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School principals' experience during the COVID-19 pandemic: leadership values and well-being supports that guided principals through the crisis

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY
WHEELLOCK COLLEGE OF EDUCATION & HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Dissertation

**SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' EXPERIENCE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:
LEADERSHIP VALUES AND WELL-BEING SUPPORTS THAT
GUIDED PRINCIPALS THROUGH THE CRISIS**

by

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Doctor of Education

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to school principals who continue to tirelessly serve others with their heads, hands, and hearts.

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ABSTRACT

School principals experience an emotional toll as they respond to crises for individuals, groups, schools, and communities. Little research and guidance exist on how to support building principals as they shoulder the pain and trauma of the school communities they serve. Dr. Mark Greenberg of Penn State University shared during an [EdWeek webinar](#) in October, 2020, "Being a principal is a highly stressful profession...Their ability to manage this stress is the best predictor about how well their teachers feel, the trust that develops in the school, and as a result we know that the principal actually affects student achievement outcomes." The greater the stress a school principal experiences without attending to their personal well-being can negatively impact the health and success of the schools they lead.

However, research does indicate that principals' increased state of well-being can positively impact the school communities and educational experiences for children. The Wallace Foundation published the report, [How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research](#), and

notes previous findings that school principals are only second to classroom teachers in impacting student achievement may have understated the importance of a quality school principal. While the teacher can directly impact that one student, the building principal has the power and influence to establish equitable schools and student outcomes for an entire community.

In order for principals to be the best leaders they can, for as long as they can, this phenomenological study will examine the experience of school principals through the COVID-19 Pandemic, and what leadership values and well-being supports guided them through the crisis.

As the need for quality leadership continues to grow, articulating the experiences and lessons learned from experienced leaders can support the training, mentoring, and growth of new and aspiring leaders. Results of this study may be applied to developing professional networks, addressing gaps in leadership preparation programs, examining the scope and job responsibilities of the school principal, and recommending practices for district leaders to examine.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Currently educational leaders are at the forefront of educating children to be future citizens of our nation amidst a backdrop of unprecedented levels of crisis and upheaval. COVID-19, school closings, economic and political unrest, social justice protests, reckoning between our communities, police, and justice system, and the ever-growing national divide, are all requiring educational leaders' immediate focus while they are simultaneously maintaining the day-to-day management, engaging in strategic improvement, and responding to unexpected emergencies with skill and compassion.

School principals experience an emotional toll as they respond to crises for individuals, groups, schools, and communities. Often there is mixed or limited guidance from federal, state, and even local levels to navigate the crisis. Thus, the principal is isolated when making day-to-day decisions to best meet the needs of the school community. This unpredictable terrain, coupled with the demands of accountability, can lead principals away from their role as instructional leaders and force them to attend to the basic needs of management of the organization.

The National Association of Secondary School Principals identifies five areas related to principal retention: working conditions, compensation, high-stakes accountability, decision-making authority, and professional learning. The breadth of responsibilities and challenges are tremendous on school principals, leading many

to consider leaving. “Nationally, the average tenure of a principal is about four years, and nearly one in five principals, approximately 18 percent, turn over annually” (Levin et al., 2021).

Murphy & D’Auria (2020) identify four major areas consuming a principal's time and effectiveness: maintenance, putting out fires, strategic improvement, and personal well-being. They propose that the fourth category, personal well-being, is often the most important yet provided the least attention by leaders.

It is important to learn how the experience of leading through the 2020–2021 school year impacted school principals’ and what leadership values and well-being supports guided them during this time.

Vignette

Principal Jane enters her middle school, coffee in hand and a list of “to-dos” that must be addressed by day’s end. This list includes responding to a concerned parent email received at 11:45pm the night before, following up with a teacher she saw in a mini-observation yesterday, and meeting with the technology specialist to develop professional development in order to roll out new educational software that the district has directed teachers to implement in the fall.

The to-do list and coffee will have to wait, as she is greeted at the door by the school nurse who informs her that a student whose family did not follow COVID traveling protocol was sent to school. A teacher reported seeing the child depart the bus and head into the school building. Quickly Principal Jane and others scurry to locate the child to reduce the contact with other students in case the child tests positive for COVID. The child is found and parents are contacted to pick up the child in order to get a COVID test, per district protocol.

This 30-minute process concludes just in time for Principal Jane to race to an off-site Central Office meeting that includes principals. The agenda has the group discuss next year’s plans, school reopening calendars, professional development, hiring of new staff, budget ramifications, curriculum directions, and supports for student’s mental health. Walking out of the meeting, much has been presented, yet little is clear for next steps for the principals. Principal Jane is more focused with next steps in her school.

As her head spins, an elementary principal asks for a moment to speak to her

about a student entering middle school in the fall. The concerns regarding this child's mental health and safety for others is new information to Principal Jane. While transition conversations have occurred between elementary schools and the middle school, this is the first time this information is shared. Principal Jane knows she must return to her building and meet with the decision makers of student placement which include the assistant principal and special education coordinator in order to ensure the programming will meet the student's needs.

When she does return, she notices her morning coffee, still full, on her desk. A teacher stops by to ask for a letter of recommendation as she is applying to graduate school in a leadership licensure program. Principal Jane recently encouraged this teacher to think about future leadership roles and supports this teacher's plan. She promises the letter to be submitted in two days' time.

She meets with the AP and Special Ed Coordinator to update them about the student presented by the elementary principal. The meeting is interrupted by the school adjustment counselor reporting that a student was in class choking themselves and revealed suicidal thoughts. Principal Jane and her team end the meeting and begin outreach to the family and mental health facility to set up emergency assessment of the child. After the parent arrives to take the child, Principal Jane looks at her to-do list and takes a sip of her room temperature coffee for the first time that day.

One sip is all she has time for as a teacher calls her office asking for assistance. A student is refusing to leave the classroom and the other students are

distracted by his behavior and defiance. Principal Jane heads to the classroom, dismisses the class to lunch and remains with the student. The student has autism and there is a plan in place for when he becomes stuck. Principal Jane reviews the plan and engages with the student. Unfortunately, the child bolts from the classroom, down the hallway, and out the side doors of the building. Principal Jane alerts the safety team as the child begins running off campus towards his home. As she keeps eyes on the student, she calls the student's mother. This has been a regular occurrence since the school returned to full time, in-person learning from hybrid. The overstimulation of the school day has been challenging for this student. The mother intercepts the child and he is returned to school where he remains shut down to learning but is supervised by his guidance counselor.

Returning to the main office, Principal Jane finds the AP with a number of boys. There was a physical fight on the playground and limited time in the school day for the AP to conclude an investigation. So Principal Jane helps divide and conquer the process of interviewing and investigating the situation in order to ensure families are contacted prior to school dismissal.

Finally, it is 2:10pm and the school day for students is over. The teacher union representative swings by to ask about the current cleaning protocols and what to do if some staff are overly compliant, causing fellow teachers and students to feel uncomfortable with the amount of chemicals being used every period.

A daily debrief meeting with the AP and Special Education Coordinator occurs to review the student issues of the day and to ensure that they have the same

information and next steps with each student are outlined and communicated with all staff involved.

By 4pm the office is quiet and Principal Jane is alone to open her email for the first time that day. The parent from the night before has sent a follow up email inquiring when they may expect a response. Principal Jane decides that calling the parent is a better option and engages in a 30-minute call. After the call the parent better understands the child's situation and appreciates Principal Jane's personal attention to the matter.

The meeting with the technology specialist had to be postponed for the next day and Principal Jane never had the opportunity to follow up with the staff member on the mini-observation. She sees the coffee on her desk, retrieves ice from the mini-fridge, and enjoys a late afternoon iced coffee as she ties up loose ends from the day and prepares for the next day of school.

Within the 9+ hours that Principal Jane was at work she addressed three of the four areas: putting out fires, maintenance, and strategic planning. From work she returned home to her family where her second job as mother, wife, daughter, and community member continued. Similar to the notation from Murphy & D'Auria the area that received the least attention was her own well-being.

Many psychosocial theorists have written about the characteristics of well-being, with particular focus on positive psychological functioning. When researchers, Carol D. Ryff and Burton Singer (1996) examined formulations of well-being, the following six dimensions were identified: Self-Acceptance, Positive Relations to Others, Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Purpose in Life, and Personal Growth. Examining principals' well-being through these six dimensions and reflecting on the mind/body connection is important to understand and develop ways principals can attend to their personal well-being and address the stress embedded in their roles.

As concluded by Ryff and Singer, "Quality ties to others, feelings of purpose and self-realization engender unique mind/body spirals, but unlike those in the realm of stress, these move toward protection and enhancement of the organism" (Ryff & Singer, 1996). Since research identifies principals as a key component in positively influencing the climate, culture, instruction and personnel in a school then the quality of a principal's well-being can directly impact the school community they lead (Brackett et al., 2020; Clifford et al., 2021; Grissom, 2021).

COVID-19 has increased the prevalence of feelings of isolation, depression,

helplessness, disengagement, and burnout. Jennifer Moss, Michael Leiter, Christian Maslach, and David Whiteside surveyed Harvard Business Review readers as part of a larger project examining rates of burnout during Covid-19. Since the start of the pandemic, 85% of people's general well-being declined, and 89% of people's workplace well-being declined. Major trends were identified with mental health declines, increased work demands, basic physical needs, isolation and lack of connection, home-life struggles and disengagement from work. (Campbell & Gavett, 2021).

The World Health Organization classified burnout as an occupational phenomenon and not a medical condition. This shifts the focus from the issues of an individual and to the impact of workplace experience. The International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) defined burnout as follows:

Burnout is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions: 1) feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; 2) increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and 3) a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment. Burn-out refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life (2021).

In a conversation with the Harvard Business Review, researchers Michael Leiter and Christina Maslach identified that burnout, "remains a syndrome of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy. If someone is experiencing high rates of all three of these at work, that indicates they are burned out, while low rates of all three indicate they are engaged" (Lievens, 2021). This is why examining the current state of school principals is essential to determine supports and interventions that

will assist their well-being, sense of efficacy, and in turn, positively impact the school community they serve.

Problem of Practice

With greater responsibilities in the principal role compared to a decade ago and the increased risk of burn out post pandemic, determining how principals' well-being can be acknowledged and supported by districts may support principals to lead effectively through future crises.

While the current pandemic crisis is at the forefront of research and public observation, historically school leaders have been facing crises in isolation for decades. Principals have continued to lead schools through local, national, political, and social crises. Knowing that principals' increased state of well-being can positively impact the school communities and educational experiences for children, it is important to examine principals' level of understanding, commitment, and access to resources related to leading during crisis while maintaining their well-being.

Little research and guidance exist on how to support building principals as they shoulder the pain and trauma of the school communities they serve. This study will chronicle the experience of school principals through the COVID-19 Pandemic, and examine what leadership values and well-being supports guided principals during this time of crisis.

