient. Principal One alluded to government officials being ultracrepidarians when it came to making decisions for how school principals should proceed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 protocols for school operation were constantly changing. There were limited actions principals could take without infringing on formal government protocols. Principal One claimed information delivered by School District A sounded logical, but the anxiety induced by it was unbearable. One of the major challenges Principal One faced as a managerial leader during the COVID-19 pandemic was dealing with School District A's contradictory guidelines. Participant One believes there was a pattern of illusion occurring in School District A—the provisional protocols were beneficial even if school principals did not realize it while working during the pandemic. The participants reported language being incredibly inconsistent during the pandemic. For example, one participant reported one instance in which the definition of "direct contact" changed from six feet to three feet within 48 hours with no clear explanation. Another example is the evolving guidelines regarding the number of students who needed to test positive for an entire class to be required to quarantine. Notably, these constant changes were far from meaningless, as school leaders were required to keep a spreadsheet to track students testing positive. At one point, 67% of the students at Principal One's school were absent due to a COVID-19-related concern.

The mixed experiences and feelings of the respondents can be applied to my second research question—How do school principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by school level (early childhood, primary, elementary, intermediate, middle, and

high)?—and my third research question: How do school principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by their years of experience? She elaborated as follows:

> We would benefit from using CARES funds to compensate support staff members, such as custodians, cafeteria staff, and special education paraprofessionals, for the new tasks expected of them throughout the day to fill in for substitutes when we have a shortage, which has grown since the start of the pandemic, while maintaining their documentation expectations for their respective roles as paraprofessionals in special education classrooms.

The use of broad-brush criteria used in guidelines for School District A was frustrating to school principals. Based on the data gathered from this study, diversity among learners means principals require a degree of autonomy to be able to meet the needs of all stakeholders in their school. For example, Principal Two stated he would appreciate more support from health services as a resource for teachers, support staff, and families.

Further contributing to the perceived inconsistency in the guidelines provided by School District A, Principal One reported, while teachers were offered additional pay to cover classes, no additional compensation was offered to non-teacher staff members to cover for teachers or other staff members. This situation demonstrates why school principals would feel there was a lack of clarity and support from federal, state, and district officials. The ways in which these officials conveyed new protocols and guidelines were puzzling to many of the school principals interviewed in this study.

A substantial body of literature (e.g., Donohue & Miller, 2020; Fancera & Saperstein, 2021; McGoron et al., 2022; Nerlino, 2022; Ritchie, Cervone, & Sharpe,

2021) documents school leaders perceiving officials as providing them with contradictory information. Participant One contributed to this sentiment, describing her role as necessarily "reactive" when responding to health concerns, noting the "tediousness of the conflicting procedures being implemented." She continued on this frustration, emphasizing that "instruction cannot be the priority that is expected, not even close," and clarifying officials must focus on other factors as well, such as stakeholders' mental and physical well-being. She concluded:

> The steps taken for communication and documentation related to direct contacts and quarantines were lacking, and even with increased positive pay being offered to certain members of staff, there were not enough hours in the evenings and weekends to be able to make it happen.

Ultimately, Principal One argued, any school principals who wanted to provide a directive felt that they did not have permission to do so.

Based on my findings, it is clear school principals felt they needed to be careful when making critical decisions, making sure to avoid interfering with district, state, and federal protocols. Stress was prominent among school principals, as officials assumed they could manage their schools the same way they did prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The resultant feelings of worry and obligation negatively impacted school principals' self-efficacy because they often struggled to anticipate positive results due to the confusing and contradictory protocols being presented to them by different officials. Principal Two advanced this common theme among the respondents regarding school policies constantly changing:

> Currently, the challenge[s] principals are facing are those created outside of the school regarding the politicization of schooling. School policies can be changing, and what was normal practice before can be called into question and deemed offensive to anyone. It is almost like being on eggshells with certain topics these days.

He proceeded to elaborate on why believes these challenges are present:

> As a veteran educator and administrator with 17 years in the principalship, it has always been interesting how the perception of our educational system [changes] […] we can be heroes when things go well and or ineffective when needed for political agendas. The reason for this is political aspirations, and my assumption is a future agenda to allow for public funds to be used for private schooling. I saw this in action in North Carolina years ago, and, as a result, schools were defunded, and the state's national ranking went from […] 24th in the nation to 50th in a few years.

The constant fluctuation of school policies reduced self-efficacy among the school principals in this study.

To further investigate this relationship, I asked Principal Two about the type of support he would need to successfully serve as a post-pandemic managerial leader. He replied, "This is challenging, as it is about politics and political-personal views [rather than] instruction. Boards are making decisions based on this, and the only support in reducing this is [having] nonpartisan boards who make policy." He said other stakeholders can support him as a school principal by "recognizing the hard work of educators, and realizing they are not the blame for social and cultural discord."

