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COVID-19 Crisis: Shifting Educational Leadership Toward a New Normal - A Case Study

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Acknowledgments

I count myself blessed to be supported through this journey by so many incredible people who believe in me and encouraged me all the way to the summit. First, I want to thank my committee members Dr. Chinasa Elue, my methodologist, whose patience and positivity gave me courage to see myself as a writer and challenged my thinking about academic research; Dr. Cindy Reed whose thoughtfulness and enthusiasm challenged me to more broadly consider the topic and the process—to envision my future; and my committee chair, Dr. Nicholas Clegorne whose sage advice and belief in my ability cannot be overstated. With utmost gratitude and respect, thank you Dr. Clegorne for challenging and guiding me through each stage; you made this endeavor a truly positive and enriching journey.

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Abstract

This study examines the lived experiences of educational leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research has often pointed to the role of educational leadership and its relationship to the quality and well-being of a school's culture and climate. Recently the coronavirus has created a crisis on a magnitude the world has never seen that has globally altered human interactions and created an educational *new normal*. Literature is quickly seeking to examine the impact on education, and while much of its effect is yet to be seen, this study advances the understanding of crisis leadership, distinct from crisis management, during the pandemic. The findings reveal six leadership lessons connecting to five leadership paradoxes identified through the themes: communication, care, decision-making, trauma and stress, coping and well-being, growth, and new normal.

Keywords: crisis leadership, stress, trauma, self-care, coping, paradox, case study

Epigraph

Never let a good crisis go to waste.

—Winston Churchill

An issue ignored is a crisis invited.

—Dr. Henry Kissinger

Self-love, my liege, is not so vile a sin as self-neglecting.

—William Shakespeare, King Henry V

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Chapter One: Introduction

During the spring of 2020, the world watched as the coronavirus (COVID-19) spread, resulting in an unprecedented pandemic. As the virus continued to spread and orders to quarantine were given and remained beyond anticipation, issues in education emerged regarding topics such as instruction, student expectations, special education services, digital access, equity, etc. (Marshall et al., 2020; Kafa & Pashiardis, 2020). Education professionals were caught in a crisis, reacting to various situations that arose with a wide array of emotional responses; they were in crisis mode—a response triggered by fear or stress closely aligned to a fight or flight reaction (Patnaik, 2014). Throughout the remainder of the 2020 school year and even into the 2021-22 school year with the introduction of the COVID Delta variant, teachers look to school leaders for guidance in navigating the myriad of new experiences, decisions, and shifting instructional platforms. Through my experience as a teacher and personal observation, interest in the topic of crisis leadership and coping was generated.

Statement of the Problem

Now, over 24 months since the virus became a pandemic, school leaders continue to work in this unprecedented environment with new and changing challenges. Whether or not they were aware of it, they have become crisis leaders. While speculation about the future of education abounds, "the sheer messiness, frustration and unpredictability of living through a global pandemic means that there are no fixed points or certainties" (Harris, 2020, p.324). This messiness includes an array of responses, including the coping strategies individuals have when faced with a crisis.

This global crisis is far from over, and COVID-19 has dramatically changed the face of leadership. Harris (2020) observed the striking reality of the situation, writing, "this leadership has no national standards, no guidelines, no stipulations, and no rubrics, … It is simply the collective glue keeping everything and everyone going" (p. 325). This comment begs the question, who or what is the

"collective glue" holding the leaders together? Hence, this study aims to explore the unique ways educational leaders at Central High School[1] are navigating the crisis toward a *new normal* that may include a shift in conceptualizing successful leadership. Using a case study approach, the purpose of the study includes exploring strategies educational leaders employed to not only lead but also to cope. Understanding the coping mechanisms needed in educational leadership may elucidate insight into future preparation programs for leaders in a post-COVID world.

Significance of Study

One day this pandemic and crisis will be over. Everyone will be recovering victims, in a sense, and will need to work to understand the impact of the pandemic. As with any experience that shapes individuals and organizations, thinking and societal norms and culture will shift, and education will find itself in a *new normal*.

This case study seeks to obtain a picture of the curious balance between a school leader's ability to lead and instill confidence in faculty and maintain a sense of well-being. It also anticipated that the leader's perspective regarding his or her role in education will have altered along with the job demands. COVID-19 is not going away, but society's understanding of it and preparation to live with it is changing. Change is a messy process that is stressful and requires coping. However, it may be argued that change, stress, and coping are natural components of the normal education environment, given its natural inclination toward high amounts of stress (Bailey & Weiner, 2021). The sudden change to schools that interrupted any semblance of normalcy only exacerbated any existing stress. Moreover, education has not endured this level of change driven by outside influences beyond understanding or control. Much of the impact of the pandemic is yet to be seen, including the trauma of its survivors,

[1] The name of the school district, school, and all study participants are pseudonyms. Any likeness to an actual district, school, or individual is completely coincidental.

learning gaps, and increased turnover for teachers and leaders. Understanding the best methods to care for educational leaders who support so many individuals may prove necessary for the future. As Stasel (2020) argues, COVID has created more than stress, it is a culture shock, and the world of education is learning how to walk all over again. To survive, educational leaders must learn to cope and adapt.

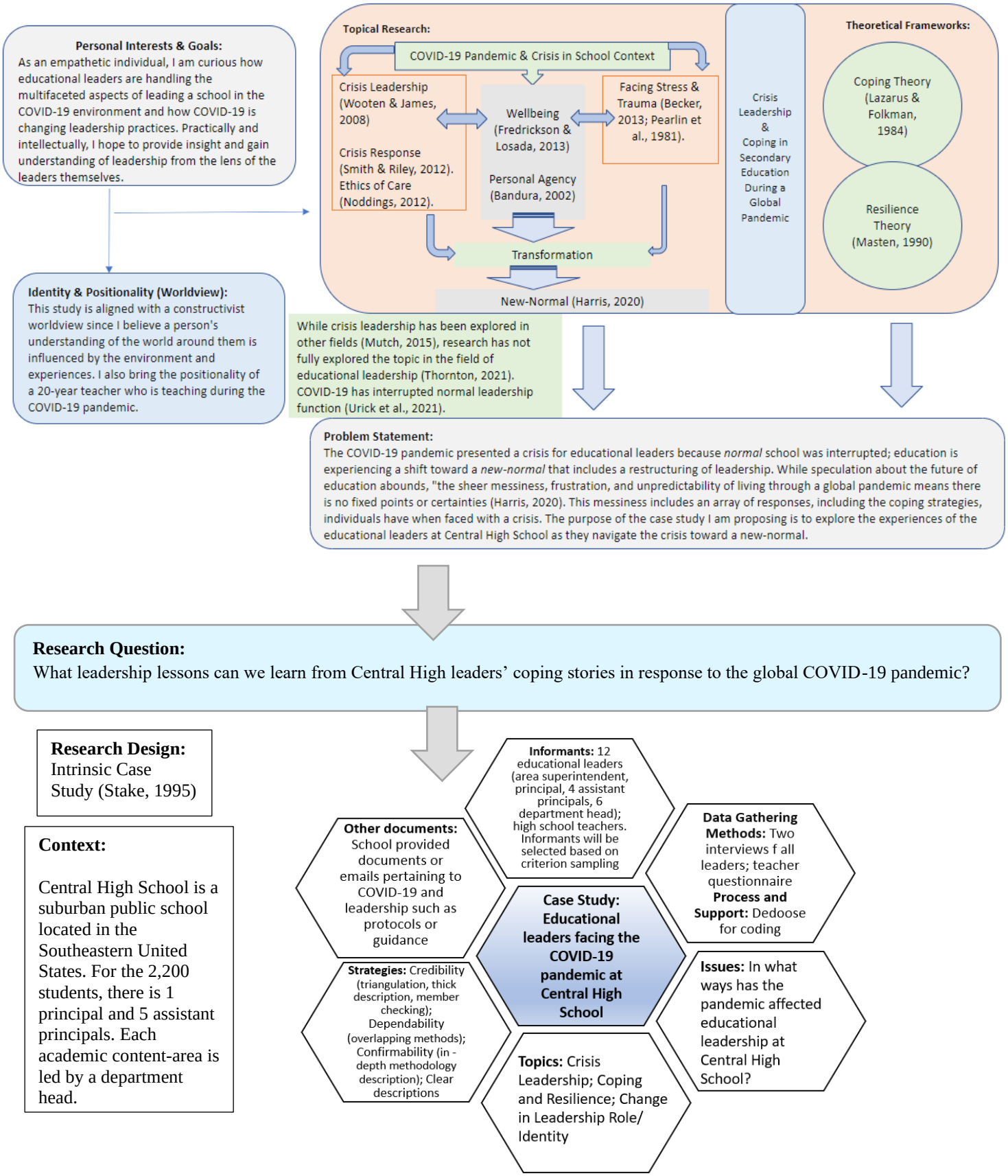
Through a case study approach, the purpose of the study is to develop a narrative of the educational leaders' experience to understand the strategies each employed to not only lead but also to cope. By understanding the coping mechanisms and crisis strategies needed in educational leadership, insight into future preparation programs for leaders in a post-COVID world may be illuminated. Additionally, the data may inform school districts of the qualities and attributes leaders need and what the school leader's role should be concerning a crisis. Lastly, the study's results may assist districts working to navigate the future of education by guiding changes to leadership support and training.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework (see figure 1) for this case study is based on Ravitch and Riggan's (2017) definition of a conceptual framework, which is "an argument about why the topic one wishes to study matters, and why the means proposed to study it are appropriate and rigorous" (p. 5).

Figure 1

Visual Representation of the Elements of Conceptual Framework



Description of Elements

COVID-19, the coronavirus that became a pandemic resulting in the closing of schools and the interruption of normal school functioning, provides the bounds of the case study. Furthermore, the study aims to garner lessons learned and understand its impact on leadership practices through personal narrative.

My positionality as a constructivist researcher is well suited for this study since it asserts that, as individuals interact and reflect on their experiences, meaning is forged in a specific context and is complex (Creswell, 2014). As a researcher holding this worldview, I will be positioned to look for the complexity of meaning and allow the themes to emerge as they are socially constructed through the lived experiences of the educational leaders (Mertens, 2010).

The topical research will present a discussion of pre-existing research informing the study and form a relationship with the theoretical framework guiding the study of crisis leadership and coping in secondary education during a global pandemic. The pandemic will be conceptualized as a crisis with challenges to which educational leaders respond, also understood as crisis leadership (Wooten & James, 2008). Crisis leadership is about the various responses and behaviors which are relational to stress and trauma experienced within the context of the crisis. A leader experiences not only personal stress and trauma because of challenges presented but also secondary traumatic stress (STS) and compassion fatigue (Lane, 2021).

Responses to stress and the crisis environment, which will be understood using Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) coping theory, are an attempt to find equilibrium and regain balance, normalcy, and well-being. A determining factor in the coping responses to stress is one's resilience, which may also be a result of striving for well-being. Resilience is seen both as an attitude and outcome**,** and Masten et al.'s (1990) resilience theory will allow for a fuller discussion of findings in addition to changes occurring

because of the crisis experience. While an aspect of crisis leadership is to return to normal business function or operation, education is experiencing a shift toward a *new normal* that includes a restructuring of leadership (Harris, 2020).

By employing a qualitative case study approach, I aim to gain a deeper understanding of this framework through the lived experience of educational leaders at Central High School[1] bound by the COVID-19 pandemic. The research question and topics of interest directly result from this goal and personal curiosity.

Theoretical Frameworks

Ravitch and Riggan (2017) indicate that a theory attempts to explain why something is happening or things work in a particular fashion. Two theories will be indicated and elaborated upon that generate the theoretical framework for the study I am proposing: Coping Theory and Resilience Theory.

Coping is about the capacity or ability of an individual to respond to environmental demands (Frydenberg, 2017). Early physiological stress theories postulated that the response to stress or threat was a fight or flight response (Frydenberg, 2017; Patnaik, 2014). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) began their research with the idea of alleviating the impact of stress, which also adds to the negative connotation associated with the concept. According to Frydenberg (2017), their transactional theory of coping remains the most widely used. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define coping as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (p.141). Their research goes on to discuss the process, and stages of coping that begin with an appraisal of the potential harm, available resources, and coping strategy, even though this appraisal may be unconsciously or automatically done (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The coping theory identifies two primary types of coping strategies: problem-focused

and emotion-focused. Problem-focused coping is the response to a situation with the goal of removing the threat or working through the stressor; emotion-focused coping is a response to the situation with the goal of reducing emotional discomfort or the effect of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In Fortes-Ferreira et al.'s (2006) study utilizing Lazarus and Folkman's theory, findings suggest there is an "interdependence of coping strategies" (p. 300). Frydenberg (2017) adds that coping research is about advancing "our understanding of human endeavor" to enhance well-being, resilience, and quality of life (p.31). Throughout the study, coping will be understood as the process educational leaders use to face a crisis.

Resilience is another ambiguous term that is significant to the study because of its proximity to coping and stress. Resilience is the place where all the terms: stress, trauma, coping and well-being converge. Lemay (2004) writes, "coping is the science of remarkable people whereas resilience is the story of how remarkable people can be" (p.13). Frydenberg (2017), in agreement with Lemay, connected research on resilience with coping and well-being, maintaining that coping is the process whose outcome is resilience. Masten et al.'s (1990) resilience theory defines this outcome: "resilience refers to the class of phenomenon characterized by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development" (p.228). Resilience is the idea of being able to bounce back without breaking. In this light, resilience is also an ability.

As suggested earlier, the concept of crisis leadership implies leaders shift or adapt their leadership strategies or behaviors based on the demands of the crisis, including "having to lead in different ways, finding a balance between rapid and consensus decision-making, and strengthening the distribution of leadership" (Thornton, 2021, p.27). Sutherland (2017) adds to the demands of crisis by noting that "school leaders may not be able to control or influence the occurrence of crises, but their responses can lead to positive learning and change in schools and communities" (p.2). The concept of

change is not new. Many are familiar with the proverbs “what doesn’t kill you only makes you stronger,” and “you don’t grow when things are easy; you grow when you face challenges.” Clichés aside, they point to the fundamental belief that crises are often viewed as unfortunate yet transformative events (Bridgeforth, 2021).

Pilot Study

In the spring of 2021, I was afforded the opportunity to conduct a pilot study to vet a potential interview protocol[2] and further refine my research focus. The findings from the pilot study were helpful and informative in the development of this study. Two high school principals were asked and agreed to participate in the pilot study. Both principals are within the same school district where this study will be conducted. Both principals met the inclusion criteria, having been in their position prior to the onset of COVID-19 pandemic and school closing. Two 45-minute, semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai. The first interview focused on early experiences with the pandemic from January 2020 through August 2020. The second interview aimed to clarify and focus on the leader’s current experiences and insights gained up to the interview.

The research questions driving the pilot study were:

- How do educational leaders navigate periods of crisis, able to both serve and lead while navigating their own well-being?
- How have the leadership styles and philosophies of the leader at the case site changed during the pandemic?

[2] see Appendix A *Pilot Study Interview Protocol*

Pilot Study Findings

In the pilot study, each principal focused on discussing the various strategies they opted to employ to support and care for their faculty. The differences between these strategies lay in their individual strengths as a leader. In all actuality, their individual leadership styles were not altered. Rather, each leader was more reliant upon their respective style. This increased reliance suggested that leadership style was the crux upon which decisions were made and was an attempt to feel in-control when leading through the crisis felt chaotic. Further, the increased reliance was apparent in the various coping strategies employed, enabling the interviewees to improve and maintain a sense of well-being. Each leader utilized and depended upon their style and philosophy of resilience, decision-making, and coping.

While the term *crisis leadership* (Leithwood et al., 2008; Thornton, 2021) was never used in the interview, based on current leadership research, the participant leaders' behaviors and decisions during the crisis were closely linked to the concept. Although the participants individually suggesed feelings of inadequacy, citing stress from a crisis outside their locus of control, they did recognize the need to address the ongoing threat to the school as an organization focusing on the safety and well-being of teachers and students.

Interestingly, the varied initial reactions and perceptions of stress experienced were tied to the individual's impression and conceptualization of the novel coronavirus and quarantine. As the stint of time in quarantine extended beyond the participants' comfort, moving to a greater feeling of uncertainty, participants expressed elevated stress. During the interview, when each discussed their feelings of increased stress, they also began to discuss the various coping strategies employed to manage their sense of well-being. Furthermore, regardless of personal needs, both participants displayed concern for their

faculty and students. This concern also seemed to outweigh personal needs and guide their next steps as leaders as they depended upon their natural leadership style.

Research Questions

After the pilot study, the research questions were modified to focus broadly on lessons learned and, more specifically, on shifts in leadership role or identity rather than style. Now, the following will be addressed within the context of this study:

What leadership lessons can we learn from Central High leaders' coping stories in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic?

a. How do leaders at Central High work to maintain self-care and well-being?
b. In what ways did the participants' identities, roles, and purposes as leaders evolve throughout the crisis?

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined as understood in the context of the study:

Agency. The capacity for individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices and the degree of independence and choice is either determined or limited by outside influences such as ability or belief (Healy, 2014; Bandura, 1989). A person's capacity to transform and shape one's environment, including identity (Chen-Levi et al., 2022).

Burnout. Building from Maslach and Jackson's definition as "a psychological syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of professional efficacy," burnout shall also be understood as "a developing condition, with a progressive reduction in levels of engagement," and the reduced perception of efficacy gives way to "passive coping strategies" (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022, p.3).

Compassion Fatigue. Often experienced by those in professions that care for others' pain. Traditionally characterized by emotional and physical exhaustion, compassion fatigue is the result of "a blurred self-other distinction... accompanied by the desire to withdraw from a situation to protect oneself from negative feelings" (Gonzalez-Mendez & Diaz, 2021, p.2). And as Gonzalez-Mendez and Diaz (2021) found, it may be experienced simultaneously with compassion satisfaction, implying that "compassion fatigue is not due to excessive compassion, but to a strong aversive response in the face of others' suffering" (p.10).

Coping. Changing one's "cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage psychological stress" (DeLongis & Holzman, 2005). "A phenomenon that involves both cognitive and behavioural responses individuals use in an attempt to manage internal and/or external stressors that are perceived to exceed their personal resources" (Lorente, Vera, and Peiró, 2021, p.1336).

COVID-19. "A respiratory disease caused by SARS-CoV-2, a coronavirus...The virus spreads mainly from person to person through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks" (cdc.gov, 2021). COVID-19 was first identified in Wuhan, China December 2019. By January 31, 2020, the World Health Organization declared "the coronavirus outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern" and by February 23, 2020, the Italian government was the first to issue a law to manage the rapid outbreak by locking down the country. March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declares COVID-19 a pandemic (cdc.gov, 2022). The U.S. quickly began to shut down and quarantine to prevent the spread, including school systems across the nation.

Crisis. That which interrupts the normal flow of life, accompanied by stress, potential danger, insecurity, and trauma (Pecujlija & Cosic, 2019).

Crisis Leadership. Leadership focusing on navigating a crisis and the skills and qualities of successful crisis leadership vary by researcher (Thornton, 2021). Here I will use the definition discussed

by Wooten and James (2008). They suggest that "crisis leadership demands an integration of skills, abilities, and traits that allow a leader to plan for, respond to, and learn from crisis events" (p. 353).

Crisis Management. Organizational plan used to navigate a crisis- typically internal- with a goal of returning to normalcy; included strategies such as "goal development and environment analysis, strategy development and evaluation, and strategy implementation and control" (Urick et al., 2021, p.2).

Crisis Response. Strategies used to "protect a reputation from the ravages of a crisis" (Coombs, 2007, p.163).

Distance Learning. A difficult concept to define due to the inconsistent uses of the term, the multitude of involved components such as time, distance, and context, and the evolving nature of technology. Will be understood as "learning experienced through the internet/online computers in a synchronous classroom where students interact with instructors and other students and are not dependent on their physical location for participating in this online learning experience. The teaching content is delivered online and the instructors develop teaching modules that enhance learning and interactivity in the synchronous or asynchronous environment" (Singh & Thurman, 2019, p.306).

Empathy. Is to be "conceptualized as a multidimensional and multifaceted construct" that includes a cognitive and emotional response. The cognitive response allows one to understand another's experience such as "imagining how another is thinking or feeling," and the emotional response allows one to relate to the emotions of others or to feel "personal distress at witnessing another person's suffering (Zurek & Scheithauer, 2017, p. 59). Includes empathetic concern or "the awareness that the other person's experience and not one's own is of primary importance" (p. 58). Empathy impacts the decision-making process.

New Normal. A generalized, nebulous term indicating a time of abrupt interruption of school due to the COVID-19 pandemic; also referred to as a phenomenon (Gonzalez-Perez et al., 2021).

Implies change in school functioning and understanding of what is of critical importance to education and instruction. The term suggests an adaptive stance for all stakeholders as the concept of normal education had become nonexistent once schools shifted to distance learning. This new approach to teaching and learning also connotes an undefined period of uncertainty, referenced as a new normal era (Phuthong, 2021). The term is used in literature without clear definition; is often placed in italics or quotation marks (Gonzalez-Perez et al., 2021; Manalu et al., 2021; Prahani & Cheng, 2020).

Resilience. "Describes how quickly individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions respond practically to external or internal shocks" (Goldstein, 2012, p. 45). "A positive adaptation in the face of adverse events; thriving through developing new skills, strengthening relationships and broadening perspectives" (Gonzalez-Mendez & Diaz, 2021, p. 2).

Self-Care. The practice of "responsible selfishness" (Boyle, 2015, p.51). Beneficial behaviors designed to improve or maintain one's physical and mental health, as well as a general sense of personal comfort, which may include listening to music, time with friends, practicing yoga, and the alike (Gonzalez-Mendez & Diaz, 2021; Neff et al., 2020).

Stress. A result of a situation that is appraised as one of loss or harm, a threat, or a challenge (Pearlin et al., 1981).

Thrive. The term is often used in the discussion of health and success and means "to grow and develop strongly; to be successful, to be fulfilled, or to develop successfully. Both senses of *thrive* are often discussed alongside the specific conditions, environment, or situation that allow or help someone or something to *thrive"* ("Thrive," 2022).

Trauma. An extreme stress that will vary dependent upon the individual and factors, such as the person's background (Lahav, 2020). In psychology, trauma has been delineated into four main levels or types: acute, chronic, complex, and vicarious (Ross et al., 2021; Ravi et al., 2021).

Trust. The term indicates a "reliance on the integrity, strength, ability, surety, etc., of a person; confident expectation; hope" ("Trust," 2022). Trust is the "crucial vehicle through which leadership may exercise influence" (Ma & Marion, 2021, p. 189).

Well-being. Is an extended state of being beyond a fluctuation of feeling happy or sad (Sanchez-Ruiz et al., 2021). The Cambridge English Dictionary defines well-being as a state of feeling healthy and happy (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Early in 2020 every aspect of education, including leadership, was interrupted as orders to quarantine due to the quick spread of the coronavirus escalated into a global pandemic. Educators at the case site were informed on March 12, 2020 that they were to instruct students on accessing course content virtually as the physical school would be closed for an indefinite amount of time beginning March 13, 2020, which was termed *distance learning*. Along with the instructional shift came a shift in leadership practices and expectations as all normalcy in environment, policy, and expectation was likewise interrupted. For instance, eliminating normalcy forced leaders to quickly determine new and unique methods for communication, support, and sensemaking. When people face a chaotic or confusing situation, they are naturally inclined to make sense of the situation, and a leader's words and actions are highly influential in the sensemaking process (Sobral et al., 2020). Also arising from the sudden shift was a notion or feeling of uncertainty in many stakeholders when a common answer to their questions was "*I don't know",* which did not help assuage concerns or fears despite the promise to search for an answer from the district level leaders. Whether or not educational leaders took time to consider the matter, they were maneuvering their way through a crisis and had become crisis leaders.