Statement of Positionality

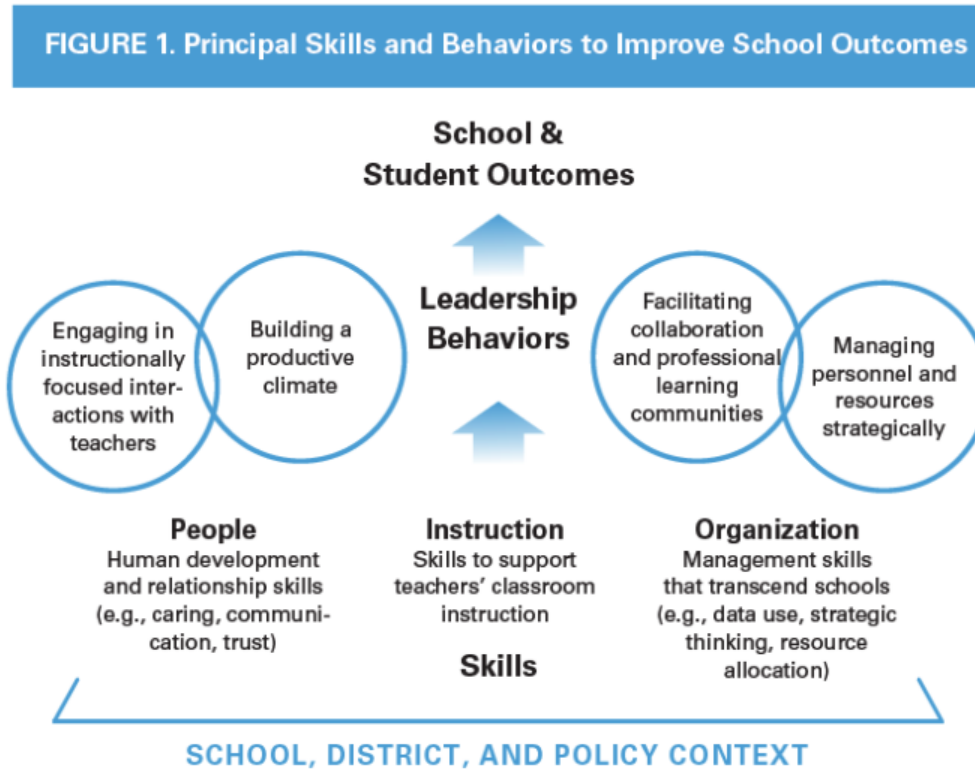
I am a White female, middle school principal who is married and has two boys in public schools. I have been working in education for 28 years with 22 of the years being in formalized leadership roles, in predominantly white, affluent communities. I had both of my children while being an administrator, with my second child being born during the first year I was a principal in a new district. For the first half my administrative years, I cared for my father with Alzheimer's Disease and faced his passing in the first few months of being a new principal. I have experienced local, national, and global crises as a school building leader. I have addressed internal and external crises that impact education since my internship in 1999 when Columbine High School experienced mass school shootings up to most recently with the COVID-19 pandemic.

CHAPTER TWO

School Principal Leadership: *Impact of school principal on climate, culture, community and student outcomes*

The role and impact of a school principal on student outcomes has been examined for over two decades. The research report from the Wallace Foundation, “How Principals Affect Students and Schools”, highlights that previous findings of school principals being only second to classroom teachers in impacting student achievement may have understated the importance of a quality school principal. While the teacher can directly impact that one student, the building principal has the power and influence to establish equitable schools and student outcomes for an entire community. Through engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers, building a productive climate, facilitating collaboration and professional learning communities, and managing personnel and resources strategically principals have the greatest impact on the people, instruction, and organization serving students in schools (Brackett et al., 2020; Clifford et al., 2021; Grissom, 2021).

In the Wallace Foundation study, there were three domains of skills identified that strong principals have mastered; People, Instruction, and Organization (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Principal Skills and Behaviors to Improve School Outcomes

From Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay. *How Principals Affect Students and Schools*, 2021.

Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay (2021) identified four sets of best practices connected to the three skill areas that effective principals foster in leading successful schools: instructionally focused interactions, building a productive school climate, facilitating collaboration, and strategic management. These practices, along with bringing an equity lens to their decision making and work raises the importance of having effective principals in schools in order to positively impact every student, teacher, and community they serve (Grissom et al., 2021).

In 2001 then superintendent of Community School District Two in New York City, Elaine Fink, identified the scope of principals as instructional leaders:

Principals have to have content knowledge — enough to make them able to judge the teaching they see. But they don't have to be content specialists. As instructional leaders, principals have to be able to figure out what to do for a teacher, what kind of professional development will be best for that persona at that time. But the principal doesn't have to actually deliver the professional development — staff development specialists in the different subjects can do that. The principal has to lead by creating a culture of learning and providing the right kinds of specialized development opportunities when they are needed (Fink & Resnick, 2001).

The value of a quality principal impacts their ability to recruit, develop, support, and retain quality staff. This quality leader influences the school culture and conditions that improve student learning. As a result, replacing below average principal with an above average principal can raise the quality of the teachers, culture, and instruction in a school community, in turn increasing academic learning gains for students by an average of 2.9 months in math, and 2.7 months in reading. Positive principal effects are also noted in absenteeism, as students with an above average principal attend 1.4 more days than students with below average principals. Principals also impact the degree of student discipline and likelihood of graduation based on students' encounters with schools' response to disciplinary incidents. Finally effective principals have a direct influence on shaping teachers' working conditions, fostering a positive climate, and reducing teacher turnover (Grissom, et al., 2021).

As concluded in the research report, “How Principals Affect Students and Schools”:

Principals really matter. Indeed, given not just the magnitude but the scope of principal effects, which are felt across a potentially large student body and faculty in a school, it is difficult to envision and investment with a higher ceiling on its potential return than an successful effort to improve principal leadership” (Grissom, et al., 2021).

Dr. Mark Greenberg of Penn State University shared during an EdWeek webinar in October, 2020:

Being a principal is a highly stressful profession...Their ability to manage this stress is the best predictor about how well their teachers feel, the trust that develops in the school, and as a result we know that the principal actually affects student achievement outcomes.

The greater the stress a school principal experiences without attending to their personal well-being can negatively impact the health and success of the schools they lead.

Well-Being: *Understanding and value of well-being*

Well-being has a broad association and is often loosely used to describe how “good” or “bad” environments and experiences impact individuals. When looking at literature on well-being constructs and theories there are many aspects that are

identified. Emotional (affect/feeling), psychological (positive functioning), social (relations with others and society), physical (physical health and fitness), and spiritual (sense of meaning and purpose in life) (Barry, 2012).

In the United States, the study of mental health and well-being has occurred for only a little over a half-century. The creation of the National Institute of Mental Health came from the Mental Health Act of 1946 which was in response to supporting veterans and citizens impacted by World War II. Following in the 1950s was an addition of scientific study regarding subjective well-being. Particularly with Marie Jahoda in 1958 there was a focus on positive mental health which is related to psychological well-being. This work looked at three dimensions; purpose in life, personal growth, and self-acceptance. In the early 1960s, Gerald Gurin, Joseph Veroff, and Sheila Feld examined the state of America's mental health and focused on subjective well-being through individuals' self-assessments of satisfaction and happiness in life. Two decades later Ed Diener published research and theory on subjective well-being and then Carol Ryff in the 1990s operationalized the theory of psychological well-being that was first presented in Jahoda's work in the late 1950s (Keyes, 2012).

The concept of well-being has foundations from two distinct perspectives, Epicurean and Aristotelian. Epicurean believed happiness was about feeling positive emotions. Aristotelian views happiness was about striving toward excellence and positive functioning. From these philosophies, Hedonic and Eudaimonia traditions were formed that bring well-being in slightly different

directions. Hedonic tradition focuses on feeling good about life. That emotional well-being is about the perception of happiness and satisfaction with life and examining ways to balance positive and negative effects. Eudaimonic tradition focuses on psychological and social well-being through self-reporting on the quality of how one functions in life (Keyes, 2012; PRYDE, 2017). As a result, research follows two paths, examining the degree of positive feelings (Epicurean/Hedonic) with work led by Gurin 1960 and identifying the degree of positive functioning (Aristotelian/ Eudaimonic) with research led by Jahoda, Ryff, and Corey Keyes.

Understanding the various theoretical factors associated with each form of well-being; emotional, psychological, and social is important, as the well-being of individuals is multi-faceted and complex. When determining the degree of emotional well-being there are two dimensions, happiness and satisfaction towards one's life overall that constitute subjective well-being as identified by Guerin and Jahoda. Social well-being as identified by Keyes has 5 operational dimensions: social integration, social contribution, social coherence, social actualization, and social acceptance (Keyes, 2012). Psychological well-being, as identified by Carol Ryff, has 6 dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. In order to operationalize these 6 dimensions Ryff developed Definitions of Theory-Guided Dimensions of Well-Being with generalized descriptions of high and low scorers on a measurement scale (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Definitions of Theory-Guided Dimensions of Well-Being (Ryff, 1989)

| High Scorer | Low Scorer |
|--|---|
| <p>Self-Acceptance Possesses a positive attitude toward the self; acknowledges and accepts multiple aspects of self, including good and bad qualities; feels positive about past life.</p> | <p>Self-Acceptance Feels dissatisfied with self; is disappointed with what has occurred in past life; is troubled about certain personal qualities; wishes to be different than what he or she is.</p> |
| <p>Positive Relations to Others Has warm, satisfying, trusting relationships with others; is concerned about the welfare of others; capable of strong empathy, affections, and intimacy; understands give and take of human relationships.</p> | <p>Positive Relations to Others Has few close, trusting relationships with others; finds it difficult to be warm, open, and concerned about others; is isolated and frustrated in interpersonal relationships; not willing to make compromising to sustain important ties with others.</p> |
| <p>Purpose in Life Has goals in life and a sense of directness; feels there is meaning to present and past life; holds beliefs that give life purpose; has aims and objectives for living</p> | <p>Purpose in Life Lacks a sense of meaning in life; has few goals or aims, lacks sense of direction; does not see purpose of past life; has not outlook or belief that give meaning.</p> |
| <p>Personal Growth Has feeling of continued development; sees self as growing and expanding; is open to new experiences; has a sense of realizing his or her potential; sees improvement in self-knowledge and effectiveness.</p> | <p>Personal Growth Has a sense of personal stagnation; lacks sense of improvement or expansion over time; feels bored and uninterested in life; feels unable to develop new attitudes or behaviors.</p> |
| <p>Autonomy Is self-determining and independent; able to resist social pressures to think and act in certain ways; regulates behavior from within; evaluates self by personal standards.</p> | <p>Autonomy Is concerned about the expectations and evaluations of others, relies on judgements of others to make important decisions; conforms to social pressures to think and act in certain ways.</p> |
| <p>Environmental Mastery Has a sense of mastery and competence in managing the environment; controls complex array of external activities; makes effective use of surrounding opportunities; able to choose or create contexts suitable to personal needs and values.</p> | <p>Environmental Mastery Has difficulty managing everyday affairs; feels unable to change or improve surrounding context, is unaware of surrounding opportunities; lacks sense of control over external world.</p> |

The World Health Organization (WHO) defined mental health as: “A state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (2001).

According to Westerhof and Keys, (2010) this definition identifies three distinct areas: well-being, effective functioning of an individual, and effective functioning for a community. These three areas correlate to the previously described emotional, psychological, and social aspects of well-being.

Over time researchers have developed a greater understanding of well-being and specific tools to measure individuals’ well-being. Current tools, specifically the Mental Health Continuum - Short Form (MHC-SF) developed by Corey Keys in 2005 gathers the three areas of well-being: emotional, psychological, and social (Lupano et al., 2017; Lamers et al., 2011).