According to him, the goal of school principals is straightforward: "Our goal is to assist in producing productive citizens who can fulfill the vision of the United States of America and support all learners." According to Principal Three, School District A officials have been present in his school throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. He informed me his school "has district behavioral specialists coming in to give strategies to special education teachers, but it would be nice to be able to give more strategies to general education teachers." He noted he is working with his school district to make the provision of such strategies a reality.

Principal Four agreed the lack of support from federal, state, and district officials constituted a challenge. She described her struggles with provisional protocols by arguing "It is difficult to make decisions and do what is best for children when you have so many hoops to jump through systematically." She clarified, however, she understands why these processes are in place—but she still knows wasting time is problematic in education, as it takes a high amount of time to get students the support and placements they need to be successful. She shared she has found ways to be creative and use the resources already available within her school to put things into place while adults in the building work through each child's needs. Similarly, Participant Five expressed the following:

> We utilize our advisory program to implement social and emotional programs to support our students. I am not sure of a program we can utilize for employees to get them back to supporting each other and extracurriculars without compensation.

This type of action would need to be developed and executed by federal, state, or district officials. In line with the feelings of Principal Five, Principal Two said one of his greatest challenges throughout the pandemic was ensuring action steps and future plans were "fully clear to others," which was made incredibly difficult by the unclear and inconsistent protocols being provided to him by officials.

The principals' narratives emphasize the lack of clarity from officials at the district, state, and federal levels as a fundamental problem impacting school principals' self-efficacy. The participants unanimously asserted officials offered schools insufficient policies with which to address the COVID-19 pandemic. This feeling aligns with the literature and points to the widespread confusion and disagreement felt by school principals (e.g., Anderson & Weiner, 2023; Spyropoulou & Koutroukis, 2021).

Notably, the school principals, as managerial leaders, felt some of the guidance from officials actually counteracted efforts to successfully survive the pandemic. The loosely established procedures were evidently unclear and inadequate to the school principals in this study, failing to address the needs of their schools. These results indicate protocols should be developed with the core idea of prioritizing school principals' self-efficacy as managerial leaders and be coherently articulated to all stakeholders in the field of education—especially school principals, who are responsible for spearheading these protocols. The interviews revealed the participants felt apprehensive about discussing the decisions made by School District A. Collectively, the participants expressed a need for greater clarity from federal, state, and district officials. Regardless of their feelings, however, the participants made it clear they continued to follow the COVID-19 response safety protocols suggested by the CDC; decisions in

School District A were made based on official guidelines. Still, it is safe to say a lack of support from federal, state, and district officials profoundly impacted school principals' self-efficacy throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lack of Support from Families and Community Members

Investing in resources is an effective way to facilitate collaboration and growth. The participants in this study agreed the lack of support from families and community members worsened as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This constituted a problem for them as managerial school leaders. They discussed how this challenge interfered with their self-efficacy as managerial leaders. Principal Four explained the dynamic as follows:

> We need families to be on board and involved with students' learning. They play a vital role in helping to ensure children are successful. This is the challenge because so many want to make it our problem and not be held responsible. Relationships and honest conversations are a must. […] Lack of parental support and lack of expectations and consistent routines are the reason for these challenges. Some bad habits were formed during COVID we are working to reverse and transition back to routines and expectations in place prior to COVID.

The range of perspective of the participants help us to better understand my second research question—How do school principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by school level (early childhood, primary, elementary, intermediate, middle, and high)?—and my third research question: How do school principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by their years of experience? While discussing the lack of support from families and community members, Participant Five, a high school principal, shared

feelings in line with those of Principal Four, an elementary school principal. He postulated "parents and guardians helping to support our students socialize more than just on their device or phone is needed. Students are truly struggling with social interaction in a face-to-face situation." Principal One discussed the struggle of contacting families to notify them their child had come in contact with a student who tested positive for COVID-19. Families never took this news lightly and often demanded video proof of the contact. Another challenge was school principals not being allowed to ask for proof of vaccination; they had to rely solely on the word of students' families. Principal One is proud of the high-quality communication she provided families with throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Once the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic began to subside, she decided to limit the frequency of her communication, shifting back to the limited direct communication she had with families prior to the start of the pandemic. She made this decision because she wanted her contact with families to stand out in order to maintain the seriousness of contact. Notably, Principal Two, an intermediate school principal, found it challenging when officials shared their own interpretations, causing families to become confused.