Educational leadership is the driving force and backbone of a school's culture, climate, and effectiveness (Leithwood et al., 2008; Smith & Riley, 2012; Ma & Marion, 2021). A plethora of literature has been devoted to the educational leader to better understand a leader's influence and strategies that ultimately support successful student learning outcomes. Researchers such as Leithwood (1992, 1994, 2008) and Urick and Bowers (2011, 2014, 2019), have examined leadership styles and models in relation to effective schools for decades (Kwan, 2020). Other researchers, such as Bandura (1989, 1997, 2002), have examined leadership practices in relation to teacher efficacy, supporting the idea that quality instruction is critical to student learning outcomes (Ma & Marion, 2021). Other

researchers, such as Leaf and Odhiambo (2017), worked to distinguish the roles of the deputy (assistant) principal from the principal to understand leadership's influence on school effectiveness further. Educational leaders are the fulcrum of the school, as delineated in the research. The overwhelming stress for all school personnel associated with the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the importance of leadership roles during times of crisis. Understanding school leadership roles for managing the well-being of the school during persistent stress is necessary to help navigate the pandemic and future crises. Exploring leadership concerning crises may prove to be a substantial addition to the literature base. Though school leaders have been the subject of crisis research, studies have also noted the paucity of crisis leadership research specific to education (James & Wooten, 2010; Wooten & James, 2008; Mutch, 2015; Thornton, 2021; Smith & Riley, 2012; Beronich, 2016; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021). A review of the extant literature on the subject follows.

Crisis and Crisis Leadership

Education is not a stranger to crisis. There have been crises over drugs, truancy, bombings, school shootings, unexpected deaths, loss of accreditation, and the list goes on from there (Pepper et al., 2010; Dwyer et al., 2015). Since this study is bounded by the educational crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic, understanding the concept of a crisis is of fundamental importance. Pepper et al. (2010) propose a school-specific, three-part definition of a crisis: "*a school crisis is an event or series of events that threaten a school's core values or foundational practices...; is obvious in its manifestation, but born from complex and often unclear or uncontainable circumstances…;(and) necessitates urgent decision-making"* (p. 6). They argue that a broad definition of a crisis is insufficient for application in schools because of the potential for any number of educational problems to be deemed a crisis. For instance, schools encounter challenges regularly and have policies and procedures already in place, and therefore are not to be misconstrued as a crisis since they do not threaten the school's core values. While being

mindful of their definition, for the purposes of this study, a crisis is that which interrupts the normal flow of life, accompanied by stress, potential danger, insecurity, and trauma (Pecujlija & Cosic, 2019). By defining the pandemic-fueled conditions and resulting changes as a crisis, the dynamic situation, pressures, stresses, and traumas educational leaders are currently facing will be better understood. Research also extends into the various phases, types, and originations of crises, and because of the divergent nature of crises, crisis leadership is more practical in application than theoretical (Johnson, 2017; Mutch, 2015; Pepper et al., 2010; Smith & Riley, 2012).

The concept of crisis leadership comes from crisis management research (Urick et al., 2021; Jaques, 2012). Organizations, when faced with a crisis, follow a crisis management plan, and during an organizational crisis it seems logical to follow a plan containing "strategies that help organizations return to normal after a crisis or a risky, unsafe, unexpected event defined by its need for ongoing attention" (Urick et al., 2021, p.2). Crisis leadership rises out of the study of crisis management-- a phasic strategy utilized in business that aims to "prevent, respond, and recover" (Urick et al., 2021). The connotation of *prevent* implies a crisis is anticipated; *respond* connotes a strategy based on the anticipated crisis; *recover* implies a strengthening of the organization or a return to normalcy. All three parts of crisis management also focus primarily on the crisis itself and not on those being led through the critical event or situation. Pearson and Mitroff (1993) argue that crisis management is the clarification of the situation, which Pearson and Clair (1998) outline to include an analysis of the cause, consequences, prevention measures, and coping mechanisms for an appropriate response. Through the study of crisis management before, during, and after a crisis, researchers began to home in on the actions and skills utilized during a crisis and differentiated between concepts of management and leadership (Jaques, 2012; Wooten & James, 2008). Wooten and James (2008) believe that crisis management does little to

support the essential role of the leadership in helping the organization effectively and efficiently navigate a crisis.

Beyond a crisis management plan or strategy, the behaviors and competencies of the leadership determine the success of an organization during a crisis. Research has identified numerous components or competencies of crisis leadership deemed important to handling the unexpected crisis. The behaviors and competencies are the focal point of crisis leadership, and it is only recently that crisis leadership has entered the field of education (Urick et al., 2021; Mutch, 2018). Therefore, due to the formulaic or tactical nature implied in crisis management, crisis leadership will be emphasized in this study due to its human approach.

Crisis Leadership Competencies

The mindset of an educational leader matters when presented with an unexpected crisis (Smith & Riley, 2012). Even though leaders are subject to the same psychological and physiological responses as other people, how a leader responds to a crisis matters to the organization, particularly when the outcome affects a student's education. Not all responses lead to a successful outcome. However, this determination is complex and not a focal point of the proposed study. Responses are the balance among the demands of the crisis, the organization's context and culture, and the leader's skills (McNulty et al., 2018). James and Wooten (2005) “emphasize that it is often the (mis)handling of crises, not the crisis itself, that can have the most consequences – positive and negative – for a firm. What differentiates those firms that thrive following a crisis from those that do not is the leadership displayed throughout the process” (p. 141).

To best respond to the demands of the threatening event and to the needs of the organization, leaders must prepare for crises by building tolerance for surprise and the skills to react appropriately and decisively (Smith & Riley, 2012). Crisis leaders should be able to think critically, make clear, decisive

decisions, and take risks (Smith & Riley, 2010). Critical thinking goes beyond discerning the correct course of action and includes an awareness of the contextual influences. The community's expectations, the trust between the leader and teachers, and the leader's personal values, experiences, and identity are all such contextual influences (Streipe & Cunningham, 2021). Critical thinking and judgement informs decisions since a leader needs to not only act swiftly, but be able to carefully consider options and consequences (Adams et al., 2021).

The decision-making process rarely follows the usual paths. Yet, the ability to make decisions provides leaders with "a sense of purpose and direction during a time when direction or purpose may be lacking" (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022, p. 142). Decisions, when normalcy is interrupted, are a mixture of intuitive responses and contextual influences (Mutch, 2015). Crisis leaders must possess the ability to persevere and cope with ambiguity to discern when a rapid decision is appropriate. That requires careful consideration of the changing environment and potentially limited information (Smith & Riley, 2012). Furthermore, crisis leaders who are decisive and solutions-oriented help set direction and propel the organization forward and through the uncertainty or threat (Caringal-Go et al., 2021). Even so, for crisis leaders to be viewed as stalwarts in their decisions and be anchors of trust, they need to utilize collaborative practices and create open and varied communication (Pepper et al., 2010; Smith & Riley, 2012; Striepe & Cunningham, 2022). Resistant decision-making leaders who do not find opportunities to frame conversation risk polarizing stakeholders when they need clear and caring leadership (Goode et al., 2021; Thornton, 2021b). Instead, leaders need to maintain a positive outlook and be flexible to think quickly and clearly to make the difficult decisions (Frydenberg, 2017; Simth & Riley, 2012). Included in critical thinking and decision-making is an element of a risk-taking mindset or a willingness to capitalize on the opportunity (Thornton, 2021).

Crises expose the crucial role leaders play in providing stability which is a function of sensemaking (Zhang et al., 2012). Sensemaking is a critical attribute of the crisis leader involving an active and ongoing process of understanding the evolving novel environment and aiding others in conceptualizing the situation (Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021). The ability to make sense of the crisis is particularly important because clear judgement, informed decisions and effective communication are also contingent upon a clear, accurate picture of the crisis as it unfolds (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). Effective communication is what Striepe and Cunningham (2021) refer to as multidimensional communication. Communication needs not only flow from the leader to stakeholders, but communication paths need to be reciprocal and inclusive to sustain healthy relationships and mitigate misunderstandings or eliminate damaging rumors. Communication is the tool that connects people and ensures everyone involved has accurate information. The school leader also utilizes multiple streams or avenues, including media, to convey information. To withhold information is to close lines of communication and to suggest there is something hidden; "there can be no economy with the truth" (Smith & Riley, 2012, p. 68). The multi-directional flow of information is also beneficial to the school leader to assist with identifying and providing for the needs of faculty, staff, students, and the larger community (Okilwa & Barnett, 2021).

Another crisis leadership mindset is that of supporting positive relationships upon which the premise for a successful crisis outcome is built (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022). At the onset of COVID-19 pandemic, some principals were proactive in checking in regularly with teachers in addition to other forms of communication (Thornton, 2021b). The effort to connect personally with teachers continued to build positive relationships even though schools were shut and people were quarantined at home. Pepper et al. (2010) refer to the mindset of supporting positive relationships as mutual respect. In one case study, they anecdotally shared about a principal who diligently worked to build a school culture of

mutual respect entailing collaborative decision-making where diverse faculty voices were appreciated. When confronted by the 9/11 crisis the teachers and principal trusted each other to do what was best to keep the children safe, allowing for a mix of decisive decision-making and collaborative leadership as the situation dictated (Pepper et al., 2010). When there is an environment of mutual respect, crisis leaders are able and more likely to lead collaboratively through the distribution of leadership, allowing room for different perspectives on problem-solving and collective sensemaking (Thornton, 2021b).

Developing positive relationships goes beyond simply navigating through a crisis but is about considering and attending to the needs of others (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022; Thornton, 2021). The practice of ensuring the well-being of others is to lead with empathy. Leaders who display empathy tend to have realistic expectations, a greater understanding of circumstances, and respond with compassion (Thornton, 2021b). Looking after the well-being of others involves caring for the social, emotional, and psychological nees of those impacted by the crisis (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022). Their research goes on to differentiate between pastoral care (the provision of empathy and prioritization of well-being) and sacrificial-care (placing the needs of others before one's own). Both forms of care allowed leaders to be attuned to various needs and, in turn, make informed decisions (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022).

In a time of crisis, leaders must be able to communicate decisions and provide guidance with clarity and transparency, but also with empathy to build and maintain trust. Empathy not only helps build trust but also impacts the decision-making process. Empathy is both a cognitive and emotional response. The cognitive response allows one to understand another's experience, such as "imagining how another is thinking or feeling," and the emotional response allows one to relate to the emotions of others or to feel "personal distress at witnessing another person's suffering" (Zurek & Scheithauer, 2017, p. 59). Their research includes empathetic concern or "the awareness that the other person's

experience and not one's own is of primary importance" (p. 58). Crisis leadership is not void of understanding the myriad of ways a crisis impacts those within and near the organization.

As noted earlier, crises are generally unanticipated, unexpected events. Helsloot & Groenendaal (2017) create an argument that the most important response a leader can make in a "flash crisis" (a crisis that is sudden and without warning) is to help the organization make meaning of the situation. In other words, a leader should be present, visible, and perceived by followers as "the right leader at the right time" (p. 352). An illustrative example is President George W. Bush's *Bullhorn* speech at Ground Zero delivered via bullhorn with an arm slung around the shoulders of a New York fireman on the 14th of September 2001. The impromptu speech, lasting less than a minute, contained rhetoric expressing empathy: "...in prayer for the people whose lives were lost here, ...for the families who mourn," unity: "...the Nation stands with the good people...as we mourn the loss...," and resilience: "I can hear you! The rest of the world hears you! And the people...who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon!" (McDowell, 2021). The speech ended with rescue workers chanting "USA!" Not four days after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the Nation's leader was present where the Twin Towers fell, now a symbolic landmark, and the *Bullhorn* speech changed the way American's saw their president (The Gallup Organization). This argument removes the emphasis on the skills a leader needs to possess at the onset of a crisis, but rather emphasizes the importance of assuaging the worries or concerns of followers to help reframe their understanding of the experience. Leaders need to be seen (Mutch, 2015). Such an argument should not be dismissed because such a response to a crisis does build trust between the leader and employees (or principal and staff members), and trust between groups is essential for a system or organization to run effectively (Sutherland, 2017).

Trust

Although a critical component of leadership is the ability to influence change, vision, culture, learning outcomes, and teacher efficacy, trust is the "crucial vehicle through which leadership may exercise influence" (Ma & Marion, 2021, p. 189). Trust is the willingness to be vulnerable to another; it is personal (Laskey, 2020). Sutherland (2017) states that for one to be vulnerable, one must be confident that a leader is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open.

One study of educational leadership in conflict-torn Kenya emphasized the importance of trust, noting that educational leadership needed to develop trust, among other aspects, such as care and respect among the volatile and broken community to have influence (Wanjiru, 2021). Therefore, since trust requires confidence in a leader and trust is essential for influence, trust may also be seen as a resource and vehicle vital to effective relationships. Kutsyuruba and Walker (2015) discuss schools as a fragile ecosystem arguing that trust is the crux upon which the sustainability of the community rests, making trust an essential and active endeavor that leaders must establish, sustain, and foster.

The deliberate construction and maintenance of trust rely on leadership actions that are transparent and demonstrative of concern for the well-being of others (Wooten & James, 2008). Adding to the discussion, Tschannen-Moran (2009) found high-trust school environments were prevalent when leaders extended trust to teachers and created trust among teachers. Such environments led to stronger teacher professionalism and psychological safety, or willingness to take risks in a cooperative manner conducive to the school's mission. Tschannen-Moran & Gareis (2015) extended the research on the role of trust and discussed the importance of a principal who is "friendly, approachable, and open to input" along with one who is "aware of and deeply engaged in the instructional program of the school" as salient in developing a climate of trust (p.79). Teachers need to be able to feel that the school leaders are

individuals with whom they may place their faith and with whom they may rely upon for guidance and accurate information (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis (2015).

The construct of trust is powerful: “If properly developed, trust can propel [organizations] to greatness. Improperly used, trust can plant the seeds of collapse” (Currall & Epstein, 2003, p. 203). Trust allows school stakeholders to accept leadership decisions and guidance (Thornton, 2021). Therefore, it may be surmised that trust between leaders and staff impacts crisis management outcomes. In one study, leaders were allowed to reflect on a recent school crisis and realized they could not have managed the crisis without the trust and relationships they had established before the crisis (Mutch, 2015). Sutherland (2017) found that leaders developed and maintained trust in a crisis situation through decision-making, communication, and collaboration. Likewise, if executed poorly, trust may also be lost through the same methods.

Crisis Impact and Response

Crisis response refers to the strategies used to “protect a reputation from the ravages of a crisis” (Coombs, 2007, p.163). To understand a given crisis response, it is necessary to understand the impact of the crisis. Since a crisis is the disruption of normal life and is accompanied by stress, potential danger, insecurity, and trauma, the impact of a crisis is therefore its accompaniment (Pecujlija & Cosic, 2019). Stress and trauma are natural and potential responses to the disruption of normalcy. Depending on one’s appraisal of the crisis and resilience, one may have a depleted sense of well-being that triggers a coping response (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Personal agency, or the capacity to cope effectively, will help to regain a sense of well-being with resilience as the result (Chen-Levi, 2022; Frydenberg, 2017).

Stress

The concept of stress, and likewise trauma, has shifted with the times and the societal usage of these terms. While this research does not delve into the etymology of stress nor trauma, there are several

definitions worth mentioning to help situate this study. According to Pearlin et al. (1981) (theorists whose work centered around the stress process model), stress results from a situation that is appraised as one of loss or harm, a threat, or a challenge. Participating in a strenuous, challenging workout puts physical stress on the body, or the potential to be infected by a life-threatening virus causes psychological stress. In both situations, stress is the result of situations that require strength and courage (Pearlin et al., 1981). In the text, *One Nation Under Stress,* Becker (2013) adds to this definition through a societal lens stating that stress is "a physical, chemical, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tensions and may be a factor in disease causation" (p.4). Becker argues that society has shifted the concept of stress, adding that it is not merely a situation to endure or a challenge to overcome, but stress is also a result of any factor with the connotation that there is a need for elimination due to its ill-effects.

Society has managed to give such versatility to the concept of stress that it may apply to nearly any number of situations such as fear of the future, pressure to pay bills on time, and working through the dissertation process. Cofer and Appley (1964, as cited in Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) comment on the nuanced concept of stress stating that "it is as though, when the word came into vogue, each investigator, who had been working with a concept he felt was closely related, substituted the word stress…and continued in this same line of investigation" (p.1). Therefore, stress has become synonymous with concepts such as anxiety and conflict. Becker (2013) continues the argument by saying stress may be a cause (e.g., stress caused him to age quickly), and stress may be an effect (e.g., pressure to perform better at work was stressful). Anything may be considered a stressor, and the source must be endured or eliminated. However, to avoid ambiguity, the current study will align with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) definition that is a part of their theory of coping: "psychological stress is a particular relationship between the person and the environment that the person appraises as taxing or

exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (p. 19). Through this definition, broad generalizations of the term may be avoided while allowing for society's appraisal that stress may be both a cause and effect. With the need for remedy, stress has a relationship to individual responses and coping. This guiding framework will allow me to be conscious of how educational leaders experienced stress concerning their environment and belief in their abilities, and what they did to cope.

Trauma

Similar to stress, the concept of trauma is also liberally used in general discourse. Phrases such as *it was a traumatic experience* are socially synonymous with *it was a stressful experience* (Haslam, 2016). Since the seemingly interchangeable use of terms creates obscurity, it is important to distinguish between the two. If stress is the relationship between a person and a "taxing" environment, then trauma is "an acute type of stressor" or "traumatic stress" (Kira, 2021, p.1). A traumatic stressor could be the loss of a loved one, a motor vehicle accident, a natural disaster, or an assault. In other words, traumatic experiences are stressful, but stressors are not always traumatic (Krupnik, 2020).

Trauma is an extreme stress that will vary dependent upon the individual and factors, such as the person's background (Lahav, 2020). Therefore, according to Krupnik (2020) trauma is rather a "subjective experience of *stress*" (p. 2). This distinction was reiterated by Scarfone (2021) in his research on the consequences of trauma. Trauma is a stress response as perceived by the individual, and it cannot be placed within strict bounds separating it from something stressful to an experience deemed traumatic. In other words, Krupnik (2020) asserts for a stressor to be considered and labeled as traumatic, it must be "outside of the person's normative life experience" (p.2). If placed on a stress continuum, the stressor's intensity is directly related to the trauma experienced. The further removed from one's normal day-to-day life, the more traumatic the experience. As the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented and ongoing, it is far removed from any "normative life experience," allowing it to be

both a stressor and a traumatic experience. Moreover, as educational leaders continue to strive to navigate this crisis they are caught in a situation where they may be experiencing multiple types of trauma.

In psychology, trauma has been categorized into four main levels or types: acute, chronic, complex, and vicarious (Ross et al., 2021; Ravi et al., 2021). Acute trauma is the result of a single event that an individual has assessed to be stressful or dangerous. Chronic trauma is repeated and prolonged exposure to highly stressful events such as abuse. Complex trauma is exposure to multiple, highly stressful events and vicarious trauma (secondary trauma) occurs when one develops trauma symptoms after having close contact with someone suffering from trauma (Ravi et al., 2021). Lahav (2020) adds to the four categories in her study of continuous traumatic stress (CTS), a type III trauma exposure where individuals repeatedly face an ongoing and prolonged threat, typically lasting several years. CTS involves constant uncertainty, constant alertness, and often impairs one's ability to maintain a stable routine. According to Kira (2021), COVID-19 is a new type of trauma because of its multidimensionality. The COVID-19 pandemic is a public health crisis that, beyond infection and health care concerns, also involves lockdown, quarantine, economics, impact on jobs, changes in education procedure, mental health, changes to routine, various levels of government involvement, change in social interaction, and so forth. Therefore, to suggest that the pandemic bridges multiple types of trauma with implications for the well-being of school leaders and teachers is reasonable.

Well-being

If stress and trauma due to a crisis deplete one's feeling of contentment and brings confusion along with other ill effects, there may be struggles to maintain a sense of well-being. Additionally, Sanchez-Ruiz et al. (2021) propounds that well-being is an extended state of being beyond a fluctuation of feeling happy or sad. Well-being encapsulates a perceived physical and psychological homeostasis

surrounding contentment and flourishing (Vernon, 2008). Seligman (2011), who is known for his research in positive psychology, describes well-being as a composition of positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning in life, and accomplishment. Research has also correlated positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning in life, and accomplishment to flourishing (Ryff, Singer, & Love, 2004). Fredrickson and Losada (2013) juxtaposes flourishing with languishing, a term utilized to indicate life without meaning to further encapsulate the meaning of well-being. Moreover, the promotion or maintenance of well-being is not necessarily via the reduction of illbeing since a person may flourish and be perfectly content during times of suffering (Mead et al., 2021). In fact, well-being is purported to be buttressed by contention with challenges, stresses, and sufferings (Mead et al., 2021). One who endures challenges, stresses, and sufferings tends to have a greater sense of well-being when faced with future struggles. Yet, as noted earlier, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) state a person understands stress when faced with a situation that is "…taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (p. 19). As one's sense of well-being is strengthened and supported, the less likely one is to experience stress showing an interdependence of the two concepts.

One positional paper likened the sudden onslaught of stress and being thrust into traumatic experiences during the COVID-19 crisis to culture shock (Stasel, 2020). When faced with a new environment or culture, adjustment is made to understand, and then negotiate, the stressful challenges. This is a fair comparison to educational leadership currently because leaders are being required to respond to their new environment. These ongoing changes disrupt the former culture and climate and necessitate the creation of new ways of being and engaging. Two considerable parts of the COVID-19 narrative are 1) the increase in stress and trauma experienced by individuals and 2) the strengthening rhetoric surrounding well-being. These elements have, perhaps, become even more common than conversations about rigorous instruction (Alves et al., 2020; Stasel, 2020).

When the normalcy of life is agitated and changing on a daily basis, the uncertainty and confusion endanger well-being. In the text *Well-being*, Vernon (2008) opens chapter two, asserting that "human beings are creatures for whom meaning is a crucial, a characteristic, part of their well-being," which may be part of the reason meaning-making is a significant function of crisis leadership (p. 31). Helsloot and Groenedaal (2017) regard meaning-making as reducing uncertainty and thus the most important task of a crisis leader for everyone's well-being.

Coping

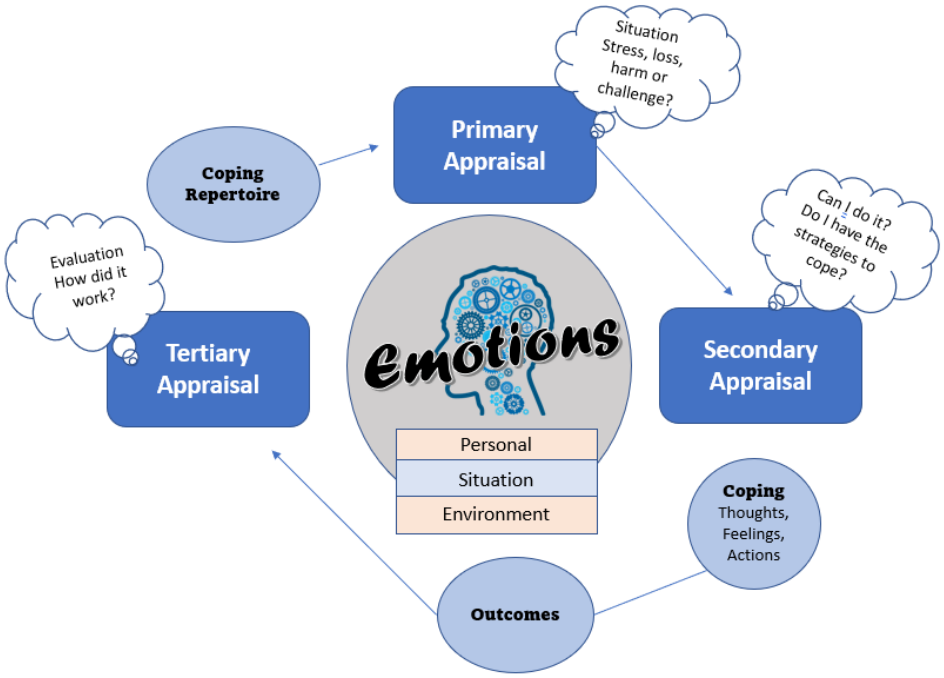
Coping is about the capacity or ability of an individual to respond to environmental demands (Frydenberg, 2017). By focusing on what an individual can do, rather than not, underpins Frydenberg's positive psychological perspective on coping. Individuals therefore respond to the environmental demands—or cope—with stress and challenges through cognition (Frydenberg, 2017). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define coping as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (p.141). Early physiological stress theories postulate that the response to stress or threat is a fight or flight response (Frydenberg, 2017; Patnaik, 2014). In Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of coping, they also suggest a two dimension approach which they refer to as emotion-based or problem-based. The emotion-based coping is a response to the situation to reduce emotional discomfort or stress's effect (ie., anxiety) through avoidance, acceptance, or seeking emotional support. The problem-based coping is the response to a situation to remove the threat or work through the stressor through a solution-oriented approach, such as learning new skills to manage stress. Lazaras (2000) adds that the two approaches are interdependent and work together in the coping process. Reinforcing the interdependence, Fortes-Ferreira et al.'s (2006) study of work-related stress and well-being found that palliative (emotion-based) coping was not a sufficient response to reduce the distress.