Researchers examining the well-being of principals in Flemish primary schools examined trends in previous research and definitions to explore negative versus positive perspectives of well-being. Examining University of Sheffield Emeritus Professor, P.B. Warr’s work, three types of well-being are identified: stress/burnout, job satisfaction, and job enthusiasm. Formulating understanding through previous studies and theoretical models on job satisfaction, they conclude: “Overall job satisfaction is a compilation of feelings of satisfaction on an array of facets. Examples of facets include work load, job security, working conditions, compensation, status and prestige of job, supervisor-subordinate

relations, and etc.” (Devos et al., 2007). As they examined the second positive perspective of well-being, job enthusiasm, they defined it as “a positive fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption” (Devos et al., 2007).

School Principal Leadership Through Crisis: *Impact of managing crisis on school principals' well-being*

Historical events have forced educational leaders over the past several decades to reconsider their approaches to education and refine the ways their systems function — often without clear guidance. Although the challenges were well-defined at the surface level, intense emotions and feelings from each stakeholder group were clearly present beneath the surface, which makes it difficult to respond effectively. Times like these demand that education leaders accurately diagnose the problem, take the time necessary to see the problem from multiple perspectives, and exert their influence to effect change at the systemic level (Murphy, D’Auria, 2020).

The experience of principals during the COVID-19 pandemic was formidable as they navigated changing guidelines and regulations to meet the health needs of their school communities while simultaneously maintaining quality academic, social, emotional, and physical environments for their students and staff. New information that influenced practice and policy would come out at a rapid pace,

often having contradictory expectations for school leaders. Each stakeholder would interpret the impact of these new guidelines and leverage their position to move the school programming to meet their desired outcomes. The principal was left navigating these expectations, perspectives, needs, and structures on their own (Beusaert et al., 2021; Brackett et al., 2020; Clifford et al., 2021; Ruggierello, 2021).

In *The Wounded Leader*, Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski share experiences from school leaders who have faced crises and the impact of these moments on their personal and professional lives. Leaders, even those who are skilled, knowledgeable, and well-intentioned, will face the emotional impact of emotional challenges and dilemmas due to unexpected crises. “There needs to be better recognition, understanding, and honoring of the myriad ways in which emotion, mind, and personality have an impact on the necessary aspects of leadership, guiding the quality of education experiences students receive” (Ackerman & Maslin, 2004).

In 2021 the American Institutes for Research released the report, “Leaders We Need Now”, which indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the profession for school principals. Elementary principals described how the events of the 2020 – 2021 school year have impacted their role, priorities, and future as school leaders. While these principals reported working similar hours during the pandemic (average 60.5 per week) the focus of their work shifted. Instead of attending to curriculum, instruction and assessment, equity and culturally responsiveness, school improvement and professional capacity principals’ time was

redirected to operations and management, providing a community of care for students, professional community for teachers and staff, and meaningful engagement for families. As noted previously, they were responding and managing crises on an ongoing basis (Clifford & Coggshall, 2021). Gracie Branch, associate executive director of professional learning at the National Association of Elementary School Principals noted, “Principals are on the front lines. They are the ‘boots on the ground’ for their school, and many are at the lowest points in their careers [right now]” (Ruggirello, 2021).

The impact on working mothers in the workplace during COVID-19 has been great. From Great Place to Work’s annual study, it is estimated 2,350,588 additional cases of burnout among working mothers will exist due to the challenges of balancing work and family responsibilities during the pandemic. Since 1998, the percentage of women principals has risen from 25 percent to 54 percent in 2016 (Grissom et al., 2021).

Due to the pandemic and school buildings being closed, there was an increased need for at-home supervision for children and a decrease in available child care. According to new research women are stepping back from the workforce to take care of children (Ranji et al., 2021). Research on psychosocial risk factors in school principals identified that family-work conflict is an increasing problem for women administrators. (Dicke, 2018). It is imperative that school principals, especially those who are female, sustain a good family-work relationship and attend to their personal well-being.

Additional research shows that women in leadership during the COVID pandemic have begun to examine their personal, home, and work health and balance. McKinsey & Company global consulting firm's senior partner, Lareina Yee, shared her concern about the impact of COVID on women in leadership, "We are at a crossroads that I didn't expect us to be on. One in four women are considering stepping out or stepping back from the workplace" (McKinsey, 2021). Alexis Krivkovich, another senior partner at McKinsey, stated:

What we hear and see from senior women is this sense of exhaustion and this feeling of burnout like they always have to be on; like the responsibilities have magnified in ways that are really profound. And the lack of boundaries and expectations of when you're in the office, when the offices come to you, has become particularly challenging for them. This is especially critical because it's not just the senior women, themselves, that we're worried about. It's the impact they have broadly on diversity and inclusion in their workplace environments. (McKinsey, 2021).

When examining the research that identifies the essential role of quality school principals, the emotional toll that these leaders face in these positions, and the additional aspect of women's experiences and reports in higher positions of power, this researcher has concern for female principals' well-being and sustainability in the workforce. How all of these areas impact the female school principal and the degree of burnout they face is important to identify as we move forward past the pandemic experience.

During times of crisis, leaders are at the forefront calling for the community to come together and support one another when they themselves are in a position that fosters loneliness and isolation.

Attaining social recognition of one's position as principal (and thus establishing a new professional self-understanding) demands that one enters the position 'in-between', without joining the inside nor the outside. One can no longer be a 'teacher-among-the-teachers', nor an external administrator or policy maker if one wants recognition as the school principal. Principals thus will have to endure this positional loneliness (Kelchertermans et al., 2011).

In a professional setting that fosters and expounds the value of collaboration and collectivism, when educational leaders experience isolation and loneliness their capacity to respond with efficacy during crisis is impacted.

The importance of social contact has long been recognized as a fundamental need for humans. The concept of isolation is used throughout the lay and scientific literature and has a primarily negative connotation for humans. The experience is sometimes severe enough to result in serious reductions in adaptation and performance (Gilmartin, 2013).

Often when a leader is struggling with their well-being, the focus has been on individual support and interventions rather than examining the workplace and demands that raise stress for typical people. The role of the principal raises their exposure to crisis management and heightens the emotional toll on these leaders. In

Adrian Carr's (1994) research on anxiety and depression in school principals, he quotes business psychologist and psychoanalytic psychotherapist, Douglas LaBier:

The stress and burnout management experts teach, in effect, that the person who feels stress must have an internal defect; that the well-functioning person would not experience stress and burnout to begin with. Few analyze the work situation and environment as a source of stress for normal people. The implication is that a "normal", well-adjusted person has an arsenal of coping mechanisms at his or her disposal to whip out and fend off whatever attack is imminent (LaBier, 1986).

The Principal Health and Well-being Survey administered to Australian school leaders in 2020 identified the top five sources of stress as: parent related issues, expectations of the employer, mental health issues of students, lack of time to focus on teaching and learning, and sheer quantity of work (Riley et al., 2021).

In the United States, the Learning Policy Institute [LPI] and the National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP] collaborated on an intensive research project on the causes and consequences of principal turnover. From their year-long research agenda four areas were identified that make the role of principal complicated and challenging; poor working conditions, undervalued for their work, too little authority to make decisions, and accountability systems that do not foster continuous growth (Levin et al., 2019). The reports are clear that the role of principal is complicated, challenging, and has the potential to negatively impact leaders' personal well-being.

School Principal Attention to Personal Well-Being: *Methods to support school principals' well-being*

Social support, understood as established mechanisms or opportunities for connectedness with others, was examined by Scott Bauer, Lori Silver, and Jessica Schwartz, to determine its impact on the quality of the work experience for new principals. They concluded, “The job of principal is demanding; role overload is not likely to go away under the intense pressure faced by school leaders. Principals, however, may learn to mitigate the effects of role overload through prioritizing tasks, appropriate delegation, or having some obligations removed or reduced. They may also assemble effective social networks that provide the kinds of support they need to mitigate the effects of factors such as role overload...” (2019).

Many of these suggestions require assistance from senior leadership, such as superintendents, to remove obligations, provide more personnel for delegation, and allow time for principals to engage in social networks. One challenge that may arise, despite the support of their senior leadership, is to what degree principals will utilize these opportunities for connectedness when facing a crisis.

A typical tenure of a principal in a role is 4 years, with novice principals classified as three or fewer years as principal (Grissom et al., 2021). In order for school improvement and growth to have an impact on student achievement it is important to establish ways that effective principals can receive support and attention to their well-being in order to extend their longevity in a school

community (Grissom et al., 2021).

Previous research on principal well-being and burnout have provided some policy and practice recommendations. Findings from Simone Beausaert, Dominki Froehlich, Philip Riley, and Andrea Gallant suggest that collegiality and collaboration of principals with people inside and outside of the school community lessen the symptoms of decline in well-being. While it may be unsurprising, the more positive social connections a leader has the better their functioning and well-being. As a result, formalized communities and networks are encouraged by many governments and policy makers (Beausaert, et al., 2021).

Addressing the increased demands on principals is essential. Taking apart job responsibilities and redistributing them across an administrative team that shares a leadership role could increase the desirability of a principalship and support longevity. The design of this team could be a co-principalship between two people. Allowing strengths and burdens to be balanced and the various needs met the role without detriment to the well-being or social capital of the individuals. This would also embed a supportive network and collaborative leadership style, which in turn, can reduce isolation and burnout. Fostering social support through social networks within and outside the school allows collaboration and may mitigate the impact of work-related stressors. Opportunities for social networks could be created by investing in communities or networks of principals, either face-to-face or online, in which support can more easily be found (Beausaert, et al., 2021).

The development of a new orientation to administration appears to be

crucial if the incidence of anxiety and depression among school principals is to be ameliorated. From *Job Desirability of the High School Principalship: A Job Choice Theory Perspective*, Diana Pounder and Randal Merrill recommend:

School districts may find advantages in offering paid administrative internships and field experiences to potential administrative candidates to allow more opportunity for pre-service evaluation of these candidates and to provide specific in-house training to qualified candidates. Later, these same individuals should receive mentoring and other support programs designed to assist new administrators in their succession to the principalship. Finally, district supervisors need to explore ways to improve the daily work life of each principal through such things as workload management (2001).

Additional research shows that leadership development programs, both preservice and in-service, might directly help principals manage the stress associated with the job. It is also recommended that identifying and showcasing work environments that reduce rather than increase stress can assist in reshaping the principal experience (Spillane & Lee, 2014).

As a leader, knowing the theoretical frameworks and having the ability to analyze and address needs and growth of a school community is important. Just as important is developing an understanding of the structural, social, political, moral and emotional aspects of the role. There is not a simple answer on “what to do” when issues arise, but a foundation of knowledge that guides a leader as they access their understanding and awareness of emotions, complexities, and nuances of the

situation at hand. Having peers to turn to when navigating these challenges is powerful in supporting a principal's sense of professional self and belonging, therefore reducing the sense of loneliness and isolation (Kelchertermans et al., 2011).

CHAPTER THREE

As noted in Chapter 1 and 2, the role and impact of a school principal on student outcomes has been examined for over two decades. Researchers at Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence question, “School leaders are trained for academics, but what training will school leaders have in strategies to support their own well-being, as well as the psychological welfare of their students and educators?” (Brackett et al., 2020).