One interesting note from the interviews is more family support would be appreciated at all school levels—though especially at the high school level. As managerial leaders, the school principals would prefer families and community members serving as partisans in the school-home connection. However, of the five common themes from the interviews, this was the theme negatively impacting school principals' self-efficacy the least. One can conclude from this data, while school principals value family and community involvement, they also believe they can operate their schools effectively

without comprehensive support and involvement from families and community members. Notably, the lack of support from families and community members throughout the COVID-19 pandemic did not profoundly impact school principals' self-efficacy.

Interview Self-Efficacy Data

The principals' narratives collectively revealed their self-efficacy as managerial leaders has been negatively impacted over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. While their self-efficacy is higher now than it had been at the peak of the pandemic, it is significantly lower than it had been prior to the start of the pandemic. Principal Two asserted the COVID-19 pandemic affected his potential longevity as a developing leader due to the stress and pressure put on him. Nevertheless, he optimistically added "the COVID-19 pandemic presented many challenges for building leaders we have never faced before [and showed] how effective we can be at building leaders." This sentiment highlights the drive and resilience of an effective leader. Surprisingly, Principal One and Principal Two both made several positive comments during their interviews, emphasizing the growth they experienced in the face of crisis and hardship.

Principal Three discussed his efficacy and claimed the COVID-19 pandemic influenced him in a negative way: he's been unable to find enough time to observe teachers in their classrooms and provide them with feedback. Principal Four asserted the pandemic impacted her efficacy but also presented a positive view of her time as principal during the COVID-19 pandemic as a learning experience for her. She explained:

> I have learned many things, both good and bad, from my experiences
> through the pandemic. Most importantly, we must do what is best for each

individual child and make decisions based on this [at] the time. Time is valuable, and I will not waste teachers' or staff's time because they need to be able to work smarter to be effective and also balance work and home for self-care. Relationships are everything.

Principal Five remarked he does not think the pandemic has limited his ability as a principal to complete the tasks he is needed for but it has "consumed more of his time." He also made the following optimistic assessment:

We are still getting everything done we need to complete to have a high-performing school, and I feel, in a few years, we will have students and staff back on track with what we were doing prior to COVID.

His view of the pandemic as an opportunity for growth is inspiring to me as both a classroom teacher and a researcher.

As shown in Table 3 the common trends displayed: lack of teachers present in the brick-and-mortar school setting, low student attendance, dilemmas now as compared to the past, negative effects, and lack of support for vigilance and reaction from government officials. The thematic coding revealed patterns between the participants. Overall, however, the results show the vitality of school principals has diminished. School principals are struggling to invest in themselves, making it nearly impossible for them to invest in others. The participants in this study demonstrated the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on their self-efficacy as managerial leaders. As displayed in Table 4, all of the participants indicated their self-efficacy has been negatively impacted over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 4

Change in Self-Efficacy Results

Participant	Meets Criteria	School Level	Negative Change in Self-Efficacy
1	Yes	Middle	Yes
2	Yes	Intermediate	Yes
3	Yes	Elementary	Yes
4	Yes	Elementary	Yes
5	Yes	High	Yes
6	Yes	Middle	Yes
7	Yes	Middle	Yes

Chapter Five: Discussion

Understanding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on school principals as managerial leaders is crucial for the field of education. This study contributes to the limited body of literature on the COVID-19 pandemic's influence on school principals' self-efficacy. This study revealed the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on school principals' self-efficacy as managerial leaders in School District A. I employed a qualitative approach to design a study outlining respondents' overall narratives, and I employed phenomenological research to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This approach provided insight into

participants' pre-pandemic, peak-pandemic, and post-pandemic experiences and perceptions, showcasing the decline in their self-efficacy as managerial leaders.

The stress of the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted the self-efficacy of school principals over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, several of the participants still shared positive thoughts about their future as managerial leaders. Clearly, schools' circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic were highly problematic, but the school principals interviewed in this study reported experiencing growth as a result. These principals are still aiming to formulate effective plans to combat obstacles—especially crisis scenarios—in the future. A key component of qualitative research is active reflection (Mertens, 2020). I engaged in thoughtful reasoning and reflection throughout this study by recording and analyzing my observations throughout the research process. This chapter offers an overview of the study, including the challenges being addressed, the findings, the research questions, and recommendations for future research.

Research Questions

Chapter Five discusses this study's outcomes. The research questions for this qualitative study are as follows:

- How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted school principals' self-efficacy as their schools' managerial leaders?
- How do school principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by school level (i.e., early childhood, primary, elementary, intermediate, middle, and high)?
- How do school principals' experiences vary in degree of impact by their years of experience?