Rather those with both palliative and action (problem-based) coping reported greater reduction of distress.

The process and stages of coping begin with an appraisal of the potential harm, available resources, and coping strategy, even though this appraisal may be unconsciously or automatically done (Lazarus, 1993). Through her study of positive psychology, Frydenberg (2017) adds that the appraisal and ensuing coping approach is a reciprocal transaction that both impacts the environment and is impacted by the environment (see Figure 2). Throughout the study, using Lazarus and Folkman's theory, coping will be understood as the process educational leaders use to face the crisis, the changing of one's "cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage psychological stress" (DeLongis & Holzman, 2005). Frydenberg (2017) adds that coping research is about advancing "our understanding of human endeavor" to enhance well-being, resilience, and quality of life (p.31).

Figure 2

Frydenberg's Concept of Appraisal, 2017



Note. This figure demonstrates the appraisal process from situation to evaluation. Adapted *from Coping and the Challenge of Resilience,* by E. Frydenberg, 2017, p. 34 (DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-56924-0). Copyright 2017 Macmillan Publishers Ltd.

Agency

Social scientists traditionally define agency as the capacity for individuals to act independently and make their own free choices. The degree of independence and choice is either determined or limited by outside influences such as ability or belief (Healy, 2014; Bandura, 1989). When agency is exercised "people bring their influence to bear directly on themselves and their environment in managing their lives" (Bandura, 2002, p.270). To illustrate, Zdun (2012) studied agency's role in desisting from delinquent behavior. Although some participants maintained a defeatist attitude ("I tried in vain"), Zdun (2012) discovered that agency was a determining factor –not a causation—in authentic behavioral change when they visualized a better future coupled with positive reinforcement such as experiencing success in their endeavor. Agency requires commitment and motivation in addition to seeing a need for change.

Bandura (1989) established that because people interact with their environment, individual agency is a triad of cognition, personal factors (location, race, socioeconomic status, creed, etc.), and environmental events. Bandura (2006) relates agency to self-efficacy, or belief about one's capabilities, as opposed to a reliance on others. If one has a strong, resilient sense of self-efficacy, the stronger the individual agency, and the more willing one is to exert influence over one's life for positive well-being (Bandura, 1989; Chen-Levi, 2022). Kanal and Rottmann (2021) further suggest that this form of control may also be interdependent. Agency becomes interdependent, also termed collective agency, when one incorporates the goals and vision of the group with one's personal goals and action (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021; Bandura, 2008). In a crisis environment where normal life is toppled by outside influences, leaders who utilize collective agency work to create a positive atmosphere, rebuild a sense of belonging and community, and to exert patience over what cannot be controlled (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021). Thus,

in support of Bandura (2008), Kanal and Rottmann (2021) fournd individual and collective agency to be on a scale where the individual may use them both in different capacities throughout a day.

Agency is also important to understand due to its relationship to coping; effective coping is an outgrowth of agency. Agency, like coping, assumes a goal of eliminating a stressor; however, where coping is temporary, agency is incorporated into everyday life to create an environment where one may thrive and flourish, similar to striving for well-being (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021; Vernon, 2008). As one builds individual agency, the ability to cope with stress positively is improved as suggested in positive psychology (Frydenberg, 2017).

Resilience

Resilience is the place where all the terms: stress, trauma, coping, and well-being converge (Frydenberg, 2017). Frydenberg (2017) maintained that coping is the process whose outcome is resilience. Masten et al.'s (1990) resilience theory defines this outcome: "resilience refers to the class of phenomenon characterized by good outcomes despite serious threats to adaptation or development" (p.228). Again, Lemay (2004) writes, "coping is the science of remarkable people whereas resilience is the story of how remarkable people can be" (p.13). Resilience is the idea of being able to bounce back without breaking. In this light, resilience is also an ability; resilience is the ability to "respond practically to external or internal shocks" (Goldstein, 2012, p. 45). Gonzalez-Mendez and Diaz (2021) broaden the psychological denotation of resilience as the ability to bounce back, to connote further thriving with the development of new skills, relationships, and perspectives.

Therefore, it is all interconnected. When faced with stress, an individual's well-being is tied to an assessment of their resources and capabilities. This connection exists because the link determines the person's perception of the potential harm. Then, the coping strategies used with the stress directly influence an individual's ability to rebound from the taxing situation to regain well-being (Sanchez-Ruiz

et al., 2021). To illustrate the serious nature of COVID-19 on well-being and coping, Lahav (2020) studied participants during the COVID-19 pandemic living near the Gaza strip who were already experiencing continuous traumatic stress (CTS) from violence and bombings. In an environment already full of stressors, Lahav found that the COVID-19 pandemic still introduced unique trauma into the environment, including heightened feelings of threat, vulnerability, anxiety, confusion, uncertainty, and helplessness. A long-term ramification of CTS is an immobilization or loss of coping ability (Kira, 2021). The findings are interesting because despite a history of violence and CTS in that region, COVID-19 still impacted their well-being suggesting the serious nature of the crisis. The findings further support this study's relevance to understanding how educational leaders continue to lead the school full of others experiencing the COVID-19 crisis, while needing to cope for their own well-being.

Crisis of Care

Educational leaders drive the culture and climate of a school, and due to their profound effect, one of the foundational ideas behind leadership is the investment in relationships – the investment in the well-being of staff and students (Atasoy, 2020; Fullan, 2011; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2019). The investment in the well-being and development of people is what Lane et al. (2021) call the ethic of care and is also part of what guides one's decisions. Noddings (2012), a formative author of care ethics, suggested that caring is universally human and is foundational to morality. Care ethics establishes that there is a relationship of care between two or more individuals where one is caring for another, and ideally, this is a reciprocal act (Noddings, 2012; Kaufman-Osborn, 2018). The caring individual is empathetic in that the needs and expectations of the others is taken into consideration when determining the ideal way to demonstrate care (Barnes & Brannelly, 2015). Noddings (2012b) further establishes that "a climate in which caring relations can flourish should be a goal for all teachers and educational policy makers" (p.777).

Through an analysis of Tronto's work *Moral Boundaries*, Miller (2020) questions "If others' needs function as the starting point for what must be done in care ethics, then what part do vulnerability, dependency, and precariousness play in the normative guidance that care ethics offers?" (p.645). To this question Miller (2020) concludes dependency, different from vulnerability, is a relance on others to meet a need. Vulnerability is the openness to express the presence of a need, and because dependency, need, and vulnerability are innately human, Miller (2020) adds that interdependence is the root of care. Ethically, care is to be reciprocated. The role of precariousness or instability in life reminds people of this responsibility and creates a sense of empathy. Precariousness "represents the ever-present call to attend to the care that others might need" (p.659). In Barnes and Brannelly's (2015) exploration of care ethics from an international perspective, they determine "care requires that people practice with compassion, respect, and treat people with dignity," which they add is one of the failures of prioritization of the individual (p.12). Nonetheless, caring for others is not without concern for the emotional price and well-being of the caring individual.

Compassion Fatigue

Noddings (2012b) identifies care as an essential part of education. Vicarious trauma or secondary trauma stress (STS) is a potential consequence of connecting to and caring about others, especially in helping professions (Ravi et al., 2021). The research defines STS as "the affective and cognitive changes that occur" as a result of accumulated exposure to trauma victims and "includes alterations in… mental health" (Cummings et al., 2021, p. 5305). STS arises when someone vicariously experiences the traumatic experiences of another, also known as compassion fatigue, and resembles posttraumatic stress disorder (Lane et al., 2021). While Lane et al., (2021) found in their study surrounding school leaders a possible result of care to be a joyful experience, or compassion satisfaction, they also noted that the "ultimate effect of …compassion compounded with stress is compassion fatigue" (p.27). Compassion

fatigue, although is typically synonymous with STS, is the term that corresponds with helping professions, and STS is now the generalized term (Ludick & Figley, 2017). Pirelli et al. (2020) argue that compassion fatigue differs from STS in that it "develops via the process of *empathizing* with clients' emotional pain" (p. 455). Drawing from Figley (1995), Adams et al. (2006) define compassion fatigue as "the formal caregiver's reduced capacity or interest in being empathic or bearing the suffering of clients and is the natural consequent behaviors and emotions resulting from knowing about a traumatizing event experienced or suffered by a person" (p.103). Symptoms of compassion fatigue include emotions such as "depression, unproductivity, dissatisfaction, hopelessness, malaise, and… being overwhelmed" (p.27). Pirelli et al. (2020) found similar symptoms of compassion fatigue, but they also add a sense of isolation to the aforementioned. Compassion fatigue should not be confused with burnout, or emotional exhaustion (Cummings et al., 2021). Burnout, the depletion of energy, enthusiasm, and efficacy, may manifest from STS or compassion fatigue since it is a defense response (Jenkins & Baird, 2002; Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). Moreover, burnout may affect anyone who inappropriately copes with chronic work stress; whereas STS and compassion fatigue is specific to those who frequently help those who suffer (Gonzalez-Mendez & Diaz, 2021). Interestingly both Cummings et al. (2021) and Jenkins and Baird (2002) found an overlapping of the concepts within participants rather than clear boundaries as defined.

Boyle (2015) explored compassion fatigue in nurses due to their constant work with trauma and devastating illness. She notes that compassion fatigue "is a state in which the compassionate energy that's been expended has surpassed restorative capabilities" (p.50). In contrast, Hofmeyer et al. (2019) suggest that compassion fatigue is not excessive compassion, but rather a blurred distinction between the self and other, and it should be referred to as "empathic distress fatigue," which is an aversive response to the suffering of others. Even though a heightened sense of empathy for an individual's suffering may

be fatiguing, compassion, whose synonyms include tender-heartedness and connotation, is the motivation to relieve the pains of another, and conceptually should buffer one against fatigue, or emotional drain (Neff et al., 2020). Likewise, Gonzalez-Mendez and Diaz (2021) did not find a correlation between compassion satisfaction and compassion fatigue stating that in the face of another's emotional pain, one could experience both simultaneously and therefore they too argue that compassion fatigue is not an excess of compassion but rather "a strong aversive response" to suffering (p. 10).

The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on a school leader and the assessment of personal capabilities and care ethic has a direct relationship to the stress and trauma individually experienced. The perceived experience of the stress and trauma is also related to the leader's responses, which would include coping to maintain or reestablish well-being. Compassion fatigue directly impacts a leader's decision-making and coping, especially if they are simultaneously experiencing a crisis. Additionally, if the leader is experiencing compassion fatigue or burnout, their perceived sense of efficacy is also reduced. As a result, their ability to positively cope with their own stress, let alone another's stress or trauma has also diminished (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022).

Self-Care and Self-Compassion

American Venture Capitalist Founder and CEO, Jerry Colona (2019) said, "We are inevitably knocked on our a*s by the demands of leading. And when we make mistakes—when we fail to lead—our identity; our sense of self; our self-esteem; our deeply held beliefs about what it will take to feel loved and safe and that we belong, as well as the most basic ability to provide for ourselves and our loved ones, seems to implode"(as quoted by Lanaj et al., 2021). Understanding the struggle leadership entails, it is important to identify tools leaders need to effectively navigate periods of challenge and uncertainty. Two such tools are self-care and self-compassion (Neff et al., 2020).

Self-care is defined as beneficial behaviors designed to improve or maintain one's physical and mental health, as well as a general sense of personal comfort, which may include listening to music, time with friends, practicing yoga, and the alike (Gonzalez-Mendez & Diaz, 2021; Neff et al., 2020). Self-care has been found to reduce trauma exposure's impact and increase well-being. Boyle (2015) coins the phrase "responsible selfishness" indicating that self-care is not only an important tool for successful leaders, but is also a necessary practice to balance "all aspects of wellness, hardiness, and resilience" (p. 51). Neff et al. (2020) make a distinction between self-care and self-compassion noting that self-care is typically after work hours, while self-compassion is practiced in the moment and is a learned skill to protect from compassion fatigue. Self-compassion is the recognition or mindfulness in moments of perceived inadequacy or failure to give oneself grace and kindness (Lanaj et al., 2021). As Colona said, when leaders are "inevitably knocked on [their] a*s by the demands of leading," self-compassion provides leaders with the ability to recognize their own humanity which Lanaj et al. (2020) posit "may render leaders more effective" (p.1). Their research also determined that when a leader practices self-compassion they have a greater sense of empathy, are more confident in their role as a leader, and improves leadership effectiveness.

Crisis as Transformative

The concept of change is not new, and while crises are viewed as unfortunate events, they are events, nonetheless, with transformative ability (Bridgeforth, 2021). Based on stress, trauma, coping, agency, and resilience, major life events are those that inform beliefs, adaptations, and narrative identities (Cowan et al., 2019). As suggested earlier, the concept of crisis leadership implies leaders shift or adapt their leadership strategies or behaviors based on the demands of the crisis including "having to lead in different ways, finding a balance between rapid and consensus decision-making, and strengthening the distribution of leadership" (Thornton, 2021, p.27). Goode et al. (2021) looked at

leadership during the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic from an adaptive approach remarking that COVID-19 forced leadership to quickly shift to meet the needs of students and saw the crisis as "an opportunity to let go of assumptions, take new risks and learn by doing" (p.40). Adams et al. (2021) studied school leadership and situational challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that principals "were forced to look at school leadership, teaching, and learning differently while maintaining a positive and courageous mindset" (p.4). Sutherland (2017) adds to the demands of crises by noting that "school leaders may not be able to control or influence the occurrence of crises, but their responses can lead to positive learning and change in schools and communities" (p.2).

Delving further, crises as transformative events may also be associated with agency as it contains a person's capacity to transform and shape one's environment, including identity (Chen-Levi et al., 2022). Bandura (1991) extended his work on agency noting that "human adaptation requires recognizing conditional relations between environmental events and between actions and outcomes" (p. 159). Bandura is referring to what Healy (2014) calls imagination in her study of agency and desisting. Imagination allows room for one to reflect, set goals, and envision various possibilities, including a future (better) self. Then, once the imagined future is perceived as both "meaningful and credible," (p.883) agentic action can be exercised. In other words, if a change occurs as a result of a crisis, it will occur through analysis and self-reflection:

> Through agentic action, people devise ways of adapting flexibly to remarkably diverse environments. Moreover, they use their ingenuity to insulate themselves from selection pressures. They create devices that compensate immensely for their sensory and physical limitations, circumvent environmental constraints, redesign and construct environments to their liking, create styles of behavior that enable them to realise desired outcomes and pass on the effective ones to others by social modeling and other experiential means. (Bandura, 2002, p.

272)

The distinct challenges of a crisis require a distinct response, or change and a leader is able to make conscientious decisions about an envisioned outcome through agency.

Recently, one study presented the idea that "anecdotally school leaders argue that every day presents a unique set of challenges breaking the perceptions of what is normal in schools" (Okilwa & Barnett, 2021, p. 63). Hubris aside, any typical challenge of the daily routine does not surmount the intrusive disruption brought about by the pandemic, and a crisis leader's "level of responsiveness is quite different" from responses to daily matter (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022, p. 144). Bearing that in mind, research surrounding changes in leadership styles and practice during the pandemic are beginning to emerge (Thornton, 2021; Tran et al., 2020; Gordon & Xing, 2020; Goode et al., 2021; Stasel, 2020; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021, 2020; Harris, 2020). Yeo (2022) created the metaphor to illustrate:

> Leadership is much like gardening where leaders should confront chaos by cultivating new mindsets and behaviors through as sense of vision. Second, like gardeners, leaders should sense through emotion by caring for their seeds (people), tilling soil (environment), and removing obstructive weeds (safety) to ensure a healthy crop (well-being). Third, selection and planting of seeds is akin to sensing through action. Leaders should combine proactive coaching with mentoring to allay their employees' fears and assure them of their worthiness in times of uncertainty. Fourth, cultivating the crop is akin to sensing through risk taking where leaders apply objective and subjective measures to enable complex change (p. 7).

Studies during the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis identified various roles leaders took upon themselves outside of the norm. The principals were required to extend themselves to create a safe, supportive, and nurturing environment when people were fearful of illness and

anxious about coming into close contact with individuals outside of the immediate family (Upadyaya et al., 2021). Striepe and Cunningham (2021) list several role extensions; school leaders were: logisticians, engineers, project managers, social workers, and coordinators. Even still, the crisis is unfolding, its effects are just beginning to be seen, and questions remain surrounding the permanence or impermanence of change in role or identity of leadership because of the unprecedented environment (Upadyaya et al., 2021).

New Normal

A new approach to teaching, learning and leading also connotes an undefined period of uncertainty, referenced as a new normal era (Manalu et al., 2021). While Sutherland (2017) writes in his study on leadership and crisis that schools "face a complex landscape of challenges where uncertainty has become the norm," the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis is requiring many educational leaders to reevaluate education priorities. For instance, a shift in conversation from increased rigor to student well-being is being observed, student assemblies were suspended, and school nurses are now responsible for contact tracing. There is not a facet of education that has gone untouched by the COVID-19 crisis, and there seems to be a collective understanding that a *new normal* is coming and currently being developed (Hanafi et al., 2021). Furthermore, the concept of a *new normal*, however amorphous it may be at present, puts education in a unique position to make thoughtful changes.

Literature about the *new normal* is young and currently being published; however, there are a few studies available. Adams et al. (2021) conclude that COVID-19 will be the *new normal.* One study about COVID-19's impact on education defines the term as "just a new mindset and habits in order to live a normal life when things are not going to be the same again" (Asawapoom, 2021, p. 1548). Hanafi et al. (2021) view the pandemic as a turning point for the education system, but also acknowledge that what the *new normal* becomes "will depend on the decisions leaders make" (p.1). Taking the concept of

a *new normal* in education further, Seke (2020) argues that COVID-19 is more than a turning point or a new mindset, but that the pandemic is precipitating the next educational revolution. Putting the concept into crisis perspective, Harris (2020) argues that an aspect of crisis leadership is to return to normal business function or operation; however, the shift toward a *new normal* includes a restructuring of leadership, which precludes one of the primary tenets of crisis leadership. Although from a business perspective, Tourish (2020) claims that the COVID-19 pandemic is not merely a crisis, but is a crisis of leadership, challenging old leadership theories and practices in favor of bringing about positive change. Yokuş (2022) reviewed the significance of leaders in education and highlights the danger of viewing this transition to a *new normal* as temporary instead of an opportunity to make conscientious change to lead differently and to lead more effectively.

Conclusion

The review of literature explored the field of crisis leadership as it may apply to education and the impact of a crisis, COVID-19, on individuals and organization. Trust was identified as a key component of crisis leadership. The impact of the crisis included stress and trauma as ones' well-being is assessed. Based on the assessment, one begins to cope to regain homeostasis along with the incorporation of resilience, or ability to bounce back. Next, the literature review examined the ethic of care that encompasses secondary traumatic stress, and compassion fatigue. Worthy of note, stress and trauma are significant to a leader's opted responses and decisions in a crisis (Thornton, 2021; Sutherland, 2017). Stress is a powerful influencer in decision-making that is never purely objective or separate from emotions (Starcke et al., 2008). Lastly, the literature review investigated the transformative nature of a crisis and the dramatic changes the current COVID-19 crisis has on normalcy in education, perhaps even irrevocably. Since the crisis is not over at the time of writing, a *new normal* is yet being defined for educational leaders.

More questions than answers seem to abound, and educational leaders are attempting to answer questions about problems they have never faced. As current research is directed, there is a vital need to understand the lived experiences of school leaders not only to understand the behaviors of a crisis leader better but to continue improving education. As studies emerge surrounding crisis leadership due to the education crisis ensuing from the novel coronavirus pandemic, more attention must be given to the pandemic's impact on schools and school leaders.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This is a qualitative case study and at the time of this writing world's eyes are on education and its impact upon student learning and achievement for unique reasons never seen in contemporary schooling. The COVID-19 pandemic and educational crisis has required many educational leaders and teachers to reevaluate education priorities as issues arise due to the virus. For instance, there is a drastic rise in anxiety (H. Boyle, personal communication, August 16, 2021) and in teen suicide attempts (M. Wade, personal communication, September 11, 2021). Students and teachers are struggling to function and are emotionally exhausted. Teacher and principal attrition has also been on the rise (DeMatthews et al., 2022). There is not a facet of education that has gone untouched by the COVID-19 crisis, and educational leaders are acutely aware of and reacting to this aberrant and unsteady environment (Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021). Working as an instructional leader to support and motivate teachers impacted by prolonged and unpredictable stress and trauma is a new challenge for principals. Thus, there seems to be a collective understanding, perhaps hope, that a *new normal* is coming and is currently being developed (Hanafi et al., 2021).

Personal Connection with the Research Topic

As a highly empathetic individual who has always been interested in the personal stories and experiences of others, curiosity about the ways educational leaders were—and are—navigating COVID-19 grew. I was sitting in a faculty meeting that now operated through an online platform, and I began to wonder what it looked like from the other end of the screen—the living room, perhaps, where the principal was sitting instead of standing at the front of the school auditorium. I knew I had my own struggles, questions, and concerns in my role as a teacher due to the current crisis. I was trying to cope and struggling to find a balance between being a wife, mother, colleague, teacher, and student in a world that was suddenly socially isolated and yet attempting to maintain contact and function in an online

environment. I wondered what my principal was experiencing as she presented a positive, friendly, and professional face on the computer screen. She was encouraging, brought brevity to the meeting, and spoke of well-being, but was she as confident as her online presence exuded? What did it look like from her point of view once the meeting ended and the screen went blank? Who was encouraging and guiding her? How did she find the balance I was striving for in my life? Upon reflection and through journaling of thoughts and ideas about these questions, I came to understand that I wished to capture an authentic story of crisis leadership in secondary education. I aim to garner information and make sense of the crisis leadership narrative through the lens of educational leaders including topics of decision-making, coping, well-being, and fatigue. Additionally, I surmise leadership roles will have altered out of necessity along with job demands may point to potential theory, but first and foremost, I hope to obtain a picture of the curious balance between a school leader's ability to lead and instill confidence in faculty and to maintain a sense of well-being.

Methodology

Qualitative research focuses on study that is interpretive, naturalistic, and emergent and it includes not only the voices of the participants, but the reflexivity of the researcher (Creswell & Ploth, 2018). According to Stake (2010), a qualitative researcher is often "an instrument, observing action and contexts, often intentionally playing a subjective role in the study… (p.20). In some research perspectives, subjectivity may be viewed as a weakness; however, within qualitative research, it is an essential component allowing for complex understanding of the emergent themes.

Research Question

This case study seeks to uncover answers to the following question(s):

What leadership lessons can we learn from Central High leaders' coping stories in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic?

a. How do leaders at Central High work to maintain self-care and well-being?

b. In what ways did the participants' identities, roles, and purposes evolve throughout the crisis?