Knowing that principals’ increased state of well-being can positively impact the school communities and educational experiences for children, it is important to examine school principals’ experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic and learn what leadership values, well-being supports, and self-care practices assisted them during the crisis. Further engaging in dialogue to learn what themes emerge from these school principals’ experiences will assist in determining ways to ward off burnout, increase resilience, and determine how principals’ well-being can be maintained in order for them to lead effectively through crisis.

Research Design

This study focused on principals, with longevity, that led a public or charter school throughout the 2020 – 2021 school year. The qualification of longevity was four or more years as principal in their current school as identified by research done by The National Association of Secondary School Principals (Levin et al., 2021). Serving as a principal during the 2020–2021 school year encompasses the greatest time frame schools were facing the COVID-19 Pandemic. This pandemic, while it

impacted communities at different rates, was a common crisis that resulted in crisis management from the state, local, and school-based leadership.

The intent of this phenomenological study was to focus on the awareness, support, and attention of well-being on principals leading during the COVID-19 Pandemic. A qualitative, phenomenological study format was chosen in order to allow participants to reflect on their experiences and make meaningful connections to their experience of leadership during crisis and their well-being. The stories of school principals during the COVID pandemic may have a limited audience but may provide powerful lessons for future leaders. Everyone thinks they know what a principal does and everyone has an opinion on what a principal should do. When times of crisis arise, there is no one playbook nor recipe that will ensure success. Learning from previous experiences and exploring the focus of well-being for principals can better prepare leaders to provide flexible, informed, and effective responses. Using a phenomenological study method with clear boundaries, such as school principals with longevity who were leading during COVID-19, allow for a detailed understanding to emerge from interviewing numerous participants with the similar parameters (Creswell, Poth, 2018).

To ensure a diversity of experiences and voices, principals from across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts were recruited. The researcher used maps of Massachusetts and delineated Eastern, Central, and Western regions of the State to gather school leaders who may have had different experiences based on the region of the State. Another category identified was the regional demographic of the

leader's community, be it Urban, Suburban, or Rural/Cape, as population and resources play a factor in the leadership experiences. Including High School, Middle School, and Elementary School leaders was necessary in order to determine if the age of children and families played a factor for leading during the pandemic. To provide opportunity to examine impact based on gender and race, participants were recruited to include Black, Indigenous, and people of color [BIPOC] principals and a balance of male and female leaders.

Once desired regions, populations, levels, and demographics were determined the researcher began identifying school districts and leaders that fit the criteria outlined. Local news articles, hiring announcements, and review of school district sites assisted the researcher in identifying if the longevity of a principal met the minimum 4-year in current school as principal criteria. A total of 25 principals across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts were identified as potential participants for the study. From that original number of potential participants, 14 individuals agreed to participate.

Personalized emails were sent to these 14 individuals (see Appendix A, B, & C). For respondents willing to participate, the researcher sent them a follow up email that included a survey using Qualtrics (<https://www.qualtrics.com>) for them to complete (see Appendix D & E). This survey outlined the scope of the research, how individual participants would remain anonymous, and included a section that recorded their electronic consent to participate. The survey gathered the demographic information of the participant, their school organization and

community. Also included in the Qualtrics survey were Likert scale questions regarding the degree leading through the pandemic has negatively impacted their leadership and well-being. Finally, the survey had respondents identify the amount of training in self-care individuals experienced prior to becoming a school leader.

Following the completion of the Qualtrics survey, the researcher contacted the participant to set up individual interviews. From the original 14 participants who agreed to be part of the study, 12 individuals were able to complete the interview phase of the study. These interviews were conducted either in-person or over Zoom (<https://zoom.us>) based on the participant's preference. The interviews were between 45 – 60 minutes in length. The questions allowed participants to reflect on their experiences during the Covid-19 Pandemic which began in March of 2020 and continued through the 2022 school year. Prior to the interview, participants received the interview questions. Since these were semi-structured interviews, discussion and follow up questions were flexible and responsive to the participant's responses. Providing these questions prior to the interview allowed the participants time to separate from their day-to-day activities and reflect on their experience during the pandemic. This opportunity lent itself to a deeper and more thoughtful conversation during the interview.

There were four sections to the interview focusing on experience, leadership, well-being, and future outlook as a school leader. With each section, the questions were read aloud to the participant and their answers often would cross between topics in various sections.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

I. Experience

- a. Take a moment to think back to your experience from January 2020 through today. Now jump ahead to 20 years from now, and a young aspiring school leader asks you what it was like being a principal during the COVID-19 Pandemic. What will you tell them about your experience?

II. Leadership (Impact & Growth/Change)

- a. In what ways did the experience of leading through the 2020–21 school year impact your leadership? Are there ways your leadership was strengthened, weakened, changed or remained constant?
- b. Do you have any story or experience that particularly demonstrates how COVID impacted your leadership?
- c. What lessons or takeaways regarding leadership did you acquire during this time?

III. Well-being (Impact & Growth/Change & Practice)

- a. You reflected on the degree your well-being was negatively impacted during the pandemic. Thinking about how you responded, what was the impact?
- b. Are there ways your well-being was strengthened or weakened, changed or remained constant? Did the pandemic have you grow or

change in your thinking or practice regarding well-being and self-care?

- c. What do you do to take care of yourself? What is your self-care?

IV. Future Outlook & Holistic Reflection

- a. What are you looking forward to in the future?
- b. Take a moment to think back to your experience from January 2020 through today. Now jump ahead to 20 years from now, and a young aspiring school leader asks you what it was like being a principal during the COVID-19 Pandemic. What would be your advice to them?

Collecting data required audio recording of individual interviews in order to focus and actively listen to the participants. All recordings were stored using a Boston University Dropbox (<https://www.dropbox.com>). All interviews were transcribed using the Zoom transcription and Otter.ai (<https://otter.ai>) to ensure accuracy in representing participants' statements. Electronic surveys were distributed using Qualtrics.

Starting and ending a school year provides additional responsibilities and demands on a principal's time. Allowing another school year to come to a close has leaders take a step farther away from the experience of leading through the pandemic. As a result, the interviews with participants occurred between April 12, 2022 through June 18, 2022 to ensure the interviews captured the past and current experience of school leaders prior to leaving for the summer.

When examining the transcriptions from individual interviews and focus groups, along with the electronic surveys, the researcher identified common experiences and perceptions that arose and paid particular attention to themes related to the four areas outlined in the literature review (School Principal Leadership, Well-Being, School Principal Leadership Through Crisis, and School Principal Attention to Well-Being). Principals' needs, perceptions, and current resources & supports were also identified. The software program, Quirkos (<https://www.quirkos.com>), was used in managing the quantity of coding data and information.

As a principal with longevity that led a school during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a sense of common understanding and appreciation for the challenges faced by school principals. My experience at a high school, middle school, and now upper elementary level provided authenticity of my desire to address the needs of principals across the Pre-K – 12 continuum. Being transparent in my own experiences, providing access to my background, research, and methods, along with reaching out individually to make connections with participants prior to interview are aspects build trust.

Pseudonyms were provided to each participant that represents their school level, their last name, last initial, first name, last initial, and community designation. Example: Jessica Downey is a middle school principal working in a suburban community. The pseudonym for Jessica is MyaS. Each participant was also assigned a number which represented the order in which they were interviewed. The

number was used in research findings to denote the participant after any direct quotation. A table was provided to allow the reader to reference the quote with the demographics of the participant.

All materials, including notes, papers, recordings, and electronic hardware were maintained in a locked file cabinet at the researcher's home. When using online programs for transcription and coding, password protection and encryptions were used to maintain protection and identifying materials were stored in a Dropbox account licensed through Boston University. When referring to a participant in the study, they are referred to by the pseudonym assigned to them.

When meeting with participants, the room utilized was in a place where privacy was maintained so third parties could not overhear. When meeting over Zoom, both parties worked to ensure their space is private and they were not disturbed.

Transferability

As the need for quality leadership continues to grow, articulating the experiences and lessons learned from experienced leaders supports the training, mentoring, and growth of new and aspiring leaders. The results found in this study may be applied to developing professional networks, addressing gaps in leadership preparation programs, and recommending practices for district leadership to examine in order to support leadership development and longevity. While focused on school principals, quality leadership during crises is needed from leaders beyond

the principalship such as department heads, curriculum directors, assistant principals, deans, and headmasters. Findings from this study may be applicable to other instructional leaders and their well-being.

Limitations

Limitations of this study lie predominantly in the small sample size of principals. The intention is to begin the research with principals who are in a similar demographic of suburban middle schools in order to determine if there are any common themes that emerge. Expanding this research to a broader representation in demographics, size, and grade levels, along with differentiating the range of principal experience, to understand how newer principals are facing crises and maintaining well-being will be important next steps in research.

As a tenured principal that led through the 2020–2021 school year, it was important to separate my own perspectives from what was gathered from the participants. To ensure my own experience with leadership and well-being during a crisis did not influence participants' responses I used consistent questions posed in the interviews. While there were times that I found commonality between participant's reports and my own, I ensured that noteworthy themes were present across a majority of participants if to be included in interpretation.

CHAPTER FOUR

In this study there were 12 participants who led public or charter schools in Massachusetts during the 2020–2021. All of these participants were principals who had longevity of 4 or more years in the same school. A breakdown of regions, populations, levels, and demographics along with years of principal experience was identified across participants (see Table 1, 2 & 3).

Table 1: Principal Demographics

| | Number of Participants | Percentage of Participants |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| REGION | | |
| East | 8 | 66.66 |
| Cape | 1 | 8.33 |
| Central | 1 | 8.33 |
| West | 2 | 16.66 |
| POPULATION | | |
| Rural | 2 | 16.66 |
| Suburban | 6 | 50 |
| Urban | 4 | 33.33 |
| LEVEL | | |
| Elementary | 5 | 41.66 |
| Middle | 4 | 33.33 |
| High | 3 | 25 |
| GENDER | | |
| Male | 7 | 58.33 |
| Female | 5 | 41.66 |
| RACE | | |
| White | 10 | 83.34 |
| BIPOC | 2 | 16.66 |

Table 2: Participant Demographics

| Participant | Gender | Race | School Level | Demographic | Region |
|--------------------|---------------|-------------|---------------------|--------------------|----------------|
| 1 | Male | White | Elementary | Rural | Cape & Islands |
| 2 | Male | White | Middle | Suburban | Western |
| 3 | Male | White | High | Suburban | Central |
| 4 | Male | White | Elementary | Suburban | East |
| 5 | Female | White | Middle | Suburban | East |
| 6 | Male | White | Middle/High | Rural | West |
| 7 | Female | White | Elementary | Urban | East |
| 8 | Female | White | Middle | Urban | East |
| 9 | Female | BIPOC | Elementary | Urban | East |
| 10 | Male | White | High | Suburban | East |
| 11 | Female | BIPOC | Elementary | Urban | East |
| 12 | Male | White | Middle | Suburban | East |

Table 3: Participant Experience

| Participant | Years as Administrator | Years at Principal | Years as Principal at the School Led During Covid |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| 1 | 16+ | 15 | 4 |
| 2 | 13-15 years | 7 | 7 |
| 3 | 16+ | 11 | 11 |
| 4 | 10-12 years | 12 | 8 |
| 5 | 4-6 years | 4 | 4 |
| 6 | 16+ | 12 | 10 |
| 7 | 13-15 years | 5 | 5 |
| 8 | 16+ | 9 | 9 |
| 9 | 13-15 years | 13 | 13 |
| 10 | 13-15 years | 6 | 6 |
| 11 | 4-6 years | 4 | 4 |
| 12 | 10-12 years | 4 | 4 |

Interviews with participants ranged from 39 minutes up to 70 minutes, the average being 53 minutes. The average percentage of speaking between the interviewer (24.33 percent of the time) and participant (75.41 percent of the time) was consistent throughout the interviews. Of the 12 interviews, six were remote using Zoom as the communication platform and six were in-person at locations chosen by participants, primarily the principals' office.