Summary of Interviews Regarding Efficacy

The phenomenological research process enabled the participants to share in-depth and meaningful narratives. From the interviews, it is clear the primary factor behind school leaders experiencing lower self-efficacy as managerial leaders since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic was the high safety concerns. Worries about quarantine and isolation made school principals, teachers, and students similarly anxious. Notably, the school principals in this study still have questions for officials and are seeking answers to aid them in the recovery of both their school's success and their own self-efficacy. The participants' perceptions of their own cognitive processes throughout the COVID-19 pandemic offered various unique perspectives. Collectively, these interviews revealed the school principals' self-efficacy as managerial leaders was negatively impacted over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. This decline in self-efficacy resulted from challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and its residual effects.

The interviews detailed school principals' self-efficacy. School Principal Two described efficacy as not about being happy but about being able to see one's own impact. Some school principals aim to inspire their teachers, while others aim to support their students. Some principals may prioritize opportunity and access, while others prioritize data and test scores. However, there was a considerable degree of agreement among the school principals who participated in this study. Taking time to pause and reflect as leaders served as a valuable experience for the participants to lead more effectively in the future. School leaders continue to feel tense and watchful of their surroundings, especially amid less apparent and tangible circumstances.

According to Principal One, she was used to having a clear purpose and plan in her work in the pre-pandemic era, even if she did not agree with everything she was tasked with doing. The most difficult part of the COVID-19 pandemic for her was needing to operate without being able to have stable plans, as the effects of the pandemic forced constant changes on her school. The most nerve-racking aspect for Principal One was not knowing week-to-week whether she would be leading her school with a distance learning, hybrid, or brick-and-mortar model. The most challenging aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic for Principal Two was needing to spend the majority of time quarantining his students. In fact, Principal Two suggested this responsibility is what decreased his self-efficacy the most.

Principal One argued school principals needed to be logistically strong in order to survive the pandemic. Planning, scheduling, backward planning, and many other operational skills were critical. Interestingly, Principal One expressed worry many school principals either hid behind their assistant principals to meet these logistical demands or simply opted to resign due to the pressure of these new responsibilities. She also noted she is now able to better understand and empathize with her school's teachers when they are facing challenges, though she still worries about their well-being and mental competence in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Principal One attributed her decline in self-efficacy to the pandemic limiting her ability to plan proactively. Emphasizing this dynamic, she said, "changes in DHEC updates and [the] implementation of DHEC expectations happened at a rapid pace, with many of the updates being illogical and, at times, contradictory. There were times the lack of direction affected efficacy negatively for all principals." Principal Two expressed a similar

perspective, though he noted his self-efficacy was able to rise again once his school procedures against COVID-19 became stronger, and, in turn, stressful situations became more effectively managed. The COVID-19 pandemic and its lingering effects have increased stress levels among school principals. This rise in stress has lowered their self-perceived longevity as leaders, as shown by some of the participants asserting their self-efficacy is not as strong as it was prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moving Forward

Optimistically, many of the participants concluded their interviews with optimistic sentiments regarding their future and the future of their school. Principal One said many of the COVID-19-related issues ultimately provided "opportunities for a resurgence in efficacy for principals who transcended a need for direction." Similarly, School Principal Two emphasized needing to endure the COVID-19 pandemic provided him with knowledge now enabling him to have stronger oversight over all aspects of his school as a managerial leader. He reported his school today more effectively manages school processes and situations than it had in the pre-pandemic era. Proudly, School Principal Two stated, based on the South Carolina Administrators Evaluation Ranking, he would rank himself proficient to exemplary despite his struggles throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

The school principals in this study sought solutions, implemented solutions, and took risks by making decisions that needed to be made. They often made these critical decisions without even being certain they were eligible to make them. School Principal One spoke of her self-efficacy as follows:

Although the effect on my efficacy as a principal was positive in its outcome by the end of the third school year of the pandemic, it did not feel positive when it was taking place, particularly in 2021–2022. The feeling was frustrating, negative, limiting, [and] under-valued. There are times when those feelings diminish a principal's ability to maximize his or her potential. For others, it lights a fire that makes a difference as long as the principal is willing to risk the security of their position in a school. The pandemic has taught us it does not take much for a major change to "happen on a dime" that can affect the lives of many, and our own positions as principals. For those of us who live in fear of that feeling, it is a sign that we need to think of the change that we need to make in our career path. One lesson that we have all learned in the last three years is that you do not need a title to be a true leader who has an impact.