Research Design

To understand how the pandemic has impacted educational leadership at the high school level, I will be conducting a case study. According to Stake (1995) "A case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (p.xi). For Stake (2005), "Case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied" (as cited in VanWynsberghe & Khan, 2007, p. 83). To distinguish between case study as a methodology and a choice is to note the idea that the researcher does not select the case as much as the research process. Additionally, according to Creswell and Ploth (2018), a case study is an approach to explore a "real-life, contemporary bounded system over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection" so researchers may gather "accurate information not lost by time" (p. 96- 97). This case study will explore the complexity of leadership at the case site bounded by the COVID-19 crisis. A case study approach will allow me to examine multiple perspectives of crisis leadership and is further appropriate because I am interested in the uniqueness as well as the commonality of the topic. I want to hear the stories, and I will enter the scene with "sincere interest" to learn with a "willingness to put aside any presumptions" (Stake, 1995, p.1). Furthermore, this study will satisfy the four defining characteristics of a case study: holistic, empirical, interpretive, and emphatic as I approach the study to gain an understanding of the COVID-19 leadership narrative at the case site (Yazan, 2015). According to Stake (1995) a case study is holistic when it considers the interrelationship between the phenomenon and the context; is empirical when the study is based on, concerned with, or verifiable by observation or experience; is interpretive when it rests upon researcher intuition and viewed as a researcher-subject

interaction; and emphatic when researchers reflect the vicarious experiences of the subjects in an emic perspective.

Context and Participants

Central High School is a suburban school in one of the nation's top 25 largest school districts. One of 17 high schools in the district, Central High School serves roughly 2,400 students, has 124 faculty members, and ranks in the top 20% of the schools in the state. The school first opened in 2006, and the current principal is the fourth since the school was established. The high school is run by the principal and six assistant principals. Each assistant principal is assigned an academic department or two, of which there are nine, and each department has a department chair who is a member of the leadership team to act as a voice for and liaison between the administration and the department members. Central High School has a mission statement suggesting a strong commitment to excellence and deliberate success, which indicates careful decision-making and a strategic, perhaps reflective, mindset of the leaders. Since the study proposes to understand how the school leaders navigated the COVID-19 pandemic, Central High School is selected due its particular school mission and vision, which emphasizes the strategies to promote excellence and success.

To investigate the research question, educational leaders will need to be interviewed to understand their perceptions and lived experiences beginning in January 2020, when news about COVID-19 began to flourish in the United States. The eleven educational leaders to be interviewed at Central High School will be the principal, five assistant principals, and five department heads. Only five assistant principals will be included because one does not meet the necessary criteria. In addition, the area superintendent will also be interviewed because of his connection and potential influence on the school leadership, namely the principal. Additionally, 87 teachers who are subordinate to the assistant

principals or department head will be invited to complete a questionnaire to provide a fuller understanding on the impact of the utilized skills and decisions of the leaders during the crisis.

Criterion sampling will be used to select the research participants (Palys, 2008). The first criterion is the educational leader needs to have been in the current position prior to school's closing March 13, 2020, so a more robust experience with the crisis. The criterion is also important because the leader needs to be familiar with the teachers and the context of the school. The second criterion for the educational leaders is role-based: principal, assistant principal, and department head. The department heads will be voluntary participants. The area superintendent to whom Central High School is assigned will also be selected because of his role in the decision-making process at the school. At present, all educational leaders have verbally agreed to participate in the study. The criteria for the teachers are they too have been at the school prior to school's closing March 13, 2020, and must either be in the same department as the department head or subordinate to one of the assistant principals. Having this departmental criterion will enable the teacher participants to answer the questionnaire more completely.

Additionally, only high school level leadership will be included in the study since the goal of the case study is not to represent the narrative of the entire district, which would require the inclusion of elementary and middle school leadership. The purpose of this study is not comparative in nature. Looking at the study through a constructivist lens where meaning is specific to a given setting, it is not my intent to compare the COVID-19 narrative at Central High School to any other school (Creswell, 2014). Consent will be part of the interview protocol.

Preliminary Data

Preliminary data about the site's instructional personnel were collected and analyzed to contextualize the site better. Central High School staffs 115 teachers (not including department chairs) for the instruction and support of its 2,400 students. Teacher input, solicited voluntarily using a

questionnaire,[2] helps to provide color to the environment and to understand leadership responses more fully. This data, in turn, situates the impact of the leaders' utilized skills and decisions during the crisis. Teachers who met the criteria of having been at the case site before school closing on March 13, 2020, and who reported directly to one of the leading participants were invited to participate. An invitation was sent via an email containing a link to the questionnaire. Google ™ Forms was the chosen platform as the application provides the ability to collect responses anonymously. The allowance for anonymity gave teachers the freedom to respond without concern of repercussion. Of the 87 teachers invited to complete the anonymous questionnaire, 60 volunteered responses. Their background was pertinent to the study, specifically why they wanted to teach, how long they have taught, and what kept them in the teaching profession. Of the 60 responses, 47 teachers (78%) have taught for over ten years. In collecting other opinions, 21 (35%) became a teacher because they loved working with students, 14 (23%) because they love the subject they teach, 8 (13%) because they believe teaching is a rewarding career, and 5 (8%) because they believe teaching is the greatest calling in life (Table 1). Additionally, 18 (30%) noted they continue to teach because they love working with students, 12 (20%) because it is a rewarding career, 7 (12%) because they love the subject they teach, and 7 (12%) because they love having summer vacation (Table 2).

Table 1

Reasons to Enter the Teaching Profession

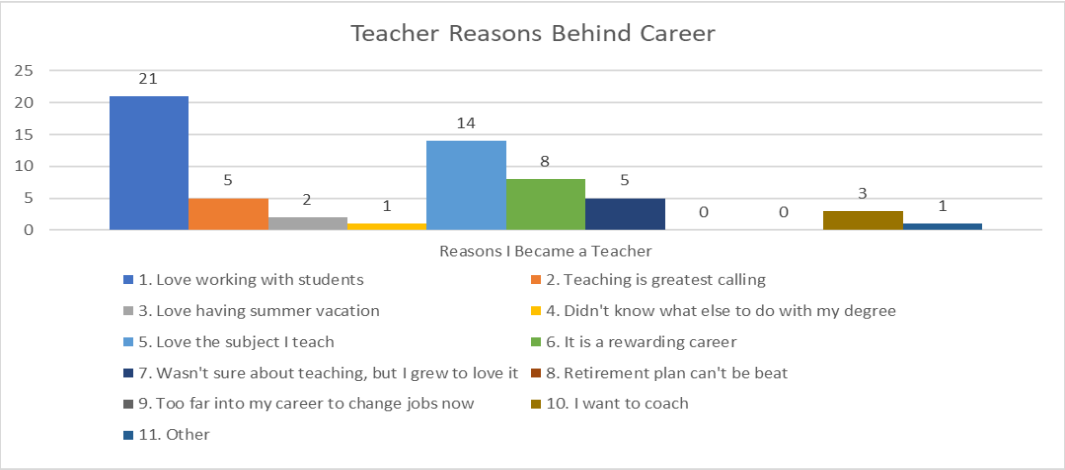
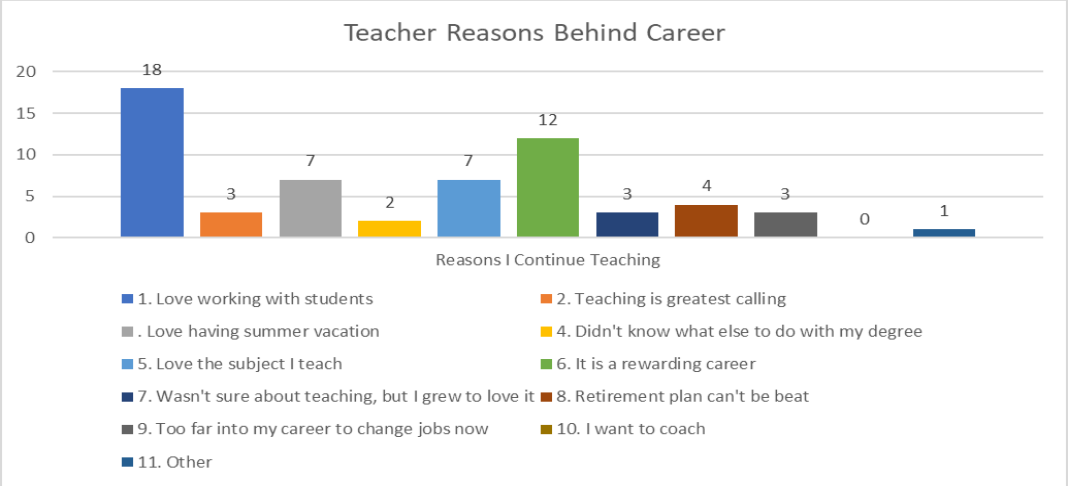


Table 2

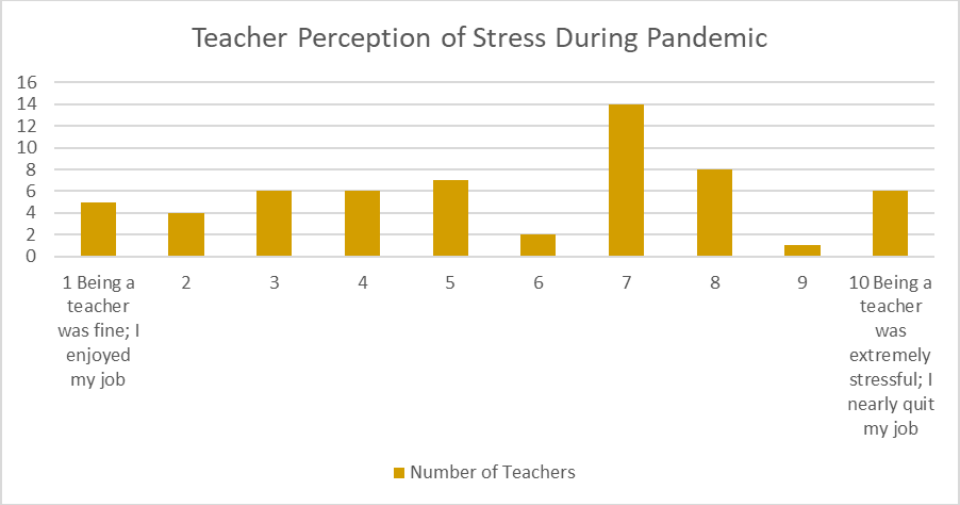
Reasons to Remain in the Teaching Profession



Furthermore, to ascertain the general feeling the teachers had about teaching during the pandemic, the questionnaire asked them to rank themselves from 1 to 10, with a score of 10 indicating "being a teacher was extremely stressful; I nearly quite my job." The results were nearly split with 28 (47%) of the participants placing themselves in the lower half, a rank of a 1 to a 5, and 32 (53%) placing themselves in the upper half, a rank of a 6 to a 10 (Figure 5). However, 23% of teachers ranked themselves at 7 and 13% at 8 (Table 3).

Table 3

Teacher Feelings about Teaching During the Pandemic



Only half of the participating teachers who have taught for more than 20 years continue to teach because they find reward and enjoyment in the profession and working with students despite the stress they encountered during the pandemic.

Data Collection

Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews, an open-ended teacher questionnaire, and school-provided documents or emails pertaining to COVID-19 and leadership. Each educational leader will participate in two, forty-five-minute interviews covering crisis leadership behaviors, coping, and leadership styles (see Appendix B). The second interview will also provide room to clarify information from the first. The questionnaire will ask teachers to respond to a series of questions about their understanding of the role and impact of leadership and any changes participants observed through their experience (See Appendix C). I will also ask the leaders for any documents or emails pertinent to any guidance or protocols they may have received or issued during the COVID-19 pandemic. These documents will be used to triangulate any emergent themes found in interviews and questionnaires.

Data Analysis

Interviews will be recorded using Otter.ai and then coded using Dedoose (9.0.46), a qualitative data analysis software program. Careful attention to coding and sub-coding will be essential, along with narrative analysis of the data. Data coding will follow a three-step process based on open, axial, and selective coding (Saldaña, 2013). The open codes will be generated from the transcription of the interviews, the questionnaire, and provided documents. Going through different coding phases will help me give "meticulous attention to language and deep reflection on the emergent patterns and meanings of human experience" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 10). Reflection on emergent themes will need to be purposeful and continual. The coding of the questionnaire and interview transcripts will allow me to see if a similar

narrative and themes are found, providing further corroboration of the data and adding to a thick description of the case study.

Trustworthiness

Researchers are skeptical of their findings and include measures to validate the research (Stake, 2010). To ensure the study is trustworthy, I will address the following four criteria Guba (1981) proposes: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To ensure credibility, I will collect sufficient data and gather as much detail as possible for the study through interviews, anecdotal notes, and documents gathered. The multiple sources of data collection will also provide for triangulation of findings. The use of documents, interviews, and questionnaires will allow me to construct a more accurate picture of crisis leadership at the case site. Furthermore, I am familiar with the culture of the participating case site through my role as an educator and have worked to establish a relationship of trust with the participants. Participants will also be approached with an opportunity to refuse participation, which will help ensure honesty in their responses (Shenton, 2004).

Transferability is important since it allows for the study's findings to resonate with the audience as they can understand the information in terms of their own experience. Stake (1995) suggests although the case is unique, the study and its findings may also be seen as a part of a broader group. However, it is up to the researcher to provide sufficient contextual information; therefore, thick descriptions are needed.

Guba and Lincoln (1982) note the close relationship between credibility and dependability as when a researcher demonstrates credibility, they also ensure the latter. However, the dependability of a study also necessitates a report detailing the processes within the study, thereby enabling a future researcher to conduct a similar study. Such in-depth description also allows one to assess the extent to which proper research practices have been followed.

Confirmability attempts to ensure that the findings accurately depict the experiences and ideas of the participants and not those of the researcher. Triangulation assists with the confirmability of findings and will reduce the effect of researcher bias.

Positionality and Worldview

To further separate researcher bias from the study's findings, I will acknowledge my own beliefs and positionality as a researcher. As a part of continuous reflexivity, positionality is a practice of a researcher delineating his or her own self in relation to the study with ethical implications since the position may influence the study such as the data collected or its interpretation (Yoon & Uliassi, 2022). Patai (1994) warns researchers to go beyond utilizing reflexivity as a method to pursue scholarship without guilt. True reflexivity is to be uncomfortable, not an absolution, requiring researchers to be conscientious of the ethical implications of their decisions.

Insiders are researchers who share "positionalities or social locations with their participants, and therefore were believed to hold insider knowledge to the experiences of those they studied" (Thurairajah, 2019, p. 135). As an "insider" in this study, I must answer critical questions to understand my impact on the research process. The answer in part is the boundary I set and maintain during interviews allowing me to either reveal or conceal my positionality to participants.

Due to the nature of the study, utilizing empathy will be paramount. Not only am I a teacher, but many of the participants will know who I am in advance. It is my intention to maintain a professional researcher-participant boundary, but I need to work through the administration-teacher boundary that some of my participants may professionally have in place. Developing trust, using empathy, and ensuring confidentiality will be important to gaining an authentic understanding of lived experiences (Toft et al., 2021).

Within qualitative research there are numerous approaches whose direction is informed by the researcher's philosophical assumptions. The philosophical underpinnings of this qualitative study are built upon the foundations of constructivism. Constructivism postulates that as individuals strive to understand their world, multiple and varied meanings are created through experience and social interaction and these meanings are under constant revision or restructuring (Mertens, 2010). Knowledge and truth are social constructs and cannot be separate from the complex world in which they were ascribed (Mertens, 2010). To illustrate the extent to which the truth may be known, it is best discussed in terms of a novel. An author makes strategic moves in constructing a story with the intent on expressing or directing readers to a particular idea. The completed work - the novel - is the interpreted and socially constructed truth; the author has written the work to be understood in a particular light. Linguistic stylings and nuances are the pen of an author who constructs meaning. A reader enters the novel and brings new complexity to this truth: the complexity of personal ideas and experiences. A novel may be read multiple times and with each read, a new interplay of language and idea may be found. However, a reader cannot know the novel as the author, nor the author as the reader, but a socially constructed truth arises if the two were to converse and it is through this social construction of knowing that meaning is created (Mack, 2010, p.8).

A constructivist paradigm will inform this research endeavor that will use the questionnaires and interviews as I seek to understand the COVID-19 crisis narrative as experienced by educational leaders. My positionality as a constructivist researcher is well suited for this study since it asserts that as individuals interact and reflect on their experiences, meaning is forged in a specific context and is complex (Creswell, 2014). As a researcher holding this worldview, I will be positioned to look for the complexity of meaning and allow the themes to emerge as they are socially constructed through the lived experiences of the educational leaders (Mertens, 2010).

As a constructivist researcher, I intend to make sense of those meanings from the point of view of the study participants. I will allow the research to speak for itself and acknowledge my role in the research as a part of the constructed truth. Furthermore, I will reflect upon the data to arrive at a careful interpretation of the lived experiences of the school leaders at Central High School.

I will approach this study with the belief that there is truth to every story, but rarely is it found in any singular telling since knowledge is not "reducible to simplistic interpretation" (Mack, 2010, p.8). Mertens (2014) writes, "knowledge is socially constructed by people active in the research process and that researchers should attempt to understand the complex world of lived experience" (p.16). This study will strive to convey an accurate and authentic telling of the experience and impact of the pandemic as understood by study participants.

Ethical Considerations

The first ethical consideration is participant confidentiality. Since the case study includes data collection through interviews or other methods involving people, it is essential the participants are treated with respect, dignity, and care throughout (Stockley & Balkwill, 2013). To ensure participants' confidentiality, they will be assigned a pseudonym. Participants' privacy will further be protected by keeping transcribed interviews and data on an external device and stored in a locked cabinet in my office until dissertation defense, at which point information will be destroyed.

Another ethical consideration is participant safety. The research design needs to consider the potential harm to all involved: participants, school, district, community, and researcher (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018). I will be transparent about any potential harm by working to eliminate, isolate, and minimize risk. Since this study involves professional and personal data, risks to minimize may be emotional or reputational. This also enforces the need for the confidentiality of all participants. As a researcher, I will be transparent, ensuring participants are fully informed of potential risks.

Conclusion

Chapter 3 provided details of the study method. The chapter began by positioning the research and discussing the researcher's personal connection with the topic. The role the earlier pilot study had in shaping and informing the research study was shared. The problem statement was shared to help situate the research question and then details about the method of study and case study design was provided. A description of the study population and the study location along with a rationale for its selection was discussed. Information was given regarding data collection, and details regarding the data analysis procedures were provided. Steps I will follow to ensure trustworthiness are outlined above; including strategies for improving credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I have also discussed the ethical concerns that will be considered, including informed consent and confidentiality. Provided in this chapter was also the researcher's role in the study. The following chapter will present study results, and chapter 5 will provide a discussion of the findings, including recommendations for future research and implications of the study.

Chapter Four: Findings

This case study aimed to investigate how leaders not only continued to lead through the COVID-19 pandemic but also maintained their own well-being. I specifically wanted to identify the pandemic's impact or changes on educational leaders within the case site.

This case study seeks to uncover answers to the following question(s):

What leadership lessons can we learn from Central High leaders' coping stories in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic?

a. How do leaders at Central High work to maintain self-care and well-being?

b. In what ways did the participants' identities, roles, and purposes evolve throughout the crisis?

Summary of Participants

Twelve educational leaders at Central High School were interviewed to understand the lessons learned as the COVID-19 pandemic intersects with leadership at Central High School. Each leader was initially asked why they wanted to be a leader, how long they've been in leadership, and what they initially believed about the leadership role (Table 4).

Table 4

Dramatis Personae

Pseudonym	Total Years Leadership Experience	Reason Entered Leadership and Understanding of Role Pre-Pandemic
Ryan	17	**Reason:** "Well, here's the funny thing. I didn't know I wanted to be in leadership. But the characteristics of who I am became noticeable to those who saw leadership in me, and I just capitalized on it." **Role:** "…clear, concise communication to all stakeholders of expectations and the beliefs of the school mission; communication is embedded in every part of what I do."
Blake	10	**Reason:** "I felt like I had a bigger stake in helping the whole school than just the 100 or so kids I had." **Role:** "…to build relationships with students and teachers, and to see how I can impact the school and then the community as well."

Kai	6	**Reason:** "I wanted to be able to impact and be apart of the school on a larger scale. I always want to be an advocate for students and make sure that students have somebody that they can reach out to." **Role:** "Other things will fall in line, but if you don't have the relationship with the students, with the staff, then how do you lead?"
Dylan	12	**Reason:** "I needed a change nearly halfway through my career." **Role:** "I really thought I would get into like data and curriculum… It wasn't anything like I thought it would be."
Morgan	18	**Reason:** "I felt naively that if I became a [leader][3] that I will be able to help teachers perform better because I felt like I'm only impacting 90 kids a day. … I will have an impact on the teachers, and it will trickle down and improve instruction." **Role:** "… to be an instructional leader, but the reality is… there's so much; we end up being managers rather than leaders because things have to get done."
Jordan	8	**Reason:** "I wanted to have a greater impact on kids- more than the 90 that I was able to touch directly." **Role:** "… the biggest part of leadership is being seen and communication with your students, teachers, and parents. They may not know everything that you're doing, but they know that you are present."
Lee	17	**Reason:** "I just kind of got into that role, and education is unique. But at the end of the day, it is about student success, and community success, and teacher success too." **Role:** "I believed it was leading the PLC process, but again you don't know what you don't know...You have to deal with so many other things and with providing support."
Jamison	18	**Reason:** "For two reasons. One to have a greater impact on more kids and two to mentor new teachers not privileged with the same strong foundation that I had received." **Role:** "To make an impact in the school that is in the best interest for students."
Charlie	4	**Reason:** "I wanted to make decisions that help shape the culture of a school or an organization. I wanted to be a part of shaping its direction, decision-making culture, together with other leaders in the building." **Role:** "Relationships 100%."

[3] Any position titles mentioned in interviews were replaced by the generic term of *leader*.

Ashley	32	**Reason:** "I wanted to be involved in making decisions and feeling like my voice is heard by people who can really make a bigger decision." **Role:** "Really trying to provide support and create community."
Sloan	12	**Reason:** "The honest answer is I got tired of listening to people who I felt didn't have an accurate view of things. I could make a difference working with teachers and helping guide them, I think, because I was dissatisfied with what I was experiencing." **Role:** "Facilitate and be an advocate for stakeholders. Also, to be an effective communicator of information."
Micah	4	**Reason:** "I needed my voice to be heard in a way to help make the school a better place. To move us in the direction to battle equity." **Role:** "I'm here to advocate for teachers…help them solve problems in a way that's going to make us all more successful at our jobs."

Considering their leadership background helps to contextualize their perspective on leading during the pandemic. The Area Assistant-Superintendent, Principal, Assistant Principals, and Department Chairs were included in this study since each position is a member of the school leadership at the case site. Furthermore, the participant description omits position titles to maintain confidentiality since this study does not purport to delineate leadership by position. The purpose of this study is not comparative. Looking at the study through a constructivist lens where meaning is specific to a given setting, I did not intend to compare the COVID-19 narrative at Central High School to any other school (i.e., Creswell, 2014).

Leadership at Central High School ranges from beginner-level experience to leaders nearing the end of their careers. Most all became leaders to make an impact in one form or another. While some believe they entered their leadership role naively or are currently feeling disillusioned or dissatisfied with education, many addressed working with students and building relationships as their primary function before the pandemic. Their experiences during the pandemic are the generative force for the study.

The following analysis begins by developing the case context through the lens of participants as reported to help bind the case. Following, I will discuss themes that emerged from the data.

Context - COVID as a Crisis

Prior to the emergence of themes, I had participants conceptualize the case (COVID) as a crisis. By allowing leaders to define the pandemic as *they* understood the idea of a crisis, I bound the narrative within crisis leadership and provided depth to thematic understanding. Each leader was asked *in what way do you think the pandemic may be seen as a crisis?* This question allowed participants to discuss the deeper themes surrounding the lessons that can be learned from coping stories in response to the pandemic. With the pandemic situated as a crisis, the responses yielded three areas of note: COVID as a health and information crisis, COVID as an education crisis, and COVID as a spotlight on a pre-existing crisis in education. The three contextual facets will be discussed below.