The process of examining the data took many steps. First, the transcripts were read through to ensure accuracy compared to the audio recording. The second reading of the transcripts was to gain a general understanding of the interview conversation, topics, and experiences that participants generated. The third reading of the transcripts was to identify common themes and reports by principals. The final reading was to identify divergent stories across participants.

From the four readings, codes were created based on themes that emerged in the individual interviews. Using the coding software, Quirkos, specific statements and segments from the interview transcripts were coded and recorded (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Tree View of Overall Themes Identified in Transcripts



It was determined that the material coded was broader than the focus of the research question. While much of this data could be used for future research, the content needed to be narrowed for the purpose of this study. As a result, there were four areas identified in all the transcripts:

- I. The experience of principals leading through COVID
- II. The values, beliefs, or practices of leadership that supported principals leading through the pandemic.
- III. Professional structures that principals found valuable in supporting them through the pandemic.
- IV. Personal attention to well-being principals felt supported them as they led through the pandemic.

Based on these four areas, transcripts were re-examined to identify:

- I. Specific descriptors or examples of the experiences, leadership skills, support structures, and attention to well-being.
- II. Frequency of themes arising across the 12 participants
- III. Demographics of participants for each of them.

During this phenomenological study school principals shared their experience of leading through the COVID-19 Pandemic and what leadership values and well-being supports guided them through the moments of crisis.

Personal Emotional Experience

The experience of principals leading through COVID had distinct characteristics across participants in the study. Reports of being in a state of constant change and uncertainty, emotional exhaustion, and taking on the emotional, mental health needs of others while maintaining a calm and unfaltering demeanor was prevalent across participants. This was one of two categories where all 12 participants contributed reflections on their personal emotional experience leading through the pandemic.

Constant State of Change and Uncertainty

On March 13, 2020 then-Governor Charlie Baker declared that all schools would be shut down for a two-week period as government and medical professionals monitored the progression of the new COVID-19 influenza that was spreading across Massachusetts. Many schools that did not have technology infrastructure, had students doing work on their own pace and direction while

others were able to switch to remote instructions using Google Classroom, Zoom, Schoology, or other instructional platforms that were already in place.

Even so, for the majority of the Commonwealth, this was a temporary closing and there was no clear picture of what lied ahead. What would come to be was an almost 3-year experience of schooling disruption, adjustments, and changes of health and safety protocols, Department of Secondary and Elementary Education guidance, and addressing the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive needs of the students and their families across the communities. Principals were the captains of their ships and there were mantras of “all hands-on deck” encouraging everyone to recognize that this was a challenge that we had never seen and had no idea of the full trajectory and impact.

I think at the onset, everybody pulled together. We saw the challenge; we rose to the challenge; we met the challenge. Everybody worked in gave of themselves in a selfless way. And then it didn't stop, and it didn't stop, and it didn't stop. And the communal support got less and less and less. And the emotional drain got worse and worse and worse. Our teachers' performance on the job, throughout this was continually strong. But the emotional drain to do that got harder and harder and harder. [12]

While principals recognized that it would not be business as usual, the work of a school leader was put into overdrive.

The urgency was just at a level that was like nothing I'd ever experienced before. I've always worked crazy hours. The fact that you didn't have to travel and have different pieces, you could just get on the computer and turn it on. I felt like I did not stop working for a year. And I know I'm not alone in that. That was certainly you know, this whole idea of remote working. For most administrators, school districts reaped the benefits of that thing called remote working because all we did is get off our couch and get right to work. There was no transitional time, there was no commute time. The distractions of office politics didn't happen. It was work, work, work, work, meeting,

meeting, meeting, meeting. At least that's how I experienced that during that time. [7]

With this change of landscape came a shift in the role of the leader. No longer did they have the autonomy to meet the instructional needs of students in their school nor the time to focus on professional growth of educators in the pursuit of meeting students' needs. Instead, their focus was shifted to the essential health and safety of their students, security of food, shelter, and life. The unknown was scary and the lack of control was frustrating.

There was a lot of change. I went from being scared to being anxious about all the change. How do we get all the equipment in our kid's hands? How to how am I monitoring that? How are we ensuring that they're getting what they need? And then I still had food safety, shelter safety, and now people were dying. So, anxiety was a lot, you know, and then the staff. The staff was really scared. [9]

I was frustrated. There were many, many, many, many, many days during the remote learning that my frustration level was really high because I felt powerless. I was just following decisions from above me in decisions about curriculum, decisions about assessment, decisions about, you know, everything. Everything went to the hands of central office, they wanted to ensure everything was being done consistently across all schools. I'm not a decision maker. I'm just one voice. There were many times I was very frustrated. I had no control of that content. I have no control of what was being delivered. And if I have frustration with any of that, there was no one to talk to. Before the pandemic, and since I became principal, the team of principals would try to like get together and talk every now and then kind of like, how were how you doing this, how you doing that? And then that kind of like, fell apart. [11]

Personal Emotional Exhaustion

As the pandemic continued school principals kept their focus on all needs of children and families. The pandemic was not just a local, but national and international crisis impacting children and families in so many ways. With each passing day, principals were experiencing a broad range of emotions such a fear, isolation, depression, and stress as they supported the communities they served.

It was really scary, because there was so much unknown. I was really worried about our families. I was worried about the staff. I was worried about practical things. I was worried about people getting sick. I was worried about where they were living. A lot of our family were immigrants. I was worried about that impact [of being immigrants] and being able to go to hospitals [but] being afraid to go to the hospitals. Because the CDC was getting involved. I was afraid of who they were going to blame. I was afraid of those kinds of things. I was scared for families who had food safety issues. I was scared for families who had to go to work and had to leave their kids at home. Because initially, things started closing little by little, but a lot of our families are that cleaning crews at the hospitals or the bus drivers, those things weren't shutting down. So, the kids were home and who were they going to be home with? I initially I was scared a lot, you know. And then I went into action. [9]

The pressure, constant demands, and intensity of situations had leaders get to a level of emotional exhaustion that for many bordered-on burnout.

I think we went through all the emotions, and then and then we got tired. Yeah, right. It all hit home all at the same time. And it was exhausting. There was a lot of pressure, people were getting better and then getting sick. And then you were hearing masks, no masks, there was a possibility of going back to closure. And then and then. [9]

After April break we're coming back to school. And we had to do 900 schedules in a week. We were putting in 12-hour days. During this time period, I never felt like I got any rest. And that might have been, I almost want to look at that as a badge of honor that I was working so hard. But I didn't realize how much it was impacting me that I was just toast. [12]

Socially, emotionally, I can't do many more years like this one. Like I just, it's just not worth it, I think it's impacted my marriage. I've not been there for my kids as much. I definitely value my alone time a little bit more., I probably drank a little bit more. This has been a very, very difficult time. I think some of that is you take on the problems of all the people you're supposed to take care of. And so, it just weighs you down. [12]

For many, the ability to recognize the emotional impact on them personally and how best to lead through this current state was difficult. It required the ability to separate the events from the emotions in order to process the experience with perspective.

To step back and really look at what the experience was like. I will admit, I haven't allowed myself or made the time to do that in full yet, I think there's a little bit of, it's too fresh, and I want to go back yet. And there's, it hasn't really ended. There has just been something right in front of me constantly, that hasn't really allowed me to step back. I would have to start by acknowledging how hard it was. [10]

I'd say [to parents or teachers] 'let me get back to you in 24 hours', because I wanted some time and to take some of the emotion out. I feel like emotions have run so high for so long, that I don't want to make an emotional decision. [12]

Emotional Caretaker of Others

As the public face to the school, there were many leaders who faced the challenge of managing the stress and emotions faced by the school community, while suppressing their own emotions to address the needs of others. They recognized that their job was to be supportive to the needs of others and it often required them to present as stoic and calm, hiding their real feelings or worries.

It was hard. I think there was a lot of grin and bear it more than usual. I mean, I think you do that as a leader sometimes. Anyways, you go from one crisis and walk out the door and smile and talk to kids and talk to teachers. But I think there was a lot more grin and bear it. I wanted to pretend [things were fine]. People were like, 'man, what you do must suck. Like, oh, man, it must suck. It must suck. It must suck.' It's terrible. [1]

As a principal, I'm almost burnt out myself, I'm running out of things to say, that can be a shining like a silver lining behind some of the clouds parents are facing at home. [6]

At times it was so overwhelming to me I was worried about my own mental health. How am I going to bear all of this and still be positive with people without snapping at them? Then the frustration of my teachers refusing to come back to school, [when district returned to in-person] but many of them getting on planes to fly to Florida, that February break. I got to negative space. And I thought, I gotta pull out of this. I'm never going to survive. Because I have to be supportive. That's my job right now. [8]

You have to realize when you take a job as a principal, that you are, the expectation is that you have to become superhuman at times and your own emotions have to be set aside. And that's hard, right? That I mean, that's up, but that's a reality. [8]

There were some days that alarm went off in the morning and you're thinking how can I do this again? How can I go to the boxes of meetings all day? How can I smile when I have a knot in my stomach and my frustration levels are already at a 20. I think just being able to dig deep within ourselves, I think we all had to dig deep within ourselves to figure out how everyone's looking at us. [8]

I do think a lot of what happened over last two and a half years I just carried. I do think there's a lot that just needs to be carried. And if you don't have that capacity, like you shouldn't be in a position. [10]

Are we [principals] in crisis? Yeah. But they cannot see your own crisis. If you need to be in crisis, make sure you do at home, or make sure you lock your door. It's part of the job. It's part of the role. People look up to you. If you're sad, they're going to be sad. If you portray happiness, they're going to portray happiness. If you portray, we're safe and the school is safe, and everyone is well, they're gonna feel secure. [11]

Leadership Values, Beliefs, and Practices

As principals shared their experiences leading through COVID all 12 participants reflected on how their leadership knowledge, skills, and practices provided strength and reassurance for them during the crisis. All principals in the study had been leading their school prior to the pandemic and had a minimum of 4 years of principal experience at the time of the interviews.

North Star

Principals reflected that having clear beliefs and an established, articulated vision prior to the crisis was helpful in managing the unexpected challenges that the pandemic presented. Due to this foundation, they were able to pivot and focus most of their efforts on the safety and well-being for children, families, and staff that were in their care. Participants referred to understanding their purpose, having firm beliefs, and not losing sight of their “North Star”, as they navigated during the darker times.

It's really important as leaders that we know what we stand for.