Principal Two believes his experience leading a school during the COVID-19 pandemic makes him better able to manage a school effectively through future crises. Principal Two, the most vetted participant, has served 17 years as a school principal. He believes his strongest attribute as a managerial leader is his ability to build a strong leadership team and office staff in which each stakeholder has different strengths allowing for more effective organization and management. He feels he maintained this strength throughout the COVID-19 pandemic because he is a "forward and futuristic thinker." He listed a talent of his as being able to predict what may need to be accomplished in the future and added his leadership team was and still is able to devise in-depth plans. This talent is critical, as the ability to ensure future success will help to encourage federal, state, and

district officials to examine the narratives of those who served as school principals during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interpretation of Findings

The participants' narratives collectively revealed their self-efficacy as managerial leaders was negatively impacted over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. While their self-efficacy is stronger now than it was at the peak of the pandemic, it is still lower than it had been prior to the start of the pandemic. By examining the narratives outlined in this study, this study revealed fundamental challenges during the pandemic interfered with school principals' self-efficacy as managerial leaders. The unifying idea among the school principals in this study was agility and their agility appeared to influence their self-efficacy. Agility was the skill the school principals developed most following the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to cope with the newfound confusion and stress brought about by pandemic-related factors. The literature on COVID-19's negative impact on school principals' self-efficacy is still limited, though reliable evidence is beginning to surface.

Creating and Leading Professional Development

As managerial leaders, school principals are responsible for managing and leading teachers in order to support the learning process. In investigating how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted school principals' self-efficacy as their schools' managerial leaders, the creation of effective professional development programs in digital learning for teachers frequently came up. Ogodo et al. (2021) examine teachers' self-perceived digital competency during the COVID-19 pandemic. School principals should refer to their

findings when creating and administering professional development for teachers to boost their technological confidence and better prepare them for future crises.

The school principals interviewed in this study were asked the following questions regarding professional development in technology:

- As a managerial leader, what professional development training was offered to teachers in your school to assist with the use of technology prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?

- As a managerial leader, do you feel you were able to offer effective professional development training to teachers in your school to support the use of technology at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic?

- As a managerial leader, do you feel you were able to offer effective professional development training to teachers in your school to assist with student discipline at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic?

- How has the professional development training you are offering teachers in your school changed to combat the residual effects of the COVID-19 pandemic?

The interviews revealed School District A was not proactive in preparing school principals to lead and manage teachers in the execution of digital learning methods. The school principals in this study conceded they did not spend time educating teachers on how to use technology effectively in a distance learning setting to maintain the integrity of the learning process. The participants also reported feeling not particularly confident when they needed to combat technological challenges with teachers during the pandemic.

Principal Two, an intermediate school principal, explained that most professional development programs are created and executed by the state and the school district and

School District A had offered professional development to teachers covering instructional technology, including Google Classroom, prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, School District A did not provide a learning-management system organizing instructional technology programs or the in-depth training necessary to promote effective distance learning. Due to the lack of professional development offered to classroom teachers and school administrators at the beginning and the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Principal Two opted to pursue professional development programs in distance learning strategies from outside sources. Based on my findings, I believe boards of education should develop plans requiring mandatory and coherent professional development for school leaders to assist them with crisis preparation. These plans should include information on how school leaders can support all stakeholders in the field of education while maintaining their own self-efficacy.

Moving Forward

The school principals in this study revealed, moving forward, they plan to be more active in maintaining the authenticity and integrity of their self-efficacy as managerial leaders. Although the literature strongly suggests principals experienced a strong decline in self-efficacy over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study's findings show this is not the case. The participants exhibited minimal declines in their self-efficacy since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The plans of the school principals in this study have come to fruition later expected. Their plans of action were largely unclear in the beginning but will be more actively designable in the face of future obstacles. Principal Two has plans to prioritize boosting clarity among teachers with regard to his school's rules, regulations, and protocols via professional development. He

believes such a focus will provide classroom teachers with more clear "learning intentions and success criteria." Principal Two concluded his teachers will use student feedback as a "check-in tool for teacher reflection in making pedagogical shifts," and they will use the data "to measure the impact of their instructional practice changes."

The school leaders from this study were forced to lead from a reactive standpoint, with many of their daily routines being ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, they share optimistic feelings about their ability to combat future crises. All of the participants in this study asserted, in some form, they are aiming to assist all stakeholders in the field of education. Given their experience in handling a crisis, they are likely to be more capable of guiding stakeholders through proactive measures in the future. I am hopeful, with some perspective, school principals can use the results of this study to plan for future crises and ultimately respond more effectively. Principal Two plans to continue practicing collaborative leadership to develop teacher efficacy.

Interpretation of the Findings

I conclude from this study the COVID-19 pandemic has had significant negative lingering impacts on schools and school principals. Based on the data gathered in this study, school principals' self-efficacy may continue to suffer due to School District A's overly demanding expectations. School District A must consider post-pandemic factors when making plans and implementing protocols to assist schools with their return to pre-pandemic "normality." The participants in this study emphasized the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on school principals as managerial leaders. There are clear patterns in participants' responses regarding their self-efficacy as managerial leaders and the degree to which it was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Common feelings include feeling

stressed and confused over the course of the pandemic. According to the principals'
narratives, they have a new perspective as managerial leaders following the COVID-19
pandemic. They are more prepared now than ever to craft plans aimed at successfully
combatting future crises.