COVID as a health and information crisis

Several participants discussed the COVID pandemic as a health crisis mentioning quarantine orders and noted the tragedy the virus caused. Jamison asserted, “I don’t care who you are; just, as a human, to wake-up every day and hear another 100,000 people died, that is a crisis.” Morgan was less emotional in reply: “A crisis is when you have people dying, so by definition the pandemic was a crisis.” However, Morgan’s response went from a general idea of crisis to the impact the crisis had on society: “People were afraid to go to the grocery store. Afraid to go anywhere.”

Other participants, too, were quick to transition to the impact of the health crisis. Several shared stories of their own children and of students with anxiety, depression, and selective mutism. Micah remarked about the many students who “just can’t handle life right now because of what happened during the time at home.” Charlie wondered if the repercussions of the crisis on the mental health of young people were because “all they could do was think about their issues and issues that maybe they

had suppressed a little bit." Furthermore, participants believed reverberations of the crisis regarding societal shifts connected to all the chaos, and the confusion created "this massive amount of distrust and misinformation." The inability to discern the truth from a lie is problematic for many people, and Charlie puzzled, "How is that going to affect this next generation of kids? It is a crisis on multiple levels." Those who discussed COVID as a health crisis covered physical health and mental health, including feelings of distrust, and most participants also went further to discuss the crisis in relation to education.

COVID as an education crisis

Although recognizing COVID as a health crisis, participants focused more on COVID as an educational crisis. Blake defined the term: "When I think of crisis, I think *help*; people need help. People need support." The education crisis was viewed as a time of uncertainty where people needed help because "the ability to teach and learn at maximum was tampered with" (Ryan). Other participants, such as Kai, took a deep breath and directly said the pandemic was "a teaching and learning crisis." Educators "were completely unprepared to do anything other than what they had always done. None of us saw it coming, including the leadership of the district" (Charlie). "We were in uncharted water. I mean, we always say when we come to school, we never know what each day brings, but during the pandemic…we really had no idea what was going to be taking place," Jordan added while expressing feelings of fear and fascination at leading during the crisis.

Jamison, a veteran leader, expressed the education crisis on a more personal level by comparing themself to a novice: "I was a new [educator]. I had no idea what I was doing; just learning and having to figure out how I am gonna get the frickin' audio to work. It was so frustrating." Jamison took the connection beyond suddenly having to learn new technology to reach stakeholders to expressing

frustration at being disconnected and isolated: “I had no idea if anybody was teaching or showing up; there was no accountability for teachers, students, parents. There really wasn’t.”

Participants also believed that the crisis was still ongoing. As Charlie commented, “I think the effects of the crisis on the youngest generation we’ve still yet to see.” In agreement, Jordan mentioned, “high schoolers who didn’t get to experience high school and elementary children who don’t know the rules or how to be in school.” Moreover, Morgan did not define the current crisis in terms of education but did iterate that the loss of instruction during COVID will become a crisis. The loss for students was beyond instruction. Participants shared that, given the pandemic’s extended length of time, the impact on social development is “going to show up in different spaces for years” (Kai). Jordan echoed, “I know we’re worried about test scores, but I’m worried about [students] learning how to interact with one another.” Despite the lack of consistency conceptualizing COVID as an educational crisis, all agreed that it is a crisis with devastating results.

COVID as a spotlight on a pre-existing crisis in education

According to other interview responses, the pandemic exposed and exacerbated a crisis already present in education. The crisis in question, as presented in interviews, is one of equity among learners, and by quarantining and closing school, the issue was amplified. Leaders who discussed the pandemic as an amplifier of a pre-existing crisis did so with diction indicative of their passion for educating all students. Sloan stated:

> There was a crisis in education before the frickin’ pandemic came along. I don’t know why people are acting like inequity all of a sudden is new: ‘Oh, the people who don’t have money can’t get education through the internet.’ Well, duh! They needed the internet before.

The frustration with what leaders viewed as an apparent issue of equity is evidenced by the sarcastic statement made to mock an ignorant individual who had a recent epiphany about students in poverty:

“Oh, the people who don’t have money can’t get education through the internet.” Leaders who see COVID as a spotlight perceived the crisis as a general lack of concern for students who cannot access education and whose needs are not being equitably met.

Students who did not have prior access to educational resources because they did not have internet, computers, etc., were finally considered. Needs were marginalized but now had center stage. Jamison added to the “disservice of so many students” that “what makes [the crisis] sad is we didn’t really do much about it; like it’s okay to let people who can’t learn and don’t have to continue to do that.” Leaders were disheartened by the pervasive attitude “to let them be” once the current and on-going crisis was so widely exposed. Two participants extended their thoughts on the crisis by asking rhetorically, “why isn’t the internet a standard public utility like gas or electric?” Leaders who discussed their role in terms of an “advocate” for education and their reason to lead as a desire to reach more students expressed deep disappointment in a lack of effort by the education system for not taking action to rectify the crisis of inequality.

COVID as a crisis devastated lives from all age groups both physically and mentally on many fronts and was tied to a range of emotions from anger and doubt to fear and sorrow. Also, by allowing participants to frame the pandemic as a crisis, I was able to better understand participant responses through Wooten and James’ (2008) idea that “crisis leadership demands an integration of skills, abilities, and traits that allow a leader to plan for, respond to, and learn from crisis events” (p. 353).

Emergent Themes

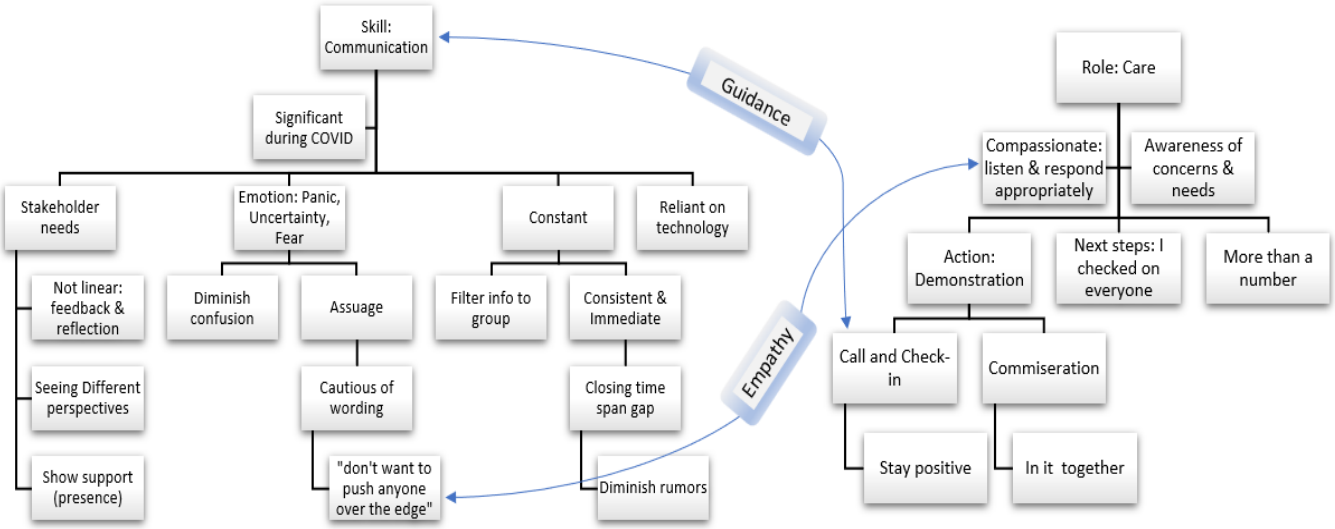
The identification of themes emerged through a three-step coding process from the data: interviews, questionnaires, and documents (principal weekly highlights and leadership meeting agendas). Throughout data collection, a journal was kept to document reflection after interviews, biases as they were uncovered, and notes on the case context. Once transcripts were initially coded, time was

dedicated to journaling about the codes and sorting codes according to similarity. The process was duplicated for the teacher questionnaire and the obtained documents. Transcripts and codes were reviewed for saturation. At this point there were 357 codes sorted into ten groups. Once again, time was spent journaling at which point themes emerged.

To further illustrate this process, *communication* became a recurring motif as participants discussed the most important skills during the pandemic in addition to the discourse surrounding care and concerns for teachers, students, and the community. Time was spent journaling about the sections of transcript coded as and related to *communication* in Dedoose. Figure 3 is the visual representation of the connections made between codes.

Figure 3

Coding: Communication and Care



The following analysis describes the five emergent themes presented in the context of the case, the COVID pandemic: communication, care, decision-making, trauma and stress, well-being, growth, and the new normal. As the themes emerged, it became clear that participant feelings were not always consistent across themes. For instance, concepts within a given theme may manifest in other themes as contradictions. Nonetheless, the analysis seeks to provide understanding and distinction for each theme

apart from another. Contradictions should be viewed as an artifact of the crisis itself. Participant quotes are provided to exemplify and substantiate the themes. They were chosen because they represent the majority of participant responses and maintain participants' anonymity.

Communication: Beyond Information

The language surrounding the idea of communication became evident during interviews while discussing what skills leaders felt to be valuable during the pandemic; however, communication was further discussed while asking participants how they showed care to stakeholders.

At the start of the pandemic, communication was primarily informative. Several participants laughed at their assumption school would resume in two weeks once the announcement to close was made since little was known about the coronavirus. The principal's weekly highlights even used the phrase "temporary normal" six days after school closed. However, once quarantine was extended in the early spring of 2020, leadership began having intentional meetings to answer seemingly basic questions regarding monitoring teaching and learning that no longer had simple answers. "We kept thinking, 'this could be bad if we have no structure,'" Ryan recalled. "I needed to communicate with the teachers on a consistent basis. They were at home, they didn't know what was going on, and I would filter information to them on Zoom™," Blake adds. Leaders used terms such as "middle management" to describe their role because they did not have answers to the multitude of questions. As supported by meeting agenda documentation, all participants identified the communication process: gather questions from teachers, meet to discuss and answer what questions they could, pass questions they could not answer to the district-level leaders, and ensure consistency when communicating back to the teachers. School leadership became conveyors of information—initially the primary purpose of communication; a go-between or liaison for teachers and district-level leadership.

Consistent and immediate communication was identified as one of the many challenges significant to a crisis for reducing rumors and protecting well-being. On March 12, 2020, leaders communicated at a faculty meeting the closing of school Friday the 13th and for everyone to "get prepared," Blake recalled. However, there were already rumors. Kai added, "I think just being this large of a district, people get information at different times. Like even some things that we would think the principals would know before we start to hear the noise sometimes, the principals don't know." Jamison expressed disappointment at being unable to provide teachers with more detailed information about school closing in 2020. They felt humiliated at first hearing the news and rumors from students: "I felt like we looked silly." Several teachers mentioned, "it frequently felt like the public and students knew more about what was happening than I did; it was not a good feeling."

To combat the "noise" during the pandemic, leaders worked to reduce the time between sharing information with staff and then sharing information with the community. One leader noted that the local school was notified about a COVID-related decision in 2021 "maybe 30 minutes" before the community, whereas the gap was larger before the pandemic.

The language surrounding communication also resonates with feelings of camaraderie and empathy because teachers were not the only ones "desperate for information." Sloan shares: "I was trying to talk to anybody I could find, and nobody really had [information] to give. And that's challenging as a leader, to not have information to share." Sloan commiserated with teachers looking for "solid ground," referring to a need for clear and immediate communication because leading without information is "scary." Without quick, timely communication, Sloan concluded, "you feel like you're leading into nowhere." Dylan illustrated a similar point through a boat analogy:

> We’re just in this boat, and we got one oar, and we just keep going in a circle. We’re going to straighten out eventually, but right now we’re not and we’ve just got to keep moving and go for it.

Despite feelings of uncertainty and hopelessness, leaders continued to utilize email, text message, and Zoom ™ communication to provide guidance using any prior knowledge of teaching and learning, and more so to “check-in” and “be available.” Ultimately, as Ryan iterates, compassion is shown through communication and “being able to listen and respond appropriately...not letting everyone become just a number in this situation,” referring to COVID pandemic.

The connection of communication to feelings of concern was further evidenced by participants connecting stakeholder emotions of panic, uncertainty, and fear to communication efforts. Statements such as “everybody was in a panic,” “there was so much speculation,” and “so many felt the sky was falling” are indicative of participants understanding the climate in which they led. Dylan noted being “hesitant” and cautious about the wording of emails to faculty because “everyone was struggling.” For some participants, communication was a “fine line” between providing guidance and showing concern “because you didn’t want to push people over the edge” (Dylan). Other participants worked to assuage the panic and fear through communication. Sloan expressed efforts to provide transparency and assurance in communication mentioning, “if I was hearing things off the record, I would say, ‘nothing I’ll put in an email, but this is what I’m hearing.’”

Teachers reiterated the “crucial” importance of communication in their responses using phrases such as “it was vital to hear from administration regularly” and “on an island at your house, it gave a sense of ‘team’ amid isolation.” Teachers also connected the communication received from school leaders to personal feelings of value and worth. Communication efforts were “key support” for teachers struggling to cobble together a digital learning environment that upheld the high standards of education

at Central High. Leaders acknowledged “that the situation was not normal,” and teachers felt valued because leaders “cared... and that was more important than the information.”

However, a few outlier respondents did feel there was a “lack of communication” because “so much information was left out when decisions/ directives were given to teachers.” Whether or not statements are accurate, the perception is a revelation of valid beliefs about communication and further supports the role and need for communication during the case.

Care: The Crux of the Matter

Interview questions aimed to understand the crisis experience and hence, the roles and purposes of school leaders. Embedded throughout, responses during the interviews revealed care as a core function during the pandemic. Leaders discussed the provision of care as tantamount to, if not a driving force, or at the heart of other job requirements such as monitoring grade books, teacher observations, professional learning, and discipline. While discussing various roles or responsibilities, one participant included, “I had to check grade books weekly and then I had to send emails, but I wouldn’t be like, ‘Hey! I sent you an email and it said this and this; you’re not showing me that you’re doing that.’ I didn’t want to be negative.”

Care was also evident in the handling of safety and discipline. Jordan shared about having to revise protocols and matrices (a tool or rulebook educational leaders use to guide decisions) to keep everyone safe, “and the rules kept changing.” Matrices were rewritten for areas such as band, athletics, and discipline. Responding to changes in discipline, one participant said, “Zoom™ bombers”, students who acted profanely in the digital classroom, “showed the human side...that people get so bored and creative.” It is of note that not every Zoom™ bomber was identified for discipline purposes. The response suggests that leaders understood the infraction in addition to leniency and care for the students.

Another demonstration of care at the core of leadership was in the suspension of teacher evaluations and professional development requirements during COVID because "there was no effective way to do it" and leaders "didn't want to overwhelm" teachers. Demonstrating the centrality of care in the function of leaders, Ryan concludes, "Parents called in tears because they lost loved ones, and they were concerned with how their child would have to still learn in those circumstances, and I realized I was prioritizing with compassion- everything I did."

Care and Perspective

Before asking participants *how did you demonstrate care,* leaders were asked *what skills did you find valuable, what surprised you during the pandemic,* and *in what way were you prepared or unprepared to lead?* Through this line of questioning, leaders focused their answers on the struggles they witnessed to illustrate skills, surprises, or preparedness. The struggles ranged from emotional hardships to logistical ones. Dylan spoke of the emotional and mental exhaustion: "Some teachers really were showing the struggle of being online." With a pained expression and cheerless tone, Ryan encapsulated the general sentiment of exhaustion they heard from stakeholders: "I don't like this life. I don't like this life."

Blake in agreement with Morgan and Dylan discussed the logistical or operational struggles noting teachers were trying to be innovative, to do more than "talk at students and a camera for 90 minutes; it was a lot for the teachers," but, he countered, "teachers didn't sign-up to be virtual teachers; so, they had no training." Blake added, "…and trying to engage kids whose cameras were off or pointing at their ceiling fan, and when the class was over there'd still be all these black boxes because [the students] weren't even there." In addition to the lack of technical training, responses further empathized with teachers struggling to conceptualize realistic expectations given the circumstances. Concerned, several leaders like Blake commented, "[teachers] couldn't let go of procedures and structures" and

connected the dissonance teachers were experiencing to the statement “teacher morale was low, really low.” Leaders were confounded and disheartened about teachers who were less receptive to relinquishing control over assignment due dates and struggled with student “apathy”. Referring to teachers, “I understand that they just felt like they couldn’t control anything that was going on around them...they forgot what was going on in these students’ lives, but to them, this was their classroom, and they could control this” (Blake).

Other participants acknowledged teachers’ struggle with fear and uncertainty, especially about returning to the brick-and-mortar school. People were divided over safety protocol and procedure such as wearing masks, “and people were getting in arguments over it and you had to enter the spectrum, right?” (Blake). Some teachers refused to enter the building unless they were provided clear partitions or the ability to partition classroom desks; some teachers called human resources inquiring about Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and others considered retirement (Morgan).

However, while leaders were identifying these fears, teachers wrote comments countering the leaders’ responses expressing the idea of not being cared for “during the pandemic, or ever”. One teacher wrote, “they didn’t care about my safety. They just wanted a warm body.” Another such response iterated, “No one cared about health... teachers were expected to go above and beyond because we are ‘teachers,’” implying that teachers are expendable. While seemingly a blip on the radar in this case study, the conversation surrounding school policy and mandates for school-wide safety intersects feelings of personal choice and liberty. Leaders did not share personal feelings except to say “a continuum of thoughts” existed; rather, leadership focused “a lot of discussion and compromise” on the divisive issue creating acrimonious feelings and fission so extensive teachers considered using FMLA or buying years for early retirement.

Another struggle identified was the teacher who had small children having to juggle teaching online and helping their own children learn at home. Jamison empathized with those in this position: “how awful that would have been for me as a student because my parents would have been incapable.” Ashley imagined having to maintain both roles and, in a parent's voice talking to a child, exclaimed, “Forget it! We’re just gonna read some books and go play in the backyard.” Essentially, leaders, being parents themselves, understood the stress and predicament in which COVID placed teachers who were simultaneously teacher and parent because they too were experiencing the tension and stress of a digital learning environment.

Care and Concern

Through expression of concern and empathy for teachers and students, leaders expressed a worry or fear of loss—be it teacher/leader attrition or loss in the form of brokenness in teachers and students. Sloan recalled a conversation with a teacher “sharing how broken they felt...like losing their love for teaching and losing their passion and really feeling like they don’t want to do it anymore.” Micah, who has fewer than ten years until retirement, empathized with the younger teachers: “I don’t know if I would have continued teaching.” “I’m surprised we didn’t lose more teachers,” Kai reflected while defining the pandemic as a time of personal testing and orienting of priorities. Also worried about losing teachers, Sloan worked to emphasize the importance “to stay the course and to not dwell in the frustration” as encouragement. Regarding students, Ashley, who prides themself on building relationships, “knew that some kids didn’t need to be locked in their house every day, all the time... I didn’t know what was going on in their world.” Leaders were at a loss since they could no longer engage with individuals within the walls of Central High. Their statements showed that they emotionally ached and worried for those with whom they could no longer converse. Even once students were fully back to school in the fall of 2021, Blake recalls, “I remember walking down the hall and the number of kids that

would spontaneously start bursting out in tears—because they were so stressed and anxious. Yeah—it was overwhelming."

Furthermore, Charlie acknowledged the frustration and worry surrounding academic rigor and test scores during the pandemic and worked to help teachers reframe their thinking: "Let's worry more about having these kids with us on the other side." Charlie believed teachers and leaders "had to reprioritize," shift their focus away from academic rigor and toward emotional well-being because they wanted to ensure "that when [students] came back, they weren't completely different people." Leaders were concerned about the emotional state of students and having to reteach them normal school behaviors once they did return; they were also concerned with teachers who were maladjusting. For instance, according to interviews, some teachers accepted what they could control recognizing they could not control the students' use of "Dr. Google" to cheat. However, some teachers "took a hard-nosed approach" and gave students "five seconds to answer each question, and why?" As expressed, part of the challenge in caring for all stakeholders is the varying perspectives and expression of equitable attention required of leadership.

Care and Action

At this point, leaders were asked *how did you demonstrate your care?* Reacting to the demands of a school in crisis and the worries of stakeholders, leaders described their role of leading as an actionable expression of care. In other words, the act of care was viewed as a demonstration of leadership. Most leaders began sharing their method of providing care by identifying personal strengths and talents they possessed prior to the pandemic, which Charlie likened to a pop quiz. They said, "Life usually tests you with a pop quiz. You can't study... You just got to be prepared when it shows up and you fall back on the skills you have, right?"

Leaders who considered their strength, or one strength, to be “relational support” and empathy discussed caring for teachers and students by being present, available, and understanding. Dylan stated, “I don’t know so much that I led as I was a [person] teachers could go to, and unload, and I wouldn’t hold it against them... like everyone has bad days.” Similarly, Lee mentioned they “had to be so flexible during that time and just listen to people where they’re at and have to be understanding.” There were “massive text chains: how’s it going? What do you need? What hurts right now? How can I help? - It was almost 100% support,” Charlie reflects. Ashley invited a team of teachers to an outdoor gathering with “prepackaged snacks” to connect and share their experiences because the closing of school was “so abrupt that you didn’t realize where your work people were.” Empaths and relational-support leadership emphasize social-emotional support and creating camaraderie to combat potential feelings of isolation and fragmentation.

Others depended upon a flexible nature to demonstrate care. “I have a natural inclination to try new things and see if it works. And if it doesn’t, I’ll say, ‘my bad’ and we’ll go a different direction,” Charlie said about supporting a cornerstone program amidst changing state health regulations in an unprecedented educational environment. Sloan cared for stakeholders by relying “on what had worked in the past and tried to be open to different types of conversations” implying a willingness to try a new or different approach on a given issue. Ashley spoke of a flexible nature and shared conversations to encourage a similar frame of mind in stakeholders saying, “everything’s not super important.” In August 2020, one participant (pseudonym withheld) reflected on the principal saying, “I don’t want to put a lot of emphasis on where you are. I just need you to [teach] wherever you are. You could be on the rooftop.” This participant explained that this illustrated care through flexibility because leadership understood the complex emotions and needs of the faculty. Repeatedly throughout interviews, flexibility was a skill that “comes to the forefront during COVID” (Ryan), which Lee sums up: “...you had to take

it day by day because it was almost a free pass... you still have to set some requirements and some non-negotiables, but you'd have to be flexible and understand that it's still not traditional." Lee, like other leaders, discussed flexibility in terms of "going with the flow more" and stepping "outside the box and [taking] risks."

Some participants demonstrated care by focusing on analytical and "problem-solving" skills." Mentioning people in overwhelming situations due to COVID, Blake "took initiative" to help "take a little bit off everybody's plate and assisted with situations requiring logical judgement: scheduling, organizing the graduation parade, and planning for laptop and textbook distribution. Morgan, whose leadership style also includes modeling, identified a growing concern with students' virtual attendance and made house visits "because I wanted [students and parents] to know that we knew and cared. I took hotspots out to students who said they didn't have internet and made sure they could connect." Likewise, Jamison recalled taking computers to students living in less technologically supported communities, so they could access school prior to the district's one-to-one initiative that began in the Fall of 2021. Ashley also recalled working to identify families without computers and finding individuals with monetary means to fund devices. They shook their head, "can't just wave this wand and transform without thinking about all of these pieces," alluding to the rapid transition to virtual education without considering the nuances involved in running a successful program.

Care: Merging Analysis and Empathy

By October 2020, students were given the option to either attend school in-person or virtually, called "hybrid teaching," using the district's new digital learning platform to streamline instruction district-wide. Adjusting to –and surviving- another COVID crisis shift, leaders discussed care encapsulating both empathy and analysis. Supported by the principal's weekly highlights, contact tracing protocol and procedure were also parts of the daily routine causing students and teachers to

quarantine for ten days. Leaders were required to gather detailed seating charts from every class to help ensure the proper execution of COVID health policy. Charlie remembers a student in tears because of contact tracing protocol; she was sent home a day after returning to school for the same reason. While leaders systematically followed protocol, they concurrently were distressed for the anxious and dispirited students needing to be at school yet gambling with the odds of being contact traced. “And the nurse, poor nurse, you know, how is she still upright?” shaking their head incredulously, one paused to empathize remembering all the school nurse did to track COVID cases throughout the school while expressing “how incredibly surprised I was by how unprepared we were” as a district.