The North Star concept is really important. And we have to be able to lead with it really openly. So that then when things come up that people are questioning, we have that to lean back on. And it does help having that it does help thicken the skin. To know this is why I'm doing this because if you're not sure why you're doing it, you're just getting the shit beat out of you. I know what's gonna last in that very long. You've got to have a very strong internal compass, moral compass, you got to know what you're doing the word for it, you've got to have a clearer understanding of what you're willing to push on and fight for and what you're not. [10]

If you have firm clear beliefs, and can articulate those transparently and consistently, then it makes a huge difference. And I don't say that believing that I've done that entirely, it's, it's still a striving for me. [10]

Student teacher relationships create the best improvement, that that there's only one reason we're here, and we're here for the kids. [6]

I think it's a job, you gotta have a lot of heart. And if you have the heart in it, it can be really, really fulfilling. But it's, it's hard, and it's challenging. And there's an ebb and flow to that. At least even [on] a bad day I know [I am] contributing to something really important and meaningful. [5]

Relationships

Having a solid foundation built on trust and relationships supported principals during this time period as well. Principals shared that they appreciated the time they had spent building relationships early in their tenure at their building, and felt these relationships allowed them to implement necessary changes and respond to the crisis. As established, trusted leaders, principals reported their staff particularly felt they knew what to expect and that their principal was looking out for them.

It has only reaffirmed or reminded me that relationships are the most important. They're at the center of the work. Relationships you have with your community, your colleagues and your students. Everything is built on that. Identity, built on relationships, or maybe connected to relationships. Do I fully know, the person or persons that I'm doing this with and how it intersects with what we do? [4]

This whole thing is 100% relationships. Like you can do derivatives and quadratic equations and titrate acids and do all that stuff. Learn another language, that's great. But the reality is, all that stuff is for me is contingent

on developing really strong relationships with people. People, kids, teachers, students, families, teachers. The whole thing is how people are treated, how they feel if they're heard, and how you interact with them. [3]

I know, my kids would say, I'm tough. I know, my colleagues would say, she doesn't mess around, that she is all business, has a heart of gold, and will give the shirt off her back for anybody, but she has high expectations for her staff and for her kids. So when I had to execute [response to crisis], at a time that I had no idea what the outcome was going to be, people responded because they knew who I was, and what I expected, even before we entered into this craziness. [7]

Transparency

The State, Department of Education, districts, and school leaders at the helm were facing constant changes and great uncertainty during the pandemic. New information, the rise and fall of COVID infections, additions to regulations, and the need for quick turnaround in shifting schedules and expectations required principals to be nimble and clear in their decision making and communication. On many occasions, the school principal was the primary source of information being shared to students, families, and staff. Transparency and flexibility were key to their helping their community feel safe and supported.

I have to be calm and thoughtful and respond to the best of my ability, and then try to think through domino effects as far as I can, to anticipate issues. Then communicate as much as I possibly can as clearly as I can. [5]

I think that this year, in particular, with some of the stuff that I faced at the high school with the public frustration, I think has definitely crystallized my recognition that we need to be really transparent about the beliefs and the experiences that were intentionally creating a need in high school. And that way, you're not surprised. [10]

I think you need to be transparent and flexible, and help your team because they model off of you. If you're transparent and flexible, it's more likely that they will be transparent and flexible. And then I think the other thing is to enjoy your job. Because this too shall pass. This too shall pass and then you want to come out of it on the other side. Better than when you went in. [9]

If you're dealing with anxiety, last thing you want to do is dodge. [You] gotta be direct. This is the direction that we're going. When you say something mean what you're gonna say. Have it feel safe, have it be safe, it will feel safe. That will help build the stamina to do it again and again. [4]

Identity of Others

During the span of the pandemic, school principals were leading amidst a backdrop of unprecedented levels of national crisis and upheaval. There was economic and political unrest, social justice protests, a reckoning between our communities, police, and justice system, and an ever-growing national divide that all required educational leaders' immediate focus. An enduring lesson that principals shared was recognizing the essential need to understand and honor the identity of others. Knowing individuals, seeing all of what people encompass, and listening to their stories, provided opportunity to make broader, more equitable decisions as they lead their community.

Identity, or built on relationships, or maybe connected to relationships in the sense that do I fully know, the person or persons that I'm doing this with? And how it intersects with what we do, right? Do I fully understand the identity of the people that I'm doing the work with? And then what is the information that comes from those things? Do I have everything that I need to make decisions to guide next steps to prioritize time, like all this other information that you need to do your job, but it starts with the relationships that you have, and understand the identities of the folks that you're doing it with. [4]

I've noticed I've had to adjust. I've had to give families an opportunity to be listened to first and I gotta make sure I have all my ducks in a row. [7]

To a white administrator, I would say don't forget those that you cannot see. And to an administrator of color, I will say find a partner. Find a partner that you can count on someone that understands what you're going through, and that potentially someone in your same field that you can bounce things off. Because that was one of the things that I did a lot. [11]

[Going through the pandemic] refined or enhanced that recognition that we've all got stories. And we're all coming in with our own paths and experiences that are impacting how we are in a classroom, whether we're instructor or students. And you can't, you can't deny that you can ignore that you have to be your authentic self. [10]

Generalized Leadership Skills

There were just general leadership skills that principals utilized to navigate the crisis. Skills such as being flexible, vulnerable, patient and positive. Not personalizing information, building trust and capacity across the staff, knowing when you have to slow down to process and that not every problem must be fixed in the moment. These were all essential pieces of leadership skills that principals spoke about during their interviews.

You can't personalize things because the minute you get knocked down and you feel like they're knocking down [you personally], instead of knocking down the principal, you're done, because you can't get out of your own way. If you take everything personally, you are going to make people angry, you're going to make decisions that make people unhappy. [8]

Don't be too hard on yourself if things don't get done. Because you can only work so hard. [12]

It just reaffirms, you have to be patient, even though it's no fun. It's staying the course and being patient. That sounds lame, but I think it reaffirms that you have to do that because they're just not there yet, even if I want them [there] today. [1]

Build up the trust and capacity of your staff, if they don't already have that. [10]

Trying to take this kind of bunch of lemons, make lemonade, and make it palatable for everybody in the sense of like, how do we try and instill this esprit de corps of like, we got to do this, we're in this together, let's go. [3]

I didn't have to fix everything that minute. There were certain times something would happen. Someone would ask me a question, because it's kind of a crisis situation. Everyone wants something solved. And there were some times I would say, I'm not going to think about a potential problem. I'm not going to borrow trouble. I'm going to give it 24 hours. [12]

Professional Structures - Job-Alike Groups & First Teams

There were two areas that were identified most frequently by principals as professional support structures that supported them through the pandemic. First was the connection with job-alike communities organized outside of the district (see Table 4). The second was reliance on the school-based administrative team, often referred to as “first teams”.

Table 4: Job Alike Groups

9 out of 12 participants spoke about Job Alike communities.

| Percentage of Comments | Percentage of Participants | In the Category |
|------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|
| 18 | 41.66 | Female |
| 82 | 58.33 | Males |
| 29 | 16.66 | Rural/Cape |
| 53 | 50 | Suburban |
| 18 | 33.33 | Urban |
| 29 | 41.66 | Elementary |
| 35 | 33.33 | Middle |
| 35 | 25 | High |

Job-Alike Groups

Job-Alike groups took a variety of different forms. Some of them were internally based across principles existing within the same district that would meet on a regular basis. Others were across a number of communities and represented a similar educational range, such as middle school principals, or high school principals.

Diversity Across Job Alike Groups

Job alike groups, provided them a diversity of thought, emotional support, and a think tank opportunity to get a greater perspective of what's going on. Principals spoke highly of the value of these job alike groups. Principals who were not able to engage with job alike groups shared they wished they had used job alike support during this time of crisis.

There's a good network, middle school specific principals. In area towns, we know each other well, we're friendly, we get along, we spend time together. And it was really interesting. They all have different organizational structures in their building. They all have different kinds of communities in

the valley. There are some that are incredibly rural and are regional districts and there are some that are incredibly urban. Some were remote, some were hybrid everybody was in a different place. But to be able to call a neighboring principal and say, Hey, I got I got a day to flip this bell schedule. We're gonna stay remote. I didn't plan on that. Or, we're gonna go hybrid tomorrow. There was the night that we were planned [for] a hybrid date of return to school date set that they just kept changing, like the night before, for months on end. And to have somebody to call and [ask], What are you doing for your specials? How are you making lunch go? [It] was just so incredibly valuable and everybody had different answers. [2]

Emotional Support

Principals reported that the role of building leader can be isolating and having a group of individuals who understand the job and can truly empathize with your struggles was helpful. They internalized the experiences happening around them and carried the stress and pain silently. Having a job alike group, they could turn to when things were difficult, eased their emotional burdens a bit.

I think internalizing, unfortunately, some of the negative and listening to people and their problems and keeping that in without having an outlet [was difficult]. For that means that sometimes my outlet is when I go home. Yeah. Which I don't think is very helpful. So in talking to other people who are principals, like, it's not, I don't feel like I'm on an island, and it's just my emotions. I feel like we're a lot of us are facing the same way. And it was good to hear good and bad that people were having similar problems and that you weren't, like you weren't having these problems that other people weren't experiencing. Not only was it good to like be able to share ideas, but it was also good to know that it wasn't just you. It wasn't just your school, that it was broader than that. [12]

We needed the space outside of the district to discuss a matter related to the school in a way that felt safe. You know, we had dinner, we had a drink here or there. But we were working. We were trying to understand what was happening to us. We were trying to understand how to manage what we needed, what we were expected to do. And we were trying to understand how to keep the schools afloat. [11]

Knowing that you've got to hold and carry a lot, I think you've got to have the structures around you to be able to vent, release, and some of that, like, I've got 20, some odd 30 some odd principals in our Job Alike, like email exchange, which is a huge resource. And probably 15–20 of us who get [on Zoom] on a monthly basis pretty routinely. To have those sort of supports and be like, how are you handling? Freaking out? Like, here's what we do, or like, Yes, I'm having the same [experience]. Even sometimes, I have no answer, but I absolutely FEEL you right now. [10]

There was the principal for me that's down the street and knows my whole family. I think I probably talked to him twice. I was like, Kevin, does this suck more than like it's ever suck before? He's like, yep. But you know, that's a brief conversation. Yeah, [I] probably should have met with them every couple of weeks just to be like, "What are you doing?". [I] just should have made a little bit more time just to meet with him. [I would have] probably felt better. [1]

Think Tank Purpose

Most often principals utilized job alike connections to brainstorm ways to address the ever-changing guidelines and regulations that were being sent from the State and local districts.

I probably talked to more people outside my districts, like old colleagues, while we were shut down. Sometimes they might just be like, What the hell are you guys doing or what's going on? Or did it help you some kids? Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. When? [1]

I think we were all trying to solve the same problem, but we were modeling off of each other in different ways. I certainly got ideas from this group that influenced how our solutions actually fed out. It was helpful to be able to say, [comparable district] is doing this and they have this population. It's not unlike us in this way. So why don't we think about that? [5]

We collaborated more as principals. Elementary principals got in line in ways we've never been in line. [4]

First Teams

The role of school based administrative groups or “First Teams” generally consisted of the assistant principal, guidance counselors, and special education leaders. These First Teams had a positive impact in supporting principals during the pandemic. 10 principals spoke positively with two, both from the elementary level, reflecting that they wished they had stronger first teams during the crisis (see Table 5).

Table 5: First Teams

Percentages of Comments related to First Teams by Participant and Category

| Percentage of Comments | Percentage of Participants | In the Category |
|------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|
| 43 | 41.66 | Female |
| 57 | 58.33 | Males |
| 8 | 16.66 | Rural/Cape |
| 48 | 50 | Suburban |
| 44 | 33.33 | Urban |
| 31 | 41.66 | Elementary |
| 50 | 33.33 | Middle |
| 20 | 25 | High |

Principals spoke about the positive support they received from their first team. They acknowledged that these are people that they could be themselves with and could trust explicitly. Since principals spent so much time on the front lines being a spokesperson for the district or their school, and having to answer questions for others, they felt they needed a group they could trust. With their first teams, they could be vulnerable and receive support to address the crisis at hand.