Coping with unfamiliar problems without a proper protocol in place was
challenging for these school leaders. Still, Principal Two concluded his contributions to
my study with the following hopeful statement: "I have enjoyed being back in the school
building to have more of an immediate impact on students and teachers and seeing the
results in real time." This statement expresses his increase in self-efficacy, as he feels the
worst of the pandemic has passed. Hopefully, in-person unity will universally boost self-
efficacy among school principals. Based on my findings, reopening schools has already
boosted self-efficacy among school principals, who are now able to lead their schools
with a more proactive approach, as protocols are in place to plan for and respond to
future crises.

Limitations

This research process had several notable limitations. Some elements of this study
were limited by post-pandemic factors. Most notably, I only examined one school district
in this study due to school principals being consumed with the lingering effects of the
COVID-19 pandemic. This study's small sample size, which stemmed from the same
reason, means I cannot draw population-wide conclusions or identify any solid
implications. Overall, the additional stress and workload on school principals' shoulders
as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic interfered significantly with the methodology of
this study. As another example, I had to allow participants to do interviews via email

rather than Google Meet because they were too busy dealing with post-pandemic school issues.

Recommendations for Action

It behooves district leaders to have specific and clear plans for potential situations that could cause a school shutdown. Collecting data on the conditions school principals faced during the COVID-19 pandemic may help to guide school principals on how to respond more effectively under unprecedented circumstances. It is vital for state-level leaders to understand the significant impact on students' results of decreased efficacy among principals and teachers. Such an understanding is critical to future success, especially during crisis scenarios. Analyzing the knowledge gained from the experiences of school principals as managerial leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic is key to developing effective plans for future action. Professional development should be offered to school principals as an opportunity to collaborate and create effective plans for future crises. Such development programs could constitute a way to rekindle or maintain principals' self-efficacy, which is important in order to boost retention among both principals and teachers (Dahlkamp, Peters, & Schumacher, 2017). Based on this study's results, it is clear federal, state, and district officials must know their audience. Meeting the needs of school principals as managerial leaders in the post-pandemic era requires new and unique demands. Developing plans for future action is critical, and this study may serve as the cornerstone for effecting positive change in school principals' self-efficacy as managerial leaders, especially when it comes to preparing for crises.

Recommendations for Further Research

With this study, as a researcher and advocate for positive change in the field of education, I sought to collect, analyze, and present data which could be used to rekindle and maintain self-efficacy among school principals as managerial leaders, enabling them to thrive and more effectively support their school. I hope my findings serve as a cautionary tale for districts and other policy-makers—as an indication they should listen to and value the opinions of school principals. This study may be used as a framework for improving leadership practices, teacher practices, student performance, and overall school success. A future study may examine more than one school district once the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic no longer constitute a significant hindrance. This study can be replicated easily with the same methodology but a larger sample size consisting of principals from more than one school district. To further assess school principals' self-efficacy, researchers could examine not only principals' self-efficacy but also how school principals' efficacy impacts the evaluation and growth of teachers. Of course, this would entail measurements of teachers' productivity in developing students and yielding high student performance.

The findings of this study may be used to inform university-level principal-preparation programs and guide district-level structures and support mechanisms for future crises. Researchers may also opt to widen this study with quantitative research on top of the qualitative framework, implementing a quantitative approach to investigating how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced school principals' self-efficacy. Additionally, a future study could investigate whether limited self-efficacy impacts school principals' performance as managerial leaders. As school principals generally have a situational understanding of how to combat future crises, I believe future research

on school principals' self-efficacy as managerial leaders should be investigated through a proactive approach now, while school principals are able to operate proactively. My hope is researchers in the field of education continue to build on this study and investigate school principals' self-efficacy from a post-pandemic perspective.

Researcher's Reflection

As a qualitative researcher in the field of education, this research process enabled me to embark on a journey of constant revelation and provided me with the opportunity to offer recommendations for future research. I am hopeful this study's findings and discussion will help federal, state, and district officials to support school principals more effectively, especially with components directly impacting their self-efficacy as managerial leaders, as this study was created with the aim of promulgating the importance of school principals' self-efficacy.

The school principals interviewed in this study exhibited commendable self-reflection and are optimistic about the future. Overall, the participants feel the losses occurring as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic are remediable with time, dedication, and support. I believe they will all be stronger managerial leaders moving forward, especially in crisis situations. As an educational researcher, I believe their hopefulness is honorable and inspiring. Past a certain point, research will no longer be able to assess the shift from pre-pandemic data to post-pandemic data, as new principals will have started in this "new normal" and only know leadership from a post-COVID-19 perspective. Additionally, researchers in the future may struggle to find information on peak-pandemic policies, as many of the guidelines from just a few years ago are no longer available online.