Leadership further combined analytical skills with an ability to demonstrate emotional care through strategic decisions. Morgan noted the environment made obtaining substitute teachers a challenge, and they remember suggesting “[leadership] to cover classes as much as possible. It was already tough enough for the teachers.” They continue, “we went and taught classes when a teacher couldn’t be there. She was teaching [from home via Zoom™] and I was facilitating the class for the ones who were there [face-to-face],” requiring the logistical leader to employ empathy. “It felt like [asking them to cover for another teacher] was punishing them for coming into the building,” another shared about modeling leadership. “I’m not going to ask teachers to do something I’m not willing to do” was a common sentiment for those who self-identified their leadership style as modeling.

Additionally, the class coverage was also done in response to teachers afraid of contracting COVID by going into another’s classroom; teachers and students needed to know “we cared for their health and safety.” Leaders stocked all classrooms with masks, gloves, disinfectant, and paper towels to further support a healthy environment and alleviate worry. They provided clear desk partitions for teachers who made the request. All while striving to understand varying perspectives, leaders worked to

support teachers and students with the minutia of digital learning, the act of caring through leadership, using seemingly contradictory forms.

Care and Demeanor

Maintaining a calm demeanor and light spirit was also associated with providing care. Like Dylan and Jordan, Blake expressed a need to have stakeholders know "it's going to be okay" and "I had to show them... and make sure that anytime I talked to anyone that I was really calm." Ryan mentioned "being very calm" as a valuable skill during COVID, and Jordan said, "I had to learn how to be a calm spirit for everybody" while talking about decision-making and handling situations that involved collaborating with others. "But it's so true that leaders can get frantic and chaos can happen, but you have to just have an 'OK, let's take a deep breath' and see how we can maneuver."

Several participants also associated humor with creating a calm environment and smiled at the memory of a "virtual fire drill" leadership scheduled during a virtual faculty meeting in 2020. Charlie mentioned teachers who went through the motions of a fire drill, and while remaining on camera, they evacuated their homes with children and pets in hand to their own backyards; "we wanted to make light of what we couldn't control to help us get through it," Ryan adds. Another participant alluded to the skills of levity and serenity by metaphorically comparing a crisis to a fire saying, "...you have a bucket of gasoline and a bucket of water, and you get to decide what you pour on to it." "Keeping everyone calm" was a recurring subject perceived by teachers. One said the best advice from leadership was "kids will be fine—it will be OK," suggesting a reframing or mental shift in their perceptions of the pandemic-an aspect of coping.

Care and Trust

Through acts of service and other means of care, leaders hoped to build trust. Blake, who identified a strength in building relationships, suggested that dependability and "follow through" as an

integral partner with trust during a crisis: “I needed to make sure they could tell me how they’re feeling, and I would get an answer for them.” Charlie discussed care as analogous to building a bridge:

> Sometimes we put up walls.... We don’t want anyone to see we have flaws, that we make mistakes, or that we don’t know.... What we started doing as leaders...was building bridges. We were pushing walls over and building bridges based on trust.

Charlie elaborated, discussing the willingness and importance for leaders and teachers to be transparent and honest with personal struggles during the pandemic to eliminate the sense of isolation. The idea of being transparent to demonstrate care and build trust was also expressed by Jordan who used phrases such as “treating people right” and “being up front” in association with “people want to know they can approach a leader and that you’re human.” Although extensive conversation encircling trust was not present in interviews, the kinship of trust and care was emphasized and defined as the intangible that bonds (“bridges”) stakeholders together.

According to Kai, teachers provided feedback to leaders regarding a lack of transparency; Kai worried, “you address everything and share all the information you can because if you don’t, then it’s hard to trust.” Cognizant of trust’s relationship with care, Jordan discussed “building bridges” by going beyond telling teachers “I don’t know.” Jordan mentioned “trying to work the problem and learn” to support and provide a potential answer. For Jordan, the action was about “being humble” and creating trust because people know “I’m open and honest and transparent as much as I could...”

Several responses also indicated “it felt good” to trust the teachers and students to be responsible “to do what they’re supposed to do.” Once the building was reopened for teachers in August 2020, leadership provided teachers with flexibility to choose on a day-to-day basis whether to continue teaching from home or to return to the building. Regarding leadership’s decision to extend trust and flexibility, Ryan remarked, “rules weren’t everything when people’s lives were on the line.” Also noted

was a remembrance of feedback from teachers “who felt like I was reasonable” further affirming “knocking over walls,” or care as an extension of trust, results in being trusted.

Sharing ideas about their perspective on *the role of the leaders* and *the best thing leaders did*, teachers commented upon the receipt of or perceived lack of care contrasting the narrative leaders provided. Teachers referred to the care they received as “inconsistent” and “out of touch with teachers in the trenches.” They felt leaders “did not seem trustworthy" and “didn’t understand (or really care to) what we were dealing with on a daily basis.” One teacher wrote, “We wanted nothing more than affirmation. We wanted our district leaders and school leaders to just come in the room and say, ‘You’re doing great, what do you need?’” Yet, other teachers at Central High provided starkly contrasting statements saying that “care seemed to be a great concern” and “they put their trust in us...and I felt important and valued.” “I remember the leaders coming around almost weekly with small treats...It helped create a feeling of community.”

Decision-making: Method to the Madness

The theme of decision-making was found interlaced in conversation surrounding communication and care. Wanting to more clearly understand what decision-making was for leaders, I asked, d*uring a crisis, what importance would you place on decision-making?* For most leaders, decision-making was critical and a constant source of stress. Leaders believed decision-making to be the “heaviest, weightiest of roles” and “a whole lot of anxiety” because, as Ryan elaborated, “everybody’s tying the outcome [of the decision] to the crisis.”

During interviews, leaders illuminated the nature of decision-making. While no clear timeframe was provided aside from “not at the beginning,” Central High School’s leaders began to gain greater control over local school decisions. Leaders said decisions were more collaborative, especially concerning health and safety. “We would sit in team meetings and talk about ‘what do we think is safe

for our kids, our teachers, what do we want to communicate to our parents because you don't want to over-communicate" (Jordan). "You have to be collaborative; you couldn't do it in isolation," Lee shared examples of complex decisions leaders need to make about closing "the gaps created by the pandemic" in both learning and employment: needing teachers to cafeteria workers and bus drivers. Regarding collaborative decision-making during COVID, one participant made the analogy to pie: "everyone brought something, everyone will put a little bit of ingredient in, we stir it up and then we put it in the oven and bake it, and for us, it came out pretty decent."

Interestingly, the concept of "micro versus macro" leadership appeared in several interviews concerning decision-making, although a unifying consensus about the idea was not fully present. Jamison said they "had to become a macro leader" because they had to consider "what it looks like for everyone on a larger scale" and provided illustrations of scheduling virtual office hours and realizing the impact on teachers and students concerning time sitting in front of a computer. While discussing whether they were prepared to lead during the pandemic, Morgan said, "I rarely look at just the microcosm" when making decisions. They continue, "I'm looking at the whole picture, and I think that helps me lead." They then illustrated taking time to visualize schedules and "what a school day would look like for a child" in the virtual setting.

Jordan, however, varied in their approach to making decisions and solving problems: "Let's not look at the big totality; identify the problem, and every problem on each [student] screen is going to be different. Having that human element is a challenge, and we just have to work each challenge separately." Jordan was not negating the macro leadership approach to decision-making, instead, they added the necessity to look at individual stories and situations when making decisions. Ashley illustrated the importance of considering the nuances within the decision (the micro), expressing that some macro-level decisions were made too quickly such as the school's first laptop distribution. Teaching and

learning in the fall of 2020 began via the district's virtual platform, and to get devices into students' hands, the school issued available laptops and tablets. At this, Ashley thoughtfully questioned, "do we even know where the laptops are at?" and "how are we gonna get them back?"

Along with the gravity and nature of decision-making, leaders utilized terms such as "stressful, pressure, comparison, and second-guessing" to illustrate the impact. Ryan and Lee remarked on the pressure placed upon leaders in decision-making because they saw their choices influence stakeholder perception and dialogue. "All eyes are on the leadership" and "leaders are judged by the outcome" were phrases they used. Early in the interview, while defining the pandemic as a crisis, Ryan interjected, "Crisis in every way… and I felt like my leadership during that time was backbone. You have to have a backbone just to be able to get through the next thing" followed by examples of difficult decisions they made. Jamison reflected on a challenging interaction with a teacher who "created so many problems" for one group of teachers: "Dang it! I probably shouldn't have done that in hindsight, but then I went, 'No! I absolutely should have!'" because their decision protected the group's culture. Jordan, fearful of making a mistake, also mentioned second-guessing decisions "and parents poking holes in everything because people didn't agree."

The complex nature of the crisis compounded anxiety surrounding the difficulty and exponential rise of decisions. COVID was so new that "the rules kept changing," as Jorden noted earlier. The policy fluctuation caused "so many decisions to be made in real-time," and the appropriate decision in one moment was inappropriate for the next. Likewise, Ryan expressed that one's "understanding impacts crisis perceptions and future decisions." Nonetheless, Lee expressed "frustration" in the decision-making process and began drawing circles in the air saying, "there was a lot of talk in circles...and it drove me crazy because...we wasted a bunch of time," adding, "it took us like ten meetings" to complete a single document. Jordan laughed as in disbelief and shook his head, "We had to think so critically;

play devil's advocate. We joke about it, but every sentence, every piece of tape that was put on the ground was analyzed. Then you second guess yourself as a leader." The tape on the ground is reference to directional arrows leaders placed around the building to help with social distancing and traffic flow once the building was open for students opting to return in October 2020.

Also, as several stated like Lee, "you don't know what you don't know" to imply decisions were made with the best available information. Leaders understood they "had to be really forgiving" of changes in decisions being made in relation to the changing environment. In a similar vein, Lee adds leaders needed to be "flexible and understanding" because "you had to take it day by day" as a guide for decision-making during a crisis.

Five teachers identified *making timely and quick decisions* as the critical function of crisis leadership; they commented in the questionnaire that they "followed and respected [leadership's] decisions" and identified leaders creating a safe work environment. Furthermore, these few expressed appreciation for the manner leaders handled concerns and sent timely emails of protocol changes. However, the majority placed little emphasis on the importance of leaders as decision-makers but rather upon the information resulting from the decisions. Most identified *informing about procedure changes and expectations* as the critical function of crisis leadership. Being informed was "essential when most things were pretty uncertain." Teachers in this group expressed appreciation for "flexibility" and "did not feel pressure to accomplish specific goals." Similar comments stating leaders "let me be," "never pressured," and "little oversight" were found alongside comments of receiving information about "safety for students and teachers," "grading protocols," and "fulfill needs." One individual succinctly wrote about their experience with leadership during the pandemic: "very flexible- little to no emphasis on concrete decisions."

Trauma and Stress

The duration of time and circumstances in which leaders used technology for communication, provided continual care, and made a myriad of decisions resulted in their own emotional stress and trauma. I asked participants to *tell me about the guidance/ support you received?* to understand the perceived stress and trauma. Most leaders paused at this moment to reflect and then provided general answers such as "I don't know if there was so much guidance or support or if it was all of us meeting for decisions," "we leaned on each other as a community," and "lots of, lots of meetings, but I have to respect that their guidance was skewed because even district leaders didn't know what to do." "There was no guidance," Micah stated, "it was more of a commiserating of 'yeah, this sucks.'" Dylan added, clarifying the lack of detailed guidance, "we weren't given an A-B-C-D; it was more like here, figure it out." However, most leaders that agreed were also quick to mention the district as a whole, "Of course, we couldn't have seen it coming, but we certainly weren't prepared...and we're still figuring it out." Another said, "I don't think [the district] could have done a better job, but realistically, they could have thought through some things" and made the analogy to a brand-new 6-speed manual Maserati (an expensive high-performance sports car). They said the support and guidance were like giving someone the keys to a Maserati without understanding if the recipient knew how to drive a vehicle with a manual transmission.

Also, leaders were asked to *tell me about the guidance/ support you provided?* Although a few leaders noted the provision of reassurance, clarification, and resources, such as how-to video links, others shared feelings of uncertainty. Sloan admitted, "I wasn't sure how… like should I be going to people's houses? Should I be dropping things off in their mailbox as encouragement?" and reflectively adding, "I wasn't sure how to lead other than be a model." "People expect you to know everything. Sometimes you may not have the answer, but I'm gonna listen to your concerns," Jordan said specifying

their own uncertainty. Several mentioned “just checking-in" by “blowing-up a lot of text messages” for encouragement to “say you’re doing a great job,” to alleviate anxiety, and to show care and concern for individuals.

Others admitted not being “as supportive as I could have been” saying, “I felt like a complete failure, I wasn’t enjoying a job I used to love, and it was so hard to help others when I was working through my own stuff.” The struggle in providing support was “balance.” Leaders were “glad to be there to listen,” and mentioned working at “keeping [their] sanity,” sharing both sentiments within the same thought. Most leaders depended upon communication to show care though there was doubt about the best support to provide during the unprecedented environment. There weren’t any rules or individuals guiding leaders on best practices. Leaders also struggled with their sense of well-being and did not feel capable of supporting or guiding others when they did not clearly grasp personal stress and trauma.

After leaders reflected on guidance and support, they were asked to share *how did your care and concern for others impact you?* and whether they *would describe the pandemic as stressful or traumatic?* Also, participants furthered the discussion of stress and trauma when asked whether they felt *capable of handling the crisis?* With respect to trauma, replies centered around loss and feelings of helplessness or being overwhelmed by the pandemic evidenced by emotionally charged phrases, “survive without a paycheck,” “no one could help us get out of the struggle,” and “lost children, lost parents, and lost confidence.” Others shared that their personal trauma resulted from feeling their expertise was undervalued “and that took a big toll.” Even those who did not personally associate with trauma did so empathetically: “Traumatic? What does that mean? That’s a big word to attach to myself compared to what other people have experienced- much worse than my own. I don’t know if it was traumatic; it was a defining moment” (Sloan). Micah along with Sloan further emphasized empathy with trauma: “people are now having the courage to leave education because it traumatized them in so many

ways; they lost confidence in a system they thought worked." "If I were still a young teacher, I don't know if I would have continued; It's hard to mentor teachers right now when I'm like 'yeah, I get it. I would find something else too.'" Conceptually and comparatively, trauma was a difficult part of the conversation because leaders whose spouses did not lose a paycheck or did not experience the loss of loved ones due to COVID struggled to associate themselves with trauma. Rather leaders compared themselves to those who did and distanced themselves from the concept. Yet, regardless of personal loss, some leaders easily sympathized with the magnanimity of the global trauma caused by the coronavirus and experienced a vicarious trauma magnifying their emotional suffering.

Moreover, while participants were divided on their view of trauma, everyone related to stress. "There were days I went home and cried- the stress was terrible, but that is part of the job," Morgan responded, adding a level of acceptance and willingness to endure the stress. Part of the stress leaders expressed was having to send children home for safety and health protocol and feeling helpless because the student wanted to be at school. Morgan, like Charlie, shared a story of a student who became frustrated and, after staying home for a month, decided to stay and attend virtually. Morgan recounted the conversation with the student who said, "I'm tired of coming back, and then the day after I'm back from my ten days, I get home for a second ten days, and then come back a week later. And I'm being sent home again today for a third." They continued, "so I didn't like making the phone calls. I didn't want to be the one to get a phone call as a parent, but I didn't want to do that. So tremendously stressful." Leaders endeavored to make sense of their stress through experiences and other emotions, such as frustration, hopelessness, and isolation. Jordan said, "I was not prepared for not being able to assist a student when they didn't have any resources... It was frustrating...feeling kind of hopeless in that situation." Leaders conveyed frustration in tandem with the lack of foresight or infrastructure before

COVID equating the experience to “flying a plane while building it,” a phrase used by multiple participants in exasperation.

Dylan claimed anyone who entered the field of education is “already a people-person” and shared, “I had a hard time” realizing “I’m missing something- it's hanging out with the kids. I miss high-fiving kids.” The idea of having a “hard time” was peppered throughout interviews and most of the time iterated with exasperated looks and a heaviness to their words; such phrases used were “It was taxing,” “It’s killing me,” “I was losing my mind,” and even “I just couldn’t deal with it.” One participant admitted to feeling emotionally isolated and burdened: “I didn’t feel like I could talk to anyone because I didn’t want to add to their stress. People were there to come to me and give me their stress.”

Since everyone was either quarantined or practicing social distancing, social gatherings dwindled away during the pandemic. People were at home, and the stress participants experienced at home was due to “boundaries between work and family were being blurred.” Micah said, “my day seemed to never stop” while sharing they were “constantly at the computer.” Moreover, at least half of the participants had children, and some began to cry while sharing the stress of watching their own children struggle. They spoke of their children going “downhill” and fighting “depression” or becoming “emotionally shutdown.” One participant cried at the thought of their child telling them, “I don’t want to be here,” meaning at home, “and I was helpless- I couldn’t fix that.” Ultimately, “there’s only so much mental health you can deal with before you have to worry about your own” (Dylan). Stress for the leaders was compounded because work and home boundaries were blurred in addition to shouldering the stress of colleagues and family members at a time void of solution; leaders were incapacitated to fix the problem even for their own children.

Teachers acknowledged, “We had some really beautiful people as leaders at the high school who did the absolute best they could when they weren’t completely drowning.” “It felt like everyone kind of

gave up," another wrote. Teachers witnessed the gamut of leadership, and responses indicated recognition of the struggle to lead and cope.

Coping and Well-being

To understand coping mechanisms and how participants strove to regain a sense of well-being, I asked *how did your experience with trauma/ stress during the crisis impact you?* and *how did you manage the stress or do to work through the trauma?* Ryan, taking on a confessional tone, indicated the loss of well-being, "I felt like the fire was being pulled out of who I was born to be" and questioned their effectiveness as a leader; "I'm just dim as a leader." To protect themself, Ryan said, "I placed [my feelings on the quality of education] in a little area that was...safe and secret" knowing they would eventually return to lead teaching and learning; although, "I wonder if it made my leadership less- like I wasn't doing a good job." Creating a protective mental space was significant for coping and involves "forgiving" and "grace". Receipt of encouraging and positive feedback assisted in coping with the stress and trauma and recovering well-being; as Ryan stated, "to have reassurances, you know, like maybe I'm not losing my fire" was just as vital for leaders as it was for teachers.

Leaders like Micah and Sloan created a semblance of separation by "powering off the computer at 4 o'clock" and enacting a commute home "even if it was just to get in the car and drive around the block and unwind as on a normal drive home." Leaders also created a semblance of separation between "workspace and family space" by literally sequestering work in one room and "closing the office door" at the end of the workday. Ryan notes, "it was tough to switch those hats in that same space." The trauma and stress due to the imbalance and merger of home and work resulted in mental deterioration, which the creation of a deliberate mental separation of time and space enabled leaders to better cope. Dylan shared about care, "when you do it so much, it wears on you. So, I would go to a parking lot and

sit there, turn my car off, and try to deal with it because, you know, one week we're doing this, one week we're doing that."

Reliance upon connections was another coping method for improved well-being. Participants expressed gratitude for family connections and time to bond. Statements such as "I wouldn't have made it if it weren't for my spouse" and playing board games during family night were "a way to reduce stress." A necessity to maintain friendships was likewise an essential connection that illustrated the need for interaction outside of the home to alleviate stress: "Safe friends" was "a pact" between families agreeing only to socialize with each other. A few leaders also discussed spiritual connections whose response to coping methods was "pray; I'm a praying person," and "as I saw them getting more and more stressed, it was more prayers," referring to teachers and students. In addition to mental coping, leaders navigated the stress emotionally and physically.

Activity created feelings of normalcy and emotional separation from stress. Personal time alone walking or hiking outdoors was a commonality. Leaders did not discuss walks or hikes as a time of reflection, only as a time "just to be outside by myself, listen to music and just kind of chill out for a second" (Lee). Leaders physically removed or distanced themselves from a location associated with stress- a symbolic point of origin from which stress radiates. One participant (pseudonym withheld) mimicked their dogs' imagined voice, implying the desired frequency and extent of activity: "They were so tired of walking they were like "Girl, stop! You know, we're good," leading them to also realize, "I needed company." Others like Sloan scheduled "movement for 30 minutes a day with a podcast" mingling the mind and body in their coping activity. Sloan said the coupling was "really crucial... and taking something in that was helping me learn or grow." Others made the activity about purchasing a home or home renovation, to create a sense of newness and "excit[ment] to come out of my survival

home” gave a sense of “stability”. Others acknowledged the negative effect of social media and deleted accounts, an action to further protect the mind.

Although leaders did not solely focus on escapism and denial as a primary coping mechanism, a few outliers included phrases such as “easy to pretend it didn’t happen” inferring at times leadership wished to turn a blind eye, as the adage goes, along with “I did binge watch Netflix™”. One leader, who shall remain anonymous due to the uniqueness of the experience, shared a story about creating a backyard “vacation with sand and ambient ocean sounds” for family and “safe friends” as a place to connect and escape reality with chairs placed six feet apart: “I’d walk out and towel over my shoulder just like I was on a beach. There’s just something about putting toes in the sand.” Jamison said of escape, “I decompressed by ‘whew, I'm in my house and I'm watching trashy TV,’ and then I'm gonna go to bed and gonna do it again the next day. I was losing my mind; everybody was losing their mind.” The repetitive nature of each day during quarantine along with the isolation, made escaping an insufficient method for coping, although a place was had for denial and feigning ignorance.

For instance, the “beach” was not only intended for escaping, but also as a place to forge deeper connections with family and create memories. Another participant (pseudonym withheld) also utilized activity to connect and support physical and mental well-being “because it was Groundhog Day over and over again, I created a little group on Facebook™ of exercise: ‘let's all post and say what we're doing’ and…They're like ‘yeah, let's do it!’ You know, everybody craving just craving people—adults.” The Facebook™ group grew to 100 faculty members.

“Yeah, for surviving. Survival. It’s all about survival.” Interviews were conducted November 2022- January 2023, and at time of the interview Micah, as did the majority, disclosed, “I’m still recovering. Finally, I’m truly beginning to feel like I’m recovering.” In line with Lorente, Vera, and Peiró (2021), educational leaders shared survival stories using a variety of coping strategies to manage

trauma and stress. Again, the extent of the pandemic and the duration of time participants coped with the various traumas and stressors helps explain the expressed ideas of "survival" and "recovery". Leaders are only recently regaining a sense of well-being.

Growth

Interview questions addressed the idea of growth. I first asked participants to *tell me about a time when you saw the pandemic shaping you as a leader.* Participants were also asked specifically about change and growth; the question was prefaced, *crises have a way of highlighting areas in need of change and growth,* then participants were asked to *tell me about a time when an area of change or growth was highlighted for you.* "I don't think I've done a stellar job" was common initial sentiment in nearly all interviews, then responses diverged. Growth in patience and empathy was highlighted by Jordan saying, "patient with myself" as a particular area of growth and Dylan who now sees their empathic ability to have risen exponentially stated, "I thought I was really like at 99%… and then when the pandemic hit, I'm like 'Good god!' I'm like maybe 150% now." Kai claimed, "patience and forgiving" as areas of change, acknowledging a gained perspective knowing their personal situation could have been worse: "not everyone came out okay." Leaders in this arena also remarked about expectations "being realistic and not pushing too much- giving a lot of space," said Kai because "we are still in the midst of the crisis- of uncertainty still- trying to recover and find healing."

In a similar vein, others discussed growth in their ability to understand. "It reminded me of the importance of professional boundaries and being able to better appreciate people's choices. It created a more compassionate perspective for students and colleagues trying to understand where they are coming from; be more patient" (Sloan). Leaders who shared about growth in their understanding of "where other people are coming from" likewise shared of their own high expectations for themselves. Leaders such as Sloan and Blake admitted to holding others to the same demand for excellence to which they held

themselves and then through the crisis “realizing that people have different levels of what they can do professionally and personally. And that is not for me to make any judgement on.” Part of the growth in understanding was also stated as “learning to listen as a leader and not always have a plan or solution.” One participant added “involving more people in the decision-making process.”