Principals often referred to first teams with descriptors such as “marriage”, “going to war”, or “family”. These terms showed how intimately these relationships

supported the principals during this time. Principals also recognized that they could not do this job alone. Not only did the first team support them, but also principals had a responsibility to ensure that they took care of the team members in a very strong and powerful way.

Positive Support First Teams

We have 48 hours to solve it. Let's go, let's get to work. And you handle this, you handle it. And so I think for me, it made me feel a lot more comfortable with my leadership style, I feel a lot more grounded in the fate of the vision and the practices that I have, as a leader because have hired really good people and because we've built a good culture and that could sustain this. [If I was a] new principal, who didn't have time to build it? I don't know, I don't know if I would have made it out. But having been in this building for 14 years, and the principal for seven and having the team that I have. Well, I made it through because we did it together. And that's always been a component part of my leadership that I've hung my hat on. So in that sense, it was really validating. [2]

My admin team has been definitely one of the reasons why we made it through this. Some of my best friends and they're, like, just good people. We've been able to rely on each other. But our boundaries aren't great. Because our boundaries aren't great, now the sort of 24/7 feel to things. It's a lot. It's a lot. [5]

The tightness of my relationships with my vice principals. Girl, I would go in a bunker with them. Like when I tell you, ride or die. With my leadership team, we've also been together for five years, every member on the team has been with me since I've started at this school. Maybe not in the same position, but they have been part of my leadership, teacher leader development that became administrator. I've had what are five people that even when things got really, really tough, I could pick up the phone and unleash with them as [myself] and they understood the ins and outs, they understood where I was coming from, they could share back with me their frustrations. I think it also showed me the strength of the team that I developed. Not every school has people that are ride or die for their jobs and their careers. [7]

One thing I learned about myself more than ever was I hated working from home. I get energy from other people around me. When I was at home, it was, you know, everybody else at home was working, you're in school. Coming back, I got that energy. We made that kind of effort each day. There was only the office staff and myself and the two assistant principals back [in the building]. We made an effort to laugh and laugh as much as you can, because that gives you that that energy. [8]

We've been together for a long time, we could finish each other sentences, we work well together. And I was able to really rely on them and their strengths. [9]

This is a marriage in here. We meet once a week for two and a half hours. But um, yeah, they think we're fighting. They've come to know, right? We have like four white noise boxes. Yeah. Yeah. Like, there's four black women and one white woman. And it's like that's how we talk. We interrupt each other. We don't take turns. Yeah. Like, sisters. [9]

We could close the door, get things done, support each other, emotionally, and then leave and present. Another, another face. I'm not sure how I get through these four years without leaning on some of the administrators that I had. I think it was important for me to make sure that I was taking care of them first and foremost, because what I was asking of them was more than they should have been required to do. So I needed those people to be the team. I recognized that when they had a bad day, I needed to pick them up, because there were days that when I had a bad day, they picked me up who fell within that team. [12]

Negative Impact

Similar to principals who felt isolation not having a job or like team to rely on during the pandemic, a similar feeling was there for principals who either had limited administrative teams, were individual administrators in their building, or had a dysfunctional relationship within the team, which did not allow them to fully trust or be vulnerable with this group. They reflected about having partners that either

they didn't choose or that it wasn't working out or not having one at all.

I found myself with partners that I did not choose were partners that were given to me, and it has been a revolving door. I've had three assistant principals in four years. Of course, it's a reflection on you. No one knows that you were told, Oh, no, this, this is a really good person. So now, this time, I am going to have a new assistant principal this next year. Choosing the right partner. It's an art. Then then allowing that partner to give you feedback the same way you're giving feedback to that partner. [11]

Personal Attention to Well-Being

Prior to interviews, brief survey questions were given to participants. (see

Figures 4 & 5).

Figure 4: Focus on Well-Being

To what extent did you focus on your personal well-being during the COVID pandemic?

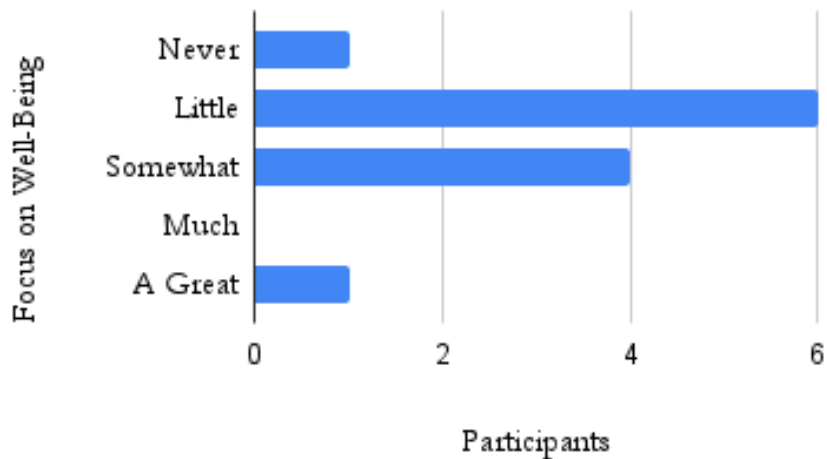
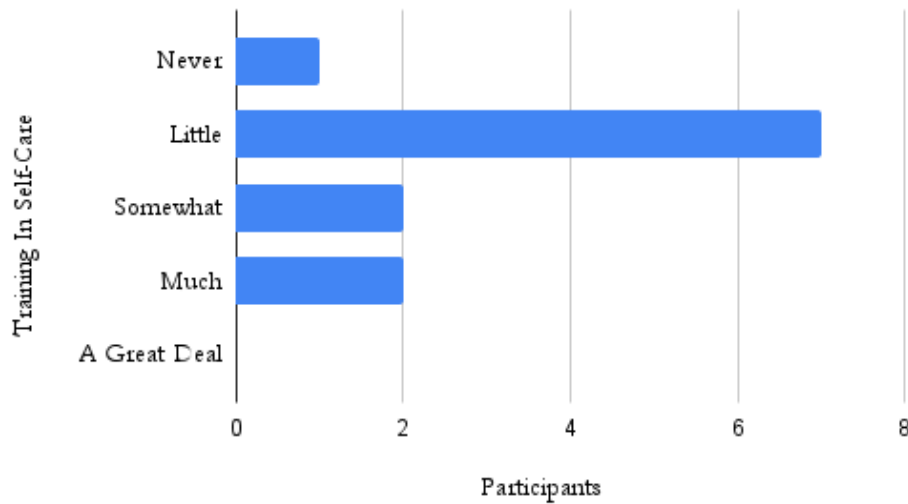


Figure 5: Training in Self-Care

To what extent did you have training in self-care prior to the COVID pandemic?



All 12 participants spoke to their personal attention to well-being (see Table 6).

Table 6: Attention to Well-Being

| Percentage of Comments | Percentage of Participants | In the Category |
|------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|
| 41.02 | 41.66 | Female |
| 58.97 | 58.33 | Males |
| 10.25 | 16.66 | Rural/Cape |
| 58.97 | 50 | Suburban |
| 30.76 | 33.33 | Urban |
| 56.41 | 41.66 | Elementary |
| 23.07 | 33.33 | Middle |
| 20.51 | 25 | High |

During the interview questions posed related to well-being and self-care were:

- a. Are there ways your well-being was strengthened or weakened, changed or remained constant? Did the pandemic have you grow or change in your thinking or practice regarding well-being and self-care?
- b. What do you do to take care of yourself? What is your self-care?

From interviews, there wasn't a consistent response from principals, instead there was diversity in their responses and a range of degree in attending to their personal well-being. Some participants reported engaging in self-care that boosted their well-being and some participants reflected they had not taken care of themselves saw negative results.

I am doing some self-care, I think, probably not as much as I should. But you know, you're a mom, and so that's not really what we do. [9]

I gained weight. I worked out less took less time for me. My hours were outrageous. Yeah. I mean, I mean, like, it's, it's, there's a toll right, and I don't think any leader in any other industry didn't get into that, that like, sustained stress. Yeah. And the impact that that has on people. So, I think it was significant. [5]

We have a new grandbaby and my wife went off to give her daughter, you know, sort of a free weekend with her husband, and you know, so she was gone Friday night and Saturday night and came back on Sunday and um But I think she noticed. And I'm starting to feel now that, you know, there is some darkness and depression. [6]

All participants shared an understanding of what self-care methods would help their well-being, however not all were able to engage in these practices during the pandemic. Common themes on the type of self-care that improved their well-being were related to physical, spiritual, intellectual, and relational activities. The relational activities focused on family, separating from work, and coaching.

Physical Activities

We ended up doing a couple of fairly significant house projects. I painted almost a whole floor and put a huge patio in our backyard. I needed to just be done. It's not like I'm shutting down. I needed to work physically with my

hands that's just sitting like staring at a computer. It was cathartic. I know, like my happy place is doing yard work, moving things around, mowing, whatever. Just watching people in the pool, like I don't even need to be in the pool, just my kids are hanging out and I'm puttering. I don't know that I would have been happy as a landscaper, but in my own life, that's where I'm happy. Going for long runs and things like that, it just has reminded me that in order to remain healthy, you're gonna need to not be "on". This thing can go at any time [you] can be told on a Saturday night that two kids get killed outside and there's that's a Saturday night. So just to make sure that there's that separation. [10]

[Last year] I decided I was going to get up every morning and I was going to walk to school. Then I'd have to walk home. I only live about four miles away. So 6:15 a.m. doot, doot doot doot, change when I got to school, then I would, have my day and then I'd walk home. That was really helpful for me. I haven't started it up again this year. But that that piece of self-care was very important. Because I'd come into the building and be able to be kind of refreshed. I already got some exercise in so I didn't feel like bad if I didn't get moving a lot that day. Even now it's like trying to find getting back into that routine of taking care of myself, but I've never been one that's been particularly good about self-care. [8]

I'm big into my yard. Got a good three acres that looks like a golf course. I still keep my old motorcycle on the road. It's 1982. It's the first motorcycle I owned. I do everything myself on that. I did do a weight loss program, because I was really getting unhealthy during COVID. I'm down 40 pounds from where was I was. Really was a great experience. My wife and I did it together. [6]

I'm a runner, I'm a worker outer, that's always been my outlet. [7]

I've been pretty good about exercising, I drink too many Diet Cokes, I gotta have less of that. But I do a good job of exercising, I do a good job of reading, I made sure that I continued to do those things. When I was home, I still didn't sleep as much as I should sleep. [2]

I remember getting routine of like driving him [my son] to basketball practice, coming home getting like a 35-40-minute workout then drive back

and picking them up I felt during the time, it wasn't like 'Oh my god, I'm so stressed. I have to do this'. I was like, "I have all this fricken time, I can go get a workout at like seven o'clock, and go to my first meeting at eight". [3]