Conclusion

Transitions are crucial, especially amid unprecedented change. The school principals in this study reported feeling low levels of self-efficacy throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The transition between the pre-pandemic era and the post-pandemic era was damaging to the self-efficacy of this study's participants. This damage was most notably brought about by the lack of support from federal, state, and district officials in terms of a cohesive and consistent policy response. The participants view poor social and academic behavior among students as the most significant lingering effect of the pandemic school principals are still trying to get under control. School principals regaining their intrinsic motivation and confidence to engage in critical conversations and preparatory measures with federal, state, and district officials is critical to maintain school principals' feelings of self-efficacy and create positive educational changes. The interviews revealed dissatisfaction among school principals with officials' lack of responsiveness, ineffective guidelines, and refusal to course-correct.

The results of this study indicate school principals' feelings of self-efficacy were diminished over the course of the pandemic and, for schools to return to their pre-pandemic status, school principals must restore their self-efficacy. Fortunately for teachers, students, and all stakeholders in the field of education, the school principals in this study plan to serve to their full potential as managerial leaders now and in the future. My findings may be helpful to the field of education, as Lyons and Murphy (1994) assert strong self-efficacy leads to school principals implementing internally based power, while externally based power is more often implemented by veteran school principals, specifically those who stay in the same school for an extended period of time.

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    message on wearing a mask outdoors despite being fully vaccinated; illegal

    migrants who cross southern border admits they're motivated by Biden's

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Appendix A: School District A, Permission to Conduct Research

Horry County Schools

June 15, 2022

Dear Krystle Ballatore,

Your request to conduct research titled *Covid-19 and its impact on Principals' Efficacy* approved subejct to the following conditions:

1. You must comply with the conditions set forth in the District policy, "Research Involving Students," and § 1232h, "Protection of pupil rights," of the U.S. Code;
2. You are not to release, present, or publish any personally identifiable information concerning students, their parents, or District staff members;
3. You are not to identify Horry County Schools or any school in our District in any publication, presentation, or release of information associated with your research without my written permission;
4. The records and raw data associated with your study are to be destroyed when they are no longer needed for the purposes set forth in your request; and
5. You are to provide a copy of your completed research report to me at the District Office.

Specifically, you have been granted permission to survey principals of Horry County Schools. You will need to gather appropriate permissions and consent from principals.

I hope your research goes well. If you have any questions or are in need of further assistance, please contact me at 488-6843.

Sincerely,

Heather C. Sheehan
Director of Assessment and Program Evaluation
Horry County Schools

Appendix B: Institutional Review Board, Approval Letter

OFFICE OF
SPONSORED PROGRAMS
AND RESEARCH SERVICES
COASTAL CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

January 19, 2023

Krystle Ballatore
Coastal Carolina University
Conway, SC 29528

RE: COVID-19 and its Impact on School Principals' Capacity and Self-Efficacy in Two South Carolina School Districts

Krystle,

It has been determined that your protocol #**2023.94** is approved as **EXPEDITED** by the Coastal Carolina University Institutional Review Board (IRB) under the Federal Policy for the Protection of **Human Research Subjects Categories) #6 & 7**,

- #6 - Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes
- #7 – Research on individual or group characteristics, behavior, or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

This approval is good for one calendar year commencing with the date of approval and concludes on **1/18/2024**. If your work continues beyond this date, it will be necessary to seek a continuation from the IRB. If your work concludes prior to this date, please inform the IRB.

Approval of this protocol does not provide permission or consent for faculty, staff or students to use university communication channels for contacting or obtaining information from research subjects or participants. Faculty, staff and students are responsible for obtaining appropriate permission to use university communications to contact research participants. For use of university email to groups such as all faculty/staff or all students, requests should be made to the Provost's Office after the research protocol has been approved by the IRB. Please allow at least one week to receive approval.

Please note, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to report immediately to the IRB any changes in procedures involving human subjects and any unexpected risks to human subjects, any detrimental effects to the rights or welfare of any human subjects participating in the project, giving names of persons, dates of occurrences, details of harmful effects, and any remedial actions. Such changes may affect the status of your approved research.

Be advised that study materials and documentation, including signed informed consent documents, must be retained for at least three (3) years after termination of the research and shall be accessible for purposes of audit.

If you have any questions concerning this review, please contact Patty Carter, IRB Coordinator, at pcarter@coastal.edu or extension 2978.