Balance was another area of growth and change. “Balance. Big time” (Micah). Sloan added, “And now I’m choosing me over family and over students” to create balance in their priorities. Jordan reflected on the need for balance in a demanding profession: “Taking care of ourselves and…spending time for yourself, meditating, and just having moments to yourself to be whole. There are so many pieces to make a school run…and nobody knows those parts and it’s just like a roller coaster… [During the pandemic] I had to do what was best for my soul.” They recognized the inability to control people and their frustration: “they have to come at somebody.” Since Jordan saw their role to be one to absorb the negativity, and therefore recognized time for healing was necessary. Although recontextualizing the pandemic was discussed in coping, one leader included the concept as an area of growth and change stating, “learning how to reframe/ recontextualize bad situations is a helpful skill” suggesting a psychological rebalancing.

Resilience is also an area of growth though participants discussed the concept as a realization of aptitude or personal capacity. Micah said, “I guess I realize my own strength.” Morgan phrased resilience as “putting out fires” and saw their growth as “trial by fire” where they had to “push through” feeling as though they would now be “better prepared” for the next crisis. Charlie explained a mindset for their growth: “I contextualize things, bad things that happen to you as opportunities to grow rather than blaming the world for your problems…you can look around and go ‘this is no one’s fault.’ How we respond to this is going to define who we are as people. How we deal with this as an educational system is going to define who we are as a country.”

Teachers were asked *what changes in leadership have you noticed since March 2020?* Comments included "prioritizing mental health and well-being" of teachers and students and "more conversation about student well-being than rigor." Teachers noticed leaders being "more present, consistent, and visible." Others said leaders provide "more allowances for students" along with being "supportive of student failures/ not meeting expectations." Teachers felt leaders are "putting band-aids over large wounds with additional box checking," yet, leaders are also "more flexible" and "they offer more grace to teachers and students." These expressed changes range from appreciating the increased transparency or visibility of the leadership as well as disappointment at a perceived lack of accountability for students failing a course. Teachers appreciated the change in flexibility and grace but were disappointed by the "band-aids" or weak solutions to larger problems. Though several also indicated that they did not see any change in leadership, this is not indicative of poor leadership or a lack of growth or change. One individual added, "It is my opinion that the leadership did not change. Our leadership at [Central High School] is very strong and steady."

New Normal

Participants were asked *is there a new normal in education?* Leaders approached the answer differently, nonetheless, responses indicated feelings of disappointment and disillusionment. New normal was a hope in the beginning of the pandemic as well as a term labeling the interruption of normal education: "There is a new normal, but not what we wanted." Charlie woefully said, "What a great time for the county to restructure education; we had this opportunity to make it better." With a similar tone, Sloan answered, "I really felt like we were going to make a lot of change at the district level; I really believed foolishly that we're about to turn this thing on its head. But no conversations are being had about anything progressive." Answers hopeful for a dramatic restructuring of education were connected to ideas about the pandemic being a spotlight on the current crisis in education.

The new normal was an interruption and mental shift in instruction and accountability. Sloan called the pandemic "a seismic shift and how kids' behaviors changed in that year and a half of school being different." Students lost – they've lost the understanding of the "level of work that is required to be good at something and to learn a skill" (Jamison). Students were taught that they would be "bailed out," which created a new normal "we are battling" because as Sloan said, "we've given them cheat codes for the last two and a half years". Ryan shared feeling "surprised by the apathy" and use of "COVID as a scapegoat." After discussing "pushing through…until we can get back to whatever our normal is," Morgan reflected, "We still have parents who, just this week, have said that the reason my child is failing in class is because of what they didn't get two years ago. I don't know how long we can use that excuse."

Lee shared, noticing another behavioral shift, "more students bringing weapons into school" and "a ton of fights" because "they feel like they need to have something with them to protect them" as a direct result of the pandemic and "social media played a huge role in that too." Lee continued identifying "the parents want to say it's because of the social and emotional and the pandemic…Parents are using that as an escape route now."

Morgan spoke of a shift in what teachers expect of students who are not yet ready for the academic rigor that once was: "Like we have social emotional kid crises right now that we're not addressing. And no one is creating a new normal to help these kids out.…These kids suffered a lot of trauma, and there's no recognition; we're just mowing them over." Other leaders entered the conversation by saying, "Yes, there are pockets of kids who have significant gaps. I get that. I'm not trying to disregard that," and thus the struggle over the new normal is the balance between high expectations and understanding of low student performance. One side of the conversation argued the

need to maintain and return to high expectations and the other side argued the need to first address the social emotional state of the students.

The new normal is “changing the way we teach and instruct and lead kids; it’s changing what we do on the back end instead of changing what we do on the front end…Online school or other online tools is not helping us reframe and reshape what we need” (Sloan). Yet others claimed the new normal does not exist as Jordan asserted, “it is a push to return.” Micah stated, "We're pretending those years just did not happen... Just carried right on as if nothing happened even though we all know the system is broken.” All responses indicate leaders are disappointed by the accepted new normal, even dismissing the existence as nothing more than “a buzzword people are using to get through.” Lee dismissed the relevance of the term and suggested the idea was short-lived: “the new normal was a framework for doing asynchronous and synchronous work.” To which Dylan replied, “we are trying to find a baseline for normal” meaning the current state of education is metaphorically on uneven ground.

I further asked *what is the new normal for leaders?* Dylan spoke of the amalgam of leader strengths and a conscientious omission of weaknesses: “We all have good points, and from some principals, I’ve learned what not to do, and I’m like ‘you’re not getting into my spice bowl.’ Why can’t we take some really good things from Miss E., Mr. D, and Mr. C, sweep it into a big bowl and stir it up and say’ BAM!’?” Dylan was working to communicate the need for leaders to have a focused conversation and reflect over what worked during the crisis for future crisis preparedness and to become better all-around leaders for a new normal so “everyone wins.” Also, leaders discussed the normal expectation of “what else can you be doing?” Then Micah continued stating, “education can be your calling, but it isn’t your life. We need to stop that message.” The new normal also created a disconnect between leadership and the classroom: “If you haven’t been in the classroom in the last three years, don’t tell me about teaching” Ashley empathized taking on a teacher perspective. The classroom

environment is “really different” and “even the really good [leaders] don’t have any idea of how this all goes together,” Ashley elaborated. Leaders imagined the use of technology in the classroom, the “battle of the cell phone,” and “all the other variables.” Leaders may understand pedagogy, but “can’t relate to what teachers have been doing for the last three years.”

Other leaders focused on the “practice [of] social emotional learning.” Acknowledging that the concept has taken on an abundance of definitions, Charlie expressed frustration about instructional expectations and support in response to the new normal: “It’s just incredible to me that we haven’t recognized that everybody passed with no skills. Let’s be real. The county office didn’t change the requirements or expectations for teachers.” Jamison continued sardonically, “Oh, wait a minute. We don’t need to talk about social-emotional learning and self-care with teachers. We need to give them the time to actually practice it,” and then woefully, “I just remember thinking how much the point was missed… and this is why teachers are quitting in droves. To me it was tone deaf.” Micah spoke directly to the culture of the school: “...we came back from COVID and we’re still very disjointed. We’re not getting together as much; we’re not celebrating.” Perhaps this is not a reflection on the new normal in education, but a reflection of the hope for a new normal and catalyst for conversation, since the pandemic is not entirely over as many elucidated.

Conclusion

Chapter 4 provided analysis of the research. The chapter began by establishing the case context as reported by leadership. Within the bounds of the case, the research explored the themes as they emerged. Communication was a tool both for informing and caring for stakeholders. Care was an essential role and skill for leaders through empathy to support and develop stakeholder trust. Decision-making was a critical and collaborative component of crisis leadership, although teachers did not value the role but rather the information and guidance. Trauma and stress were uniquely experienced based on

experience and perception. Well-being was interrupted, and participants sought to cope with the trauma and stress. Growth and change in leaders was a reflective process, and all feel more prepared for another crisis, although they were also hopeful they never have to face one. Out of the COVID crisis came an understanding of a new normal, which has caused disillusionment. Chapter 5 will discuss the findings, including recommendations for future research and implications of the study.

Chapter Five: Discussion

The research question of this study was *what leadership lessons can we learn from Central High leaders' coping stories in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic?* The case study focused on twelve educational leaders at Central High School bound by the COVID-19 pandemic (or COVID).

A review of the literature connected to emergent themes is pertinent to frame the discussion. The literature review considered studies that focused on defining a crisis in education and the role of crisis leadership (see, for example, Pepper et al., 2010; Pecujlija & Cosic, 2019; Urick et al., 2021, Mutch, 2018; James & Wooten, 2005). The literature review also discussed crisis leadership competencies and skills such as critical thinking and decision-making, which was also found within the study (for example, Smith & Riley, 2010; Striepe & Cunningham, 2022; Caringal-Go et al., 2021). The importance of communication and care were constructs also considered in the literature and were emergent themes found at Central High School (Okilwa & Barnett, 2021; Thornton, 2021b; Zurek & Scheithauer, 2017). Literature pointed to visible, present leadership and trust as essential tools during a crisis, and leaders at Central shared similar ideas through the analogy of a bridge (Mutch, 2015; Sutherland, 2017; Tschannen-Moran, 2009).

Further, the impact of a crisis regarding stress, trauma, coping, and well-being were considered (for example, Pecujlija & Cosic, 2019; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pearlin et al., 1981; Kanal & Rottmann, 2021; Kira, 2021; Krupnik, 2020; Sanchez-Ruiz et al., 2021). The continuous traumatic stress (CTS) of the COVID-19 pandemic and leadership's investment in the well-being of stakeholders resulting in compassion fatigue was also discussed and represented in the emergent themes (Kira, 2021; Nodding, 2012; Cummings et al., 2021). Lastly, the literature touched upon an emergent concept *new normal* as COVID-19 has interrupted the normalcy of education (Adams et al., 2021; Hanafi et al., 2021). Leaders at Central provided several different points of view concerning the term.

Context of Findings

Bounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and through semi-structured interviews, the case study explored crisis leadership. The pandemic timeline within this study began in February 2020 as many were first learning of the threat the virus posed and the determination to close schools on Friday, March 13, 2020. During the spring of 2020, the state issued quarantine orders, followed by the superintendent's decision to remain closed for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year. The 2020-21 school year began virtually, and synchronous and asynchronous learning were introduced. By late October 2020, the school transitioned to a hybrid instructional platform, and instruction was provided simultaneously to students online and face-to-face. Virtual teaching ceased in the fall of 2021, though contact tracing and the expected use of the digital platform continued. Interviews were conducted from November 2022 through early January 2023.

Interviews were conducted in person to capture the nuance and allow for a broader analysis of the participants. Although, four interviews were conducted via Zoom™ due to extenuating circumstances. Through the semi-structured interviews and subsequent teacher questionnaires and document review, I examined multiple perspectives of crisis leadership and captured a unique narrative of the pandemic at the case site. The major socially constructed emergent themes are communication, care, decision-making, trauma and stress, well-being, growth, and the new normal.

Paradoxes and Lessons

Woven in the stories of Central High School's leaders are the lessons as understood within the case study surrounding the emergent themes: communication, care, decision-making, trauma and stress, well-being, and growth. During the analysis of transcripts and coding, places of intersection were noted among emergent themes. Upon closer review, the intersection of ideas, much like a crisis, was not contained by clear boundaries. At that juncture within the analysis, messiness was revealed in leading

through panic, uncertainty, and the unknown. The messiness within crisis leadership was identified as a cognitive dissonance or discomfort because leaders were operating in binaries—paradoxes in leadership where both parts are simultaneously true.

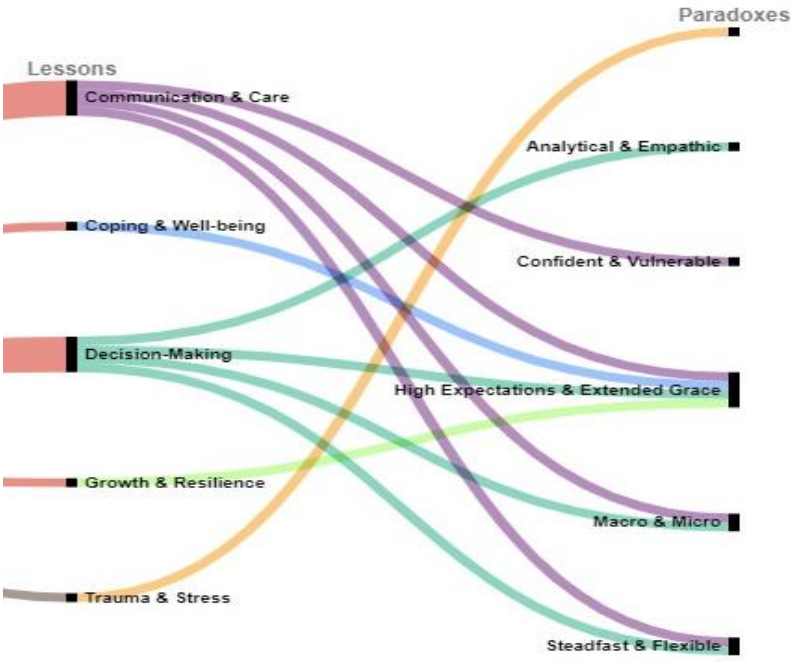
Participant responses flowed into emergent themes during data analysis manifesting five entangled rivulets or paradoxes. The paradoxes uncovered that leaders were 1) both confident and vulnerable in action and speech, 2) were both steadfast and flexible in their decisions, 3) needed both macroscopic vision and microscopic vision, 4) needed to be analytic and empathetic operationally, and 5) maintained high expectations and extended grace. These paradoxes represent cognitive dissonance, a clash between an individual's beliefs (cognition) and behavior or decisions (Lavergne & Pelletier, 2016). Cognitive dissonance theory suggests individuals make one of three choices to alleviate the discomfort or reduce the stress: alter or adapt new beliefs and behaviors, rationalize or justify the decision, or alter the appraisal of the decision (Lavergne & Pelletier, 2016; Kokkoris & Kühnen, 2014; Stone & Focella, 2011). Pepper et al. (2010) write, "virtually every choice a leader makes comes at the expense of something else…times of crisis are filled with distractions and conflicting demands from multiple stakeholders" (p. 244).

A deeper analysis of themes also elucidated six lessons including 1) the role of communication and care, 2) the function of decision-making, 3) the emotional impact of trauma and stress, 4) the growth and resilience of leadership, 5) the need for well-being, and recognition that 6) the new normal is not new. Figure 4 illustrates five paradoxes and six lessons that were present in the overall analysis and how they relate. The lesson surrounding trauma and stress is the outlier in that while it influences all relationship channels, it does not flow into a paradox of its own. Furthermore, the final lesson regarding the new normal in education is not a separate channel. Rather the new normal is the current in the diagram and river metaphor. The new normal is an idea arising from the discomfort and stress

surrounding the duality in attitudes, decisions, and actions requiring leaders to seek a resolution (a state of well-being). Discussion of each lesson follows with a nuanced description of the entangled paradoxes.

Figure 4

Alluvial of Lessons to Paradoxes



Lesson 1: The role of communication and care

During the COVID-19 pandemic, communication and care were vital tools intermingled with all other crisis leadership competencies, such as decision-making. Transparent, consistent, and timely communication mitigated feelings of distrust and potential misunderstandings. While maintaining the primary function of sense-making and informing stakeholders of changes, communication merged with the crisis leadership role of providing care as the severity of the coronavirus became globally evident. Especially during quarantine and the rise in feeling helpless and isolated “on an island inside your house,” communication provided a means for leadership to express care and support. However, leaders

also found the reciprocation of care important to their well-being; many of whom looked to a spouse or colleague for needed support or care.

The abrupt interruption of normal education created chaos and uncertainty for teachers and leaders. Communication was “solid ground.” Leaders needed communication and guidance on how to lead so they could extend guidance. However, the guidance was limited in the unprecedented COVID environment and felt more like “flying a plane while building it.” Leaders needed communication from stakeholders in terms of feedback, and teachers needed affirmation and recognition of their effort. The skill of multidirectional communication was acknowledging and assuaging a range of emotions, including panic, uncertainty, and fear; all of which required empathy.

Once again, using the metaphor of COVID as “a fire,” leaders utilized empathy and poise when communicating to help determine whether their words were “gasoline” or “water,” much like Dylan, who “didn’t want to push people over the edge.” Leaders recognized and understood the depth of uncertainty and struggle stakeholders were experiencing in multiple areas of life especially because the pandemic blurred the lines between home and work lives. Transparent communication also required empathy as leaders expressed a willingness to share personal struggles to “build bridges” held together by trusses of trust between stakeholders. Leaders trusted teachers to self-govern instruction and were flexible because “rules weren’t everything...,” and teachers trusted leaders for timely information.

Nevertheless, communication was a “fine line” between providing guidance and showing concern. For instance, leaders maintained confidence in their decisions regarding teacher grading and assessment practices, uniform use of district-approved technology, and timely communication with students and parents. Leaders believed there needed to be a reprioritization within the school to protect students’ well-being above academic rigor. Be it in the written weekly highlights, emails, or Zoom™

faculty meetings, communication needed to exude confidence and composure because “everybody was in a panic” and “I had to make sure...I was really calm.”

Thus, the first paradox is created; leaders were both confident and vulnerable in action and speech. Leaders were confident and assertive in their knowledge of what was ethical and in the best interest of students during the crisis. Leaders strove to build confidence in teachers through demonstrations of care and empathy and bring about conceptual reprioritization within the school. To be vulnerable is to admit weakness and uncertainty. While leading confidently, leaders were also humble showing vulnerability by openly saying, “I don’t know.”

Lesson 2: The function of decision-making

The rapid change and complexities created during the pandemic required collaborative, multifaceted decision-making and a stalwart mental capacity. Leaders “didn’t know” the answers and had to collaborate to make equitable safety, teaching, and learning decisions under strict COVID guidelines set by the Department of Health and district leaders. As information and understanding about the novel virus developed, guidelines were impacted and often required leaders to make rapid decisions referred to as “real-time decisions” appropriate at the moment (see, Smith & Riley, 2012). The daily influx of new information was viewed as making little progress as Dylan mentioned in the boat analogy, “...we just keep going in a circle...and we’ve just got to keep moving and go for it.” Utilizing analytical thinking, leaders scrutinized decisions while asking, “what do we think is safe...?” Leaders understood they were being judged based on the political environment and outcomes. Making decisions and informing stakeholders required “backbone” and a stalwart leadership capacity because “you can’t please everyone all the time.”

While being steadfast in their decisions, there was also an awareness of the varying information adding complexity; thus, necessitating leaders to maintain or develop flexibility in “going with the

flow." Leaders mentioned needing instruction to take place but allowed flexibility as an extension of care and trust saying teachers could even provide instruction "on the rooftop." Leadership at this moment is synonymous with decisions made "with compassion." Therefore, leaders made exceptions to the rules. Care was not relegated to communication but was a guide in the decision-making process. As Lee said, "leaders needed to be flexible and understanding" and "just listen to people where they are at." In the same sense, leaders felt compelled to "set some requirements and some non-negotiables" but were flexible with the terms because "[things were] still not traditional" demonstrating contrarian or paradoxical thinking. Thus, the paradox of leaders being steadfast and flexible in decisions is established and provides a lens for understanding the teachers who determined "little to no emphasis was placed on concrete decisions" and leaders hearing feedback from teachers "who felt I was reasonable."

Another facet of decision-making was vision. Leadership embraced both a macro and micro view of the collective environment and the impact on the individual taking both into account in decisions. For instance, leadership understood the collective need to proceed with instruction to maintain the school's core function and knew "this could be bad" without structure. Leaders identified macro-level needs such as devices and a schedule through "intentional meetings" (read analytic discussion). Leaders also considered the safety of all stakeholders. Such macro-level leadership made decisions at the cost of individual feelings of security and liberty, such as mask mandates and contact tracing.

The macro-level perspective required leaders to be analytical in the operational sense. Leaders needed to take details, a microscopic view, into account to properly execute the decision. For instance, leadership could not simply announce the need for synchronous instruction without providing a detailed schedule appropriate for an individual student or teacher. An example of this was Morgan, who, considering the "whole schedule," first analyzed a simulated school day for an individual student before finalizing a decision with the leadership team. Furthermore, once leaders determined the schedule after

scrutiny and analysis, the next step was to inform stakeholders. In addition to impersonal communication, leaders acknowledged the significance of "checking-in" with individuals, a microscopic view of communication. Leaders sought to connect with and appreciate the individual by "blowing-up a lot of text messages" and providing small gifts ("treats"). Therefore, by ensuring communication and care were microscopic or personal, teachers felt a sense of "community." Thus, the third paradox is established. Leaders need macroscopic and microscopic vision, which can also be understood as a collective and personal approach to leadership.

For instance, safety, such as contact tracing mandates and protocols, was another area requiring macroscopic and microscopic vision. The mandates were for the collective health and safety of those within the school building, a macroscopic, collective approach. Yet the act of sending potentially infected children home to quarantine for ten days conflicted with leadership beliefs about educating each child. Leaders empathized with individual students and parents using a microscopic, personal approach. Driving this point home, Morgan mentioned, "I didn't like making the phone calls" and "I didn't want to be the one to get a phone call as a parent."

As discussed in the first lesson above, participants utilized empathy on an operational level by recognizing the "human element" or individuals impacted by the pandemic and emphasized looking at individual stories and situations when making decisions. Although bound by mandates and protocols, empathy was a significant competency in crisis leadership allowing leaders to be attuned to various needs and, in turn, make informed decisions (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022). Thus, the fourth paradox is created. Leaders need to be analytic and empathetic operationally. Consequently, the combination of both paradoxes led to leaders perceiving decision-making as the "heaviest" of roles during the crisis.

Lesson 3: The emotional impact of trauma and stress

Trauma and stress were both personal and interpretive and connected to compassion fatigue (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). During interviews, participants were not provided with a definition of the terms trauma or stress because I did not want to influence responses or memories and because of the numerous factors involved in evaluating trauma and stress. Outside of recognizing the trauma associated with the devastating loss of lives globally, leaders associated feelings of personal loss, struggle, isolation, and helplessness with trauma. Likewise, those who only vicariously or empathetically connected with trauma associated feelings of frustration, hopelessness, isolation, helplessness, and fatigue with stress. The study's only distinction between trauma and stress are the participants' interpretations of their experiences during the pandemic. The language surrounding trauma and stress was similar. Leaders who removed themselves from the idea of trauma did so by comparing themselves to experiences "much worse than [their] own." Nevertheless, the empathy leaders expressed for other COIVD experiences does not necessarily negate the existence of their own trauma only the choice to align themselves with the term.

Therefore, the plethora of unknown variables and complexities to decipher during the crisis are understood as the source of stress surrounding crisis leadership. For instance, leaders felt stressed over decisions, communication, and care efforts. Leaders connected "being judged" to perceiving "decision-making [was] everything." Without minimizing the emotional impact of timely communication on stakeholders, determining the timing and wording of information was difficult for leaders due to the rapid changes and fluctuating flow of information during the pandemic.

Care was also a point of stress or compassion fatigue (see for example Gonzalez-Mendez & Diaz, 2021; Cummings et al., 2021). Altruistically, leaders attempted to express care and compassion through trust, transparency, communication, and empathy. Leaders empathized with individuals, and

again as Morgan mentioned regarding contact tracing, “I didn’t like making the phone calls.” However, they also remembered the calls being “tremendously stressful” because of compassion fatigue. Supported by Boyatzis et al.(2006), because leaders felt responsible for caring for individual teachers and the whole school simultaneously, they were “under a steady flow of stress related to the exercise of power” which was only intensified by COVID (p. 9). Therefore, since leaders needed to cope, they accepted the stress “as part of the job” although they acknowledged the stress was different than pre-COVID.

Lesson 4: The growth and resilience of leadership

Major life events are those that inform beliefs, adaptations, and identities (Cowen et al., 2019). Adaptation of leadership roles and identities was present but not in terms of purpose. Even through the crisis, leaders aligned their purpose to the school mission of deliberate success and modeled high expectations such as the choice to distribute laptops and hotspots to students in need. Not only did the personal delivery of a laptop or work to connect an individual to the internet demonstrate deliberate success and care but the expectation for care and success was modeled along with the expectation to attend school even if it was virtual.

Part of the adaptation was restructuring priorities beginning with care, well-being, and health and safety as prime concerns. Rigor, deadlines, and evaluation became temporarily less important. Leaders set expectations for teaching and learning but understood “where other people [were] coming from.” Leaders realized the importance of modeling high expectations. However, they also adapted to the idea “that people have different levels of what they can do professionally and personally.” They could forgive or withhold judgment as Sloan and Blake shared. The statements are demonstrative of prioritizing people before deadlines and are indicative of flexibility and grace.

Dylan, Kai, and Jordan spoke of personal growth or identity changes as becoming more patient, empathetic, and "giving lots of space" (read extend grace) to stakeholders and themselves. The weight of leading during a crisis concerning communication, decision-making, care, and paradoxes caused stress and fatigue along with a negative self-evaluation of efficacy or agency. Considering the emotional and mental stress and fatigue and the duration and expanse of the COVID-19 pandemic, the acceptance of stress (dissonance) and contradiction as the operational rule to crisis leadership further helps situate leaders questioning their effectiveness or loss of "fire." The major life event, the pandemic, catalyzed the change in identity out of necessity to protect their mental well-being and is evidence of their resilient nature.

The fifth paradox is the intersection of high expectations and grace, which also helps contextualize Ryan's placement of their "[feelings on the quality of education] in a little area that was...safe and secret." Ryan demonstrated resilience by protecting their beliefs and high expectations for teaching and learning while embracing the need to extend themself grace for their choice and others unable to meet the standard. Paradoxical leadership as a label helps make sense of the cognitive dissonance and crisis leadership experience with coping stories and resilience at Central High School.

Lesson 5: The need for well-being

Coping was the method to regain a positive sense of well-being that leaders perceived lost due to trauma and stress. Leaders needed to extend forgiveness and grace (self-compassion) to return to well-being. COVID-19 was an information-poor environment where a "good idea right now" is a poor one tomorrow, so leaders were plagued with self-doubt and anxiety. The loss of agency, the loss of normalcy, the inability to be confident, and the inability to stand on "solid ground" was evidenced through the phrases "it was taxing," "I was losing my mind," and "I just couldn't deal with it." All of which damaged the sense of well-being. The study aligns with Folkman's (1984) coping theory because

leaders attempted to find equilibrium and regain balance, normalcy, and well-being. Leaders who said they felt prepared to lead during the pandemic only because "everyone was in a place of not knowing" are leaders who are coping and adapting to the environment to protect themselves mentally. Leaders were practicing self-compassion through the exercise of forgiveness and extension of grace.

Throughout the pandemic, leaders coped to regain a sense of well-being by adjusting to the cognitive dissonance they were experiencing daily. Like Lee said, "[stress] was coming from everywhere, but you didn't know until you open your inbox...Just the unknown of the day-to-day operations." Physical and emotional self-care were other tricks for the mind to feel normal, like exercise and spatial separation or compartmentalization of work-life and home-life.

As I wrote on the emergent theme of coping and well-being, I was hesitant to include pseudonyms. I was concerned about *outing* individuals, or unintentionally revealing the participant's identity, though I was advised to cite the quotes from the interviews. Upon reflection of my reticence and concern for the anonymity of my participants, a paradigm shift became apparent. Micah had stated concerning the new normal that, "education can be your calling, but it isn't your life. We need to stop that message." Interestingly, Micah also refers to the need for balance and self-care. *Self-care has been devalued to the point I am cautious about outing participants discussing the very idea*; an idea that according to Gonzalez-Mendez and Diaz (2021) builds resilience. I did not quote all the passages, and the mere fact I was concerned about sharing participants' pseudonyms is a striking implication of the need for self-care or as Boyle (2015) described, "responsible selfishness" (p.51).

Lesson 6: The new normal is not new

The phrase new normal initially arose from the sudden and drastic interruption of education when school closed in March of 2020. Like a spotlight that reveals what has been hidden from sight, the COVID-19 pandemic acted in much the same way. The crisis pulled back a veil for educational leaders

and provided a lens and opportunity to examine education in a new light. The new normal made the familiar strange and new. The new normal allowed leaders to see problems in the educational system afresh. It became the phrase embodying the chaos leaders saw, the hope for change, and a thoughtful restructuring of education.

Hope is "to expect with confidence; trust," and leaders discussed the new normal with disappointment because what was expected, what was trusted, and what was hoped for did not come to fruition as evidenced throughout interviews ("Hope", 2023). Without fulfillment of the hoped-for, intentional, and thoughtful change, the new normal in education, leaders (and teachers) struggled and became disillusioned by education. The hoped-for conversations to address problems in education have not taken place, and to mend the educational wounds, "band-aids" have been used instead of authentic change. The earlier teacher statement communicating that "they just wanted a warm body in the classroom" also connects to the "band-aids" implying society utilizes public education to solve problems beyond a reasonable scope even to the extent of being an inexpensive babysitter. Perhaps the disillusionment and deeper frustration expressed in the study is due to perceiving the problems as allowed and perpetuated instead of resolved.

The paradoxes have existed, but the crisis also brought them to light. Paradoxes are representations of chaos and order—the intermingling of wanting freedom and liberty and rules and structures. The new normal was also leadership operating within the heightened sense of chaos and order, coping with the dissonance and stress, and hoping for "good outcomes despite the serious threats to adaptation or development," which is Masten et al.'s (1990) definition of resilience (p. 228). The new normal was a lens for leaders to conceptualize their environment, their exposed paradoxical leadership, and to regain well-being which led to resilience.

Implications

This study was not designed to evaluate crisis leadership competencies nor designed to elucidate the need for a crisis strategy. The study was designed to understand the lived experiences of crisis leadership at Central High School during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study's findings have implications for scholars, leaders, and teachers described below.

Implications for Scholars

To scholars, two questions initially arise. The first question to consider concerns why the perspectives of teachers and leaders seem incongruous. For instance, one teacher, who nearly quit teaching during the pandemic, said they did not observe any change in leadership: "They did nothing. They were bad before, and they are bad now. They sucked." While this was one teacher of 60, the point not to be missed is the lack of a positive relationship. The teacher did not trust the leaders before the pandemic ("they were bad before"). There was nothing any leader could have done to lessen the individual's stress because a positive relationship and trust were already missing. Trust and a positive culture and climate within the school need to be built before any crisis as a component of crisis leadership.

The second question to consider is what does paradoxical leadership mean for the future of educational leadership? Looking at the state's *Leadership Standards,* leaders are expected to balance managerial, operational, and instructional competencies. However, looking to the paradoxical leadership practices used during the crisis, leaders also need interpersonal competencies to lead operationally and personally. Reference to these interpersonal skills is limited within the standards that guide leader preparation. The next crisis will not be the same as the COVID-19 pandemic, but the skills and resilience discussed throughout this study will be needed. Leaders must be able to delineate whether the decision being made is for crisis management or if they are engaging in crisis leadership. Therefore, a

look at leader preparedness, resiliency, and team building is important especially in creating a positive culture and climate before any crisis is essential in pre-leadership training or coaching programs. Additionally, by preparing leaders Leaders also need to be able to delineate whether a decision or action

Leaders perform a complex job managing and operating a school. Per the findings, many leaders enter the role with aspirations to impact students and instructional practices only to realize the obligations placed upon leaders overshadow the initial reasons for donning the cap. Therefore, to realign leadership with its primary purpose and function is essential for leaders to thrive and as Jordan said, "to be whole." Further study of the ills and issues society places upon education and its leaders to solve beyond the intended purpose and function is a critical step towards realignment. Scholars must clearly delineate between society's *needs* from education and *wants* from education and its leadership in particular. Understanding the needs versus the wants will help drive critical, hoped-for conversations and direct education toward a new normal.

The crisis acutely revealed the problems and paradoxes of education and its leadership. As education begins to recover, the problems, ills, and lunacy brought into the light need not be pushed back into the shadows and forgotten. As stated earlier, there will never be a crisis like the pandemic. There will be another crisis, yet the current crisis needs to be a call to action and seen as an opportunity for transformation to help create a stronger education culture and climate where teacher and leader attrition is not due to burned-out, disappointed, and disillusioned individuals.

Implications for Educational Leaders

To educational leaders, understanding the paradoxes within leadership and building a balanced leadership team regarding the contrarian, paradoxical skills and lessons of communication and care, coping and well-being, and decision-making will provide an opportunity for more collaborative leadership. Coupled with needing a balanced leadership team is the need for personal balance and self-

care. Lee noted a “new normal” trend in leadership saying they recently noticed more leaders expressing disinterest in working at the high school level because of the extended hours and extracurricular duties. While Lee had an alternative opinion regarding the trend, I noticed an increased interest in work-life balance and self-care among leaders per study findings.

Leaders need to survey and engage the faculty and staff in authentic conversation to understand the school's values to assist in promoting self-care and work-life balance for all stakeholders, including themselves. Building a sustainable work-life balance into the current culture in education is essential to improving leadership agency and reducing stress, as supported by Boyatzis et al. (2006). Leaders need to know their limits and boundaries and begin by surveying their duties and responsibilities not excluding extracurricular activities and supervision. Part of leadership is decision-making, and instead of perpetually asking *what more may I do*, leaders need to make choices delineating needs from wants. Educational leaders should begin by identifying what is *needed* versus *wanted* of them and their faculty to make realistic choices and to alleviate burdens.

Furthermore, leaders need to allow teachers to practice self-care and honestly talk about the COVID experience. During interviews, leaders expressed thanks for “this therapy session” because they had not had an opportunity to debrief. Sloan stated, “I appreciate the opportunity to reflect.” Leaders commented on the quality of interview questions or noted that I would make an excellent therapist because I was “a good listener” (Ashley). Even though interviews became emotional at times, leaders ultimately appreciated the chance to verbalize thoughts and feelings about the pandemic for the first time. These seemingly small side comments resonated deeply as a constructivist researcher. The participants needed time to process the crisis experience. Educational leaders must not only recognize that teachers need the same debriefing opportunity after facing trauma and stress, but there must also be follow through which will bring about unity and a stronger school culture.

Implications for Teachers

To teachers, the implications reach beyond the classroom and into the culture of the school. In the questionnaire, teachers noted the disconnect between leaders and the current state of the classroom. Classrooms are not the same, students are not the same, and teachers are experiencing burnout. School is trying to solve the results of the crisis by reacclimating children to studious behaviors lost, or in simpler terms trying to teach kids how to do school in a classroom setting. School is trying to increase rigorous instruction and expectations paused during the pandemic and is trying to navigate the obstacle of student and teacher absenteeism due to illness.

Furthermore, instruction has become technology-heavy, and students are more dependent on a device. Because of quarantine and virtual learning, students' brains have been trained to gravitate toward a device since the technology was central during the pandemic; it was the source of education, an outlet, and a connection to society and each other during the pandemic. While this trend was certainly present before the pandemic, modalities of instruction and communication throughout quarantine exacerbated the issue. Teachers are overwhelmed by the need to engage students more in tune with a cell phone than with classroom instruction.

Teachers should address the current changes and work to understand the disconnect by creating a reverse-mentoring program to build a collaborative environment for teachers to voice concerns and be included in decisions. The use of reverse-mentorship would not only empower teacher leaders but allow current leaders to gain insights now lost due to the transformative power of the crisis. Reverse-mentorship would provide a platform for deeper conversations and space to create a stronger school culture and climate. An added benefit to mentorship or coaching is the development of compassion and empathy within the teacher leaders for those being coached. Boyatzis et al. (2006) define "*coaching with compassion* as 'helping others in their intentional change process'" as the focus is on helping the

individual rather than the collective (p.12). Referencing Charlie's bridge metaphor, the creation a multidirectional bridge of trust is implied because coaching with compassion also "requires a caring relationship," the creation of (Boyatzis et al., 2006, p. 14). Thus in addition to the individual, the organization would benefit from a reduction in stress and a stronger school climate and culture.

Teachers also need to be authentically invited to share their values as a community to clarify their *needs* and *wants* from school leadership. This clarification is necessary because a leader's capacity is not infinite. Leader participants admitted to vulnerability, and teachers noted leadership was "drowning." Teachers began to see the humanity of school leaders due to the crisis, and clearly defining needs from wants will assist in preventing leadership burnout and stress. Leaders, like teachers, also need time to practice self-care to prevent burnout and fatigue. Teachers also need to include stress, burnout, and fatigue in the discussion.

Limitations of Findings

A primary limitation is the timing of the study. Had the interviews been conducted throughout the pandemic, even beginning at the time of the pilot study in spring of 2021, observational notes would have been included in the narrative along with clearer remembrances not lost by time (Creswell & Ploth, 2018). The study, as it stands, captures the lasting impressions and impact of early pandemic along with current experiences.

A secondary limitation is the generalizability of qualitative research. The study was bound by the COVID-19 pandemic and the results of the study conducted with a constructivist approach were not intended to be generalizable through a traditional qualitative research approach (Creswell, 2014). Constructivists believe knowledge and truth are socially constructed in the unique environment in which the study was conducted, and traditionally, the aim of qualitative study is to provide in-depth explanation and make meaning of human experience (Mertens, 2010; Carminati, 2018). However, there

is a growing argument surrounding the generalizability of qualitative studies (Carminati, 2018; Maxwell, 2021).

Recommendations for Future Studies

Through analysis, nuanced variations in responses were observed based on leadership position within the organization. This nuance was not discussed as distinguishing responses based on leadership title (assistant superintendent, principal, assistant principal, and department head) and was not the focus of the study. Upon reflection, repeating the study using multiple schools and delineating responses by rank or title might be an opportunity to create discussion through an observant critique.

It is also recommended to repeat the identical study at a different case site as COVID narratives and leadership experiences differ and may yield a unique perspective of crisis leadership and lessons learned through the coping stories.

Closing Narrative

During an early interview I made a slight slip of the tongue. I began a question saying, *as the pandammit*—to which the chortled response by the participant was, "pandammit, that's what it really is." We laughed and appreciated the moment of comedic relief to my chagrin.

Ending the interviews, I provided a final reflective moment for my participants by asking *if you could tell your pre-pandemic-self anything, what would it be?* So, to conclude and own my Freudian slip, Blake shared feeling exacerbated at the entirety of the COVID-19 *pandammit:* "it was awful. It was horrible. I think I need to be rewarded with extra years toward retirement." Yet, others took a more pensive route. "I would [tell myself] there's going to be something that you're not ready for. When it comes, what are you going to do to get on the front end? Because you only have one shot at it," Ryan shared. Also, reflectively Kai said, "I wish I could go back and tell the younger me to chill out; you're going to be alright." Jordan paused and smiled knowingly, "And it's always going to be in the back of

our mind, will always be in the history books. And no, it's not gone, but we are able to manage it now from a school perspective, athletic perspective, and just a family perspective...We're better situated to move forward and deal with whatever comes." Although there will never be another COVID-19 pandemic or crisis exactly like it, there were valuable lessons learned about leading through a crisis and preparing future leaders for the skills they will need to be successful in moving education toward a new normal.

Another crisis in education will undoubtably arise. Hopefully, through the lessons learned and continued commitment to deliberate success, teachers at Central High School will no longer comment that the leadership roles were "blurry and muddled" or leaders were "stretched thin." Rather, through self-care, designation of wants and needs, and authentic teambuilding pre-crisis, we can say that "leadership at [Central] is strong and steady".

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Appendix A

Pilot Study Protocol

Spring 2021, a pilot study was conducted with the following protocol and changes in interview protocol is reflected in Appendix B.

Interview Protocol and Questions: Educational Leader

Script

Welcome and thank you for your participation today. I'm Emily Ellwood and a graduate student at Kennesaw State University conducting research as a part of a Directed Study course. This interview will take about 45 minutes to an hour where I will be asking questions about your experiences starting during the Covid pandemic.

I would like permission to audio record this interview so I may accurately document the information you convey. If at any time during the interview you wish to discontinue the use of audio recording of the interview itself, please feel free to let me know and we will stop. All your responses are confidential. Also, your responses will remain confidential and will be used only for educational purposes. Your actual name will neither be used nor appear on the transcription or my final report. Rather, you will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. The audio recording of any interview and any other documents will remain confidential and securely kept in a locked location.

At this time, I would like to ask for your verbal consent and inform you that your participation in this interview implies your consent. Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. If at any time you need to stop or take a break, please let me know. You may also withdraw your participation at any time without consequence. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin? Then with your permission we will begin the interview.

Please note that I will be referring to school leadership throughout the interview. I would like for school leadership to be understood as either department chair or school administration. Please feel free to make any distinction between the two in your responses.

One last note, I will also be asking questions that are focusing only on teachers and not the entire staff for the purposes of this research.

Interview #1

1. To provide some background, could you please share why you became an educational leader/ wanted this position in the school?
2. How long have you been in this current position?
3. How would you describe your leadership style? Could you please provide examples to illustrate it?
4. Now, I would like for you to walk me through Spring Semester 2020 beginning in March. Please briefly summarize the semester.
    a. Could you please reflect on your thoughts and feelings about the semester?
    b. Describe a moment or situation that illustrates these feelings?

5. At what point was the decision made to remain virtual for Spring 2020 semester? Describe what you did- what actions and steps you took- including your thought process – in communicating this decision with your teachers?
6. What support or strategies did you have or use to help make decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic?
7. How were you coping during this time? Could you please provide examples to illustrate it?

Interview #2

1. Think back to post-graduation Spring 2020; Teachers are on Summer Break. Talk me through your summer as an educational leader? (Consider struggles and priorities.)
2. How were you coping during this time? Could you please provide examples to illustrate it?
3. Describe the start of the 2020- 2021 school year. What is an example that best illustrates what you just described?
4. How were your actions different from a traditional start to the school year? Could you please provide an example that you find relevant to illustrate it?
5. What strategies did you rely upon to help you navigate this time?
6. When it comes to leading, how did your actions in spring and fall differ from prior years?
7. you feel that your leadership philosophy has been impacted because of the pandemic? If so, in what ways?

Appendix B

Dissertation Interview Protocol

The following protocol was used in the dissertation study and reflects changes made post pilot study conducted in spring 2021.

Interview Protocol and Questions: Educational Leader

Script

Welcome and thank you for your participation today. I'm Emily Ellwood and a graduate student at Kennesaw State University conducting research as a part of my dissertation. This interview will take about 45 minutes to an hour where I will be asking questions about your experiences starting during the Covid pandemic.

I would like permission to audio record this interview so I may accurately document the information you convey. If at any time during the interview you wish to discontinue the use of audio recording of the interview itself, please feel free to let me know and we will stop. All your responses are confidential. Also, your responses will remain confidential and will be used only for educational purposes. Your actual name will neither be used nor appear on the transcription or my final report. Rather, you will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. The audio recording of any interview and any other documents will remain confidential and securely kept in a locked location.

At this time, I would like to ask for your verbal consent and inform you that your participation in this interview implies your consent. Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. If at any time you need to stop or take a break, please let me know. You may also withdraw your participation at any time without consequence. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin? Then with your permission we will begin the interview.

The questions are intended to provide me with a clear picture or your experiences from your perspective. The more descriptive and detailed your answers, the better I will be able to understand. I would appreciate if you would include any thoughts, emotions, immediate actions or steps you took to create a fuller account and understanding of your experience.

Interview #1

1. Why did you want to be an educational leader? How long have you been an educational leader ?
2. When you first became a leader, what did you believe to be the most important part of your role? Please provide an example to illustrate.
3. What skills as a leader did you find valuable during COVID? Tell me about a time where you found that skill to be valuable?
4. Tell me what surprised you during the pandemic. Please provide an example to illustrate.
5. In what way were you ready to lead during the pandemic? In what way were you unprepared to lead?
6. Tell me about how you learned schools were going to close March of 2020. What were your next steps?

7. As the pandemic progressed, tell me about a time that helped define yourself – shows how you came to see yourself as a leader.
8. Tell me about a time when you saw the pandemic shaping you as a leader.
9. In what way do you think the pandemic may be seen as a crisis?
10. How would you describe the pandemic crisis as stressful or traumatic from a leader's point of view? How would you describe it as stressful or traumatic personally?
    a. Tell me about a moment or time when you experienced stress or trauma during COVID. (What caused you to feel the most stressed? What caused you to experience trauma?
11. How did your experience with stress/ trauma during the pandemic impact you professionally? Personally?
12. What did you do to manage the stress or do to work through the trauma professionally? Personally?

Interview #2

1. The first interview focused on leadership role, stress, and coping during the pandemic. Did you feel capable to handle the situation professionally? Personally? Tell me about at situation or moment that helped prepare you for the crisis.
2. While navigating the crisis, tell me about the guidance and/ or support you received.
3. While navigating the crisis, tell me about the concerns you had about your stakeholders.
4. How did you demonstrate your care for the stakeholders you mentioned?
5. How do you feel your care was received/ perceived by your stakeholders?
6. Have you ever experienced an educational crisis before?
    a) In what way do you think it prepared you for this one?
7. In what way has this experience changed the way you see yourself as a leader? Tell me about a moment when you noticed this change.
8. Crises have a way of highlighting areas in need of change and growth. Tell me about a time when an area of change or growth was highlighted for you professionally and personally.
    a) In what way or to what extent do you feel you had control over the change or growth?
9. During the pandemic, the phrase "new normal" was used. What does "new normal" mean to you?
    a) In what ways do you see the pandemic/ crisis changing education?
10. During a crisis, what importance would you place on decision-making? Tell me about a time that illustrates your response. (Remember- any details you can include will be helpful.)
    a) What guided (consider anything that either helped or hindered) your decision-making?
11. If you could tell your pre-pandemic self anything, what would it be? Why?

Appendix C

Teacher Questionnaire

Script

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire for my research as a part of my dissertation.

You may either type your answers or feel free to audio record your answers (with Mote Chrome extension). All of your responses are confidential and will only be used for educational purposes. Neither your name nor email is being recorded; this questionnaire is anonymous. The responses will be securely kept.

This questionnaire is completely voluntary, and your submission of the questionnaire implies your consent. Please let me know if you have any questions.

*Side note: I will be referring to school leadership or educational leadership in the questions. School leadership is to be understood as principal, assistant principal, and/ or department chair. Please feel free to make any distinction among them in your responses.

1. How long have you been teaching? (1-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-20 years, 21-30 years, 30+ years)
2. Why did you want to be a teacher and why do you continue to teach? (Scroll to see all 11 options and select the answer that is the MOST true.)
    a. I wanted to be a teacher because/ I continue to teach because:
        1. I love working with students
        2. Teaching is the greatest calling in life
        3. I love having summer vacation
        4. I didn't know what else to do with my degree
        5. I love the subject I teach
        6. It is a rewarding career
        7. I wasn't sure about teaching, but I grew to love it
        8. The retirement plan can't be beat
        9. I'm too far into my career to change jobs now
        10. I want to coach
        11. Other
3. If you selected "other" for question 2, or wish to further explain any response- Please explain here.
4. How do you feel about being a teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic? (1-10; 1= Being a teacher was fine; I enjoyed my job. 10= Being a teacher was extremely stressful; I nearly quit my job.)
5. During the pandemic, what is the most important function or role of school leadership?
    a. Communicating about what is happening
    b. Helping to make sense of the crisis
    c. Informing about procedure changes and expectations
    d. Checking to make sure I'm OK
    e. Showing care and concern
    f. Being present and available
    g. Making timely and quick decisions throughout the crisis

6. Provide an example to support your answer to question #5.
7. During the pandemic (2020- present), how do you view the role of the school leaders? (principal, assistant principal, department chair, area superintendent) Please provide examples to illustrate your response.
8. What changes in leadership (role, decisions, etc.) have you noticed since March 2020? -Please provide examples to illustrate your response.
9. What is the best thing your educational leader (principal, assistant principal, department chair, area superintendent) did during the pandemic? What make it memorable? -Please explain.
10. Anything else you would like to share about your experience with school leadership during the pandemic?