Thank you,

Stephanie Cassavaugh
Director, Office of Sponsored Programs and Research Services
IRB Administrator

cc: Lee Hunter

Appendix C: Demographic Survey

Participants' Demographics

By completing this survey you will have consented to participating in this study and will have consented to potentially completing follow up interview questions recorded via Google Meet.

What is your current position?

○ School Principal

○ Other

In what level do you currently serve?

○ Primary

○ Elementary

○ Intermediate

○ Middle

○ High

What is your gender?

○ Male

○ Female

What is your race?

○ Caucasian

○ African American

○ Native American

○ Asian

○ Other

What is your age range?

○ 20-30 years old

○ 31-40 years old

○ 41-50 years old

○ Older than 50 years old

How many years did you serve as an educator prior to your role as an administrator?

○ 5-10 years

○ 11-15 years

○ 16-20 years

○ Longer than 20 years

How many years did you serve as an assistant principal?

○ 1-5 years

○ 6-10 years

○ 11-15 years

○ Longer than 15 years

How many years have you served as a school principal?

○ Less than 5 years

○ 5-10 years

○ 11-15 years

○ 16-20 years

○ Longer than 20 years

How many years have you served as school principal in your current level (Elementary, middle, highschool, etc.)

○ Less than 5 years

○ 5-10 years

○ 6-11 years

○ 11-15 years

○ 16-20 years

○ Longer than 20 years

How many years have you served as a principal in your current school district?

○ Less than 5 years

○ 5-10 years

○ 11-16 years

○ 16-20 years

○ Longer than 20 years

How many years have you served as a principal in your current school building?

○ Less than 5 years

○ 5-10 years

○ 11-16 years

○ 16-20 years

○ Longer than 20 years

Appendix D: Interview Questions

Research Questions & Interview Questions

1.   How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted school administrators' self-

efficacy as their school's managerial leader?

- How would you rate your level of self-efficacy as a managerial leader prior

to the COVID-19 pandemic?

- Do you feel your self-efficacy as a managerial leader was impacted during

the peak of the pandemic?

- Do you feel your self-efficacy as a managerial leader has been impacted by

post-COVID-19 pandemic factors?

- As a managerial leader, what professional development training was offered

to teachers at your school to assist with the use of technology prior to the

COVID-19 pandemic?

- As a managerial leader, do you feel you were able to offer effective

professional development training to teachers at your school to support the use

of technology during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic?

- As a managerial leader, do you feel you were able to offer effective

professional development training to teachers in your school to assist with

student discipline during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic?

- How has the type of professional development training that you are offering

teachers at your school changed to combat the residual effects of the COVID-

19 pandemic?

2.   How do these administrators' experiences differ in degree of impact by school

level (early childhood, primary, elementary, intermediate, middle, and high)?

- How do you feel the school level that you lead (early childhood, primary,

elementary, intermediate, middle, high) has determined the type of challenges that

you faced prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?

- How do you feel the school level that you lead (early childhood, primary,

elementary, intermediate, middle, high) has determined the type of challenges that

you faced during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic?

- How do you feel the school level that you lead (early childhood, primary,

elementary, intermediate, middle, high) has determined the type of challenges that

you are currently facing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?

- How do you feel the school level that you lead (early childhood, primary,

elementary, intermediate, middle, high) has determined the type of professional

development that you offered to teachers prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?

- How do you feel the school level that you lead (early childhood, primary,

elementary, intermediate, middle, high) has determined the type of professional

development that you offered during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- How do you feel the school level that you lead (early childhood, primary,

elementary, intermediate, middle, high) has determined the type of professional

development that you are offering as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?

- How do you feel the school level that you lead (early childhood, primary,

elementary, intermediate, middle, high) has determined the manner in which you

worked with teachers prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic?

- How do you feel the school level that you lead (early childhood, primary, elementary, intermediate, middle, high) has determined the manner in which you worked with teachers during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic?

- How do you feel the school level that you lead (early childhood, primary, elementary, intermediate, middle, high) has determined the manner in which you work with teachers now?

3. What are the different degrees of impact by school leaders' experience levels?

- What do you feel your strongest attributes were as a managerial leader prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic?

- What do you feel your strongest attributes were as a managerial leader during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic?

- What do you feel your strongest attributes are as a managerial leader now as a result of having combatted the COVID-19 pandemic?

- What do you feel your weakest attributes were as a managerial leader prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic?

- What do you feel your weakest attributes were as a managerial leader during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic?

- What do you feel your weakest attributes are now as a managerial leader as a result of having combatted the COVID-19 pandemic?

Follow-Up Questions:

- How do you feel your ability to lead as a managerial leader has been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic?

- How well do you feel you communicated COVID-19 school protocol to staff members and families during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic?

- Who do you need more support from to support staff members and families more effectively?