Spiritual Activities

I've enhanced my practice of around meditation. I meditate almost daily. I meditate during the day as well. I take 10 minutes. I meditate with the students, when I find that they need it. I'll meditate with a teacher. In the morning, I meditate in the evening, and probably 10 minutes during the day, I do that I think it's been a saving grace. We also because we're very familiar here, and I'm not sure how appropriate it is. But we've often done prayer circles. And we did a lot of that during COVID. We have the same cafeteria women, for both preachers and who've been with us for 23 years each. They start every morning here and they come in at five, they do a walk through the entire school and then the whole ground every morning and say their prayers. When I come in at 7:30, I go downstairs, and we say our morning prayers. And I think that helps. [9]

Intellectual Activities

I want to go to this conference. There are many interesting topics I want to hear about, I need to re-energize myself, I need something to feed my principalship again. Yeah. And I'm going to do that, and I'm going to take my time off. [11]

I was doing much better about just reading at night before bed and just getting my head out of the space. And I, when I get up in the morning, I don't look at my email first I do we'll see how I do that. And you know, like, just making sure I've got some separation at different points. [10]

This is where it shifted for me where I made a decision, like, what am I going to do with my time? There is time here that is offset, [the pandemic] has created time that we didn't have. We're not on the go anymore. Sports came to a halt, restaurants, movies, museums, all that shit was [done]. So you had time. It was like, what am I going to do with my time? So I started doing workshops. I would do a workshop, you know, everything was free. [4]

I finished IDEAS (Initiatives for Developing Equity and Achievement for Students). I joined a yearlong experience with School Reform Network called Equity in Leadership. I was like, I'm all in on this, I'm going to spend my time in equity, I want to be like, a better human. And so that part, from a leadership perspective, I feel like I came out stronger. Way different way better perspective than I did previously. [4]

Relational Activities - Coaching

It's been positive, it's been great. It gets my brain someplace else. I've always kind of done a little bit [of coaching] instead of maybe like working out, or go to the gym, or running, or things like that just to do something else. I mean, I think there's stresses involved with that. But it's different. Yeah, it's different. I can coach sports and people [ask], why do you do that? I'm like, it makes me do something else. Like really like, otherwise I'll just sit in my office and work and work and work and work and go home and work and work and work. So at least gives me something else to do. That's good. I've always coached football, because I played so that was easy. [1]

I'm also around a group of people. It's like affinity group of guys, you know, that we are, whether we're going to do this the way that we believe we're going to do this what we're building something for the community It's completely filled our bucket here, meeting great people that you know, this tribe of folks that have been traveling around forever, and then I handed them over to the high school. I enjoy being around kids. It's just fine. You're on your own terms. I like being in the community. That's how I found my way into the community. [1]

I found myself coaching three basketball teams and doing all that. And my wife again was uh, you've lost yourself. You're crazy. I loved every second of it. Yeah, I didn't feel a bit stressed. It made me get the hell out of here. Because there was practice coming. You can't have your phone on when you're teaching a third grader how to dribble a basketball or play Sharks and Minnows or whatever, I loved it. Man did I have fun, I love that. I didn't feel a lick of stress. I was up on my feet moving around. I'm going to commit to coach basketball as often as I can for as many of my kids. [2]

Relational Activities - Family

We were allowed to take vacation days in July, we took some time off, I went back home to Puerto Rico reenergized came back and I was really just really excited that the school year was going to begin in person, I didn't care about all the protocols that were put in place. You know, I just wanted the kids back full time. [11]

I think I'm trying to prioritize like some more wellness strategies for me, like, you know, I am really trying to establish better boundaries outside of school hours. So even things like putting the work cell phone away from me. There were times that my family would be like, you gotta stop now. Having little kids it's a good reminder. They don't care about whatever guidance just dropped by DESE. That was a helpful reminder of taking time to pause. Yeah, stop, because your, your brain works better with those breaks. [5]

Reflections of not attending to well-being

I feel like a lot of people are drained on the weekends, and then don't have the energy on the weekend, to be a better husband, be a better father, you know, spouse, whatever. And I think that's the next learning that I have to I have to say, is if this is going to be what it's like, I have two options, which is one, I need to change it somehow so that it's better. Or I need to I need to look for another job. Yeah. That's where I am. [12]

Results from Qualtrics Survey

Included in the data collection was a brief survey that asked principals to reflect on the impact leading through COVID-19 had on their leadership and personal well-being. Principals were also asked about the amount of training they received related to self-care prior to COVID-19 and how much attention they paid to their personal well-being during the crisis (see Figures 6, 7, 8, & 9).

Figure 6: Extent Principals' Leadership was Negatively Impacted During COVID Crisis.

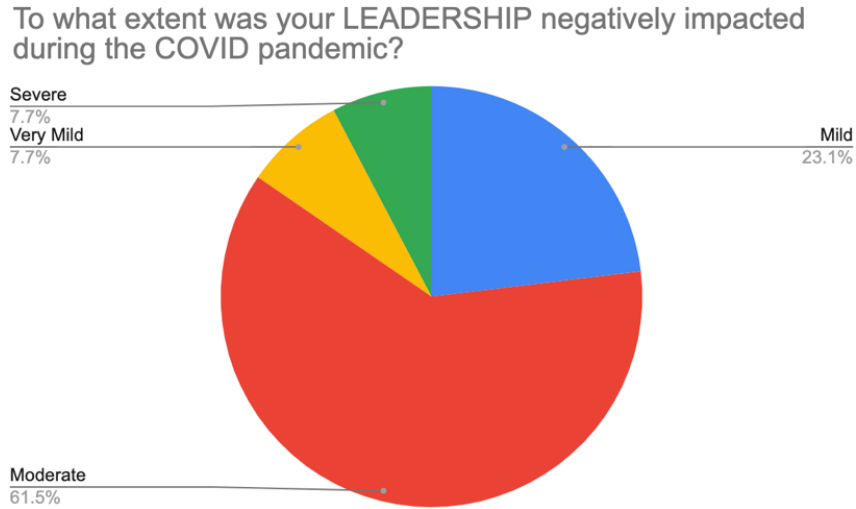


Figure 7: Extent Principals' Well-Being was Negatively Impacted During COVID Crisis.

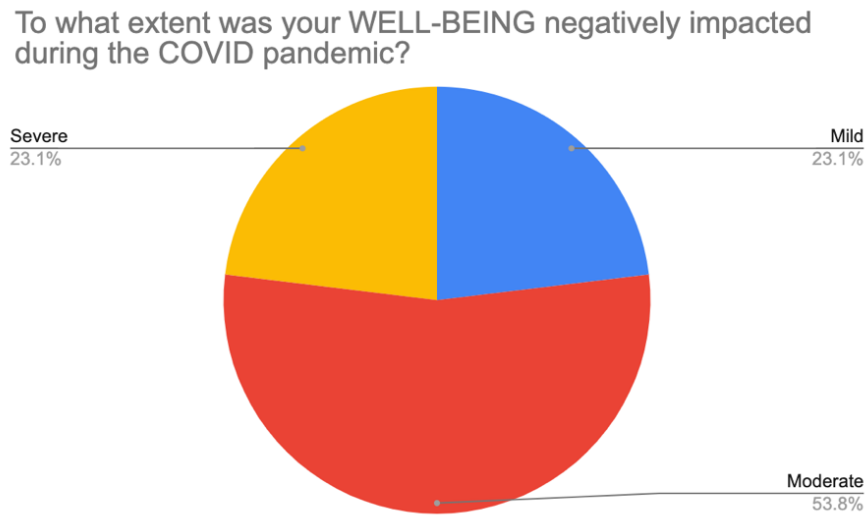


Figure 8: Extent Principals' Focused on their Personal Well-Being COVID Crisis.

To what extent did you focus on your PERSONAL WELL-BEING during the COVID pandemic?

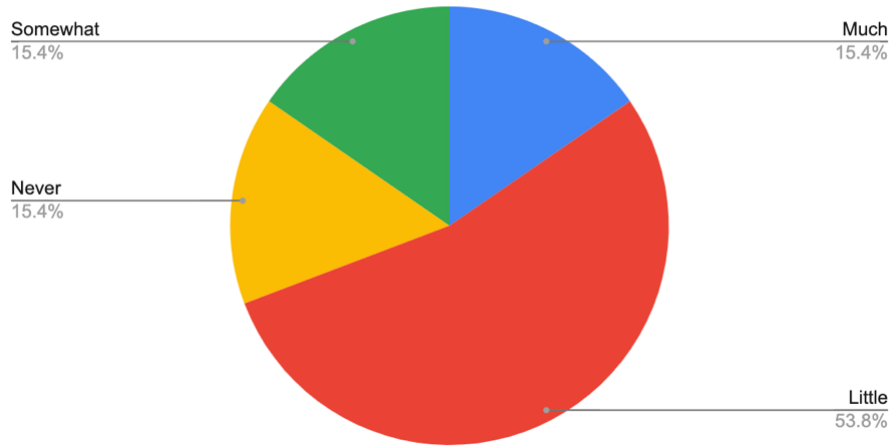
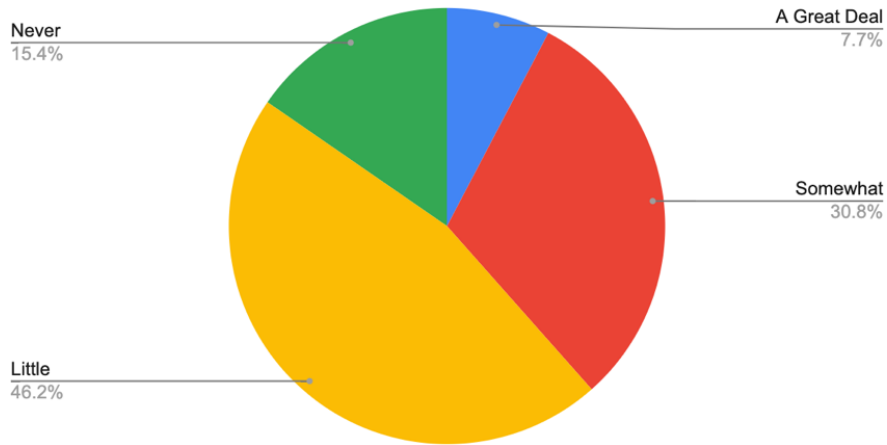


Figure 9: Extent of Principals' Training in Self-Care Prior to the COVID Crisis.

To what extent did you have TRAINING IN SELF-CARE prior to the COVID pandemic?



CHAPTER FIVE

It was valuable to learn how the experience of leading through COVID-19 Pandemic impacted principals' and what leadership values and well-being supports guided them through the crisis. Findings and analysis of the data revealed the emotional experience was unlike any previous leadership crisis. However, the emotional demands and toll principals regularly faced were intensified beyond imagination.

Principals focusing on the core values that guide their practice, understanding the skills and strategies utilized when leading organizational change, engaging in leadership practices related to equity, and maintaining strong relationships through transparent and authentic communications were at the center of principals' feeling impactful during the crisis. Previous research has identified that school principals must establish culture and practices for an organization to be successful. This demands that principals must maintain "personal and emotional stamina, the ability to read and interpret situations micropolitically, a reflective attitude as a basis for proper judgment and skillful interaction with others inside and outside school" (Kelchertermans, 2011).

Job-Alike Groups & First Teams were valuable assets for leaders while facing the crisis. In these places, principals could be vulnerable and seek support. Relying on Job-Alike networks assisted them in maintaining their balance and well-being during this very stressful time. Principal shared that these Job-Alike networks

provided valuable professional and emotional support. These groups helped them brainstorm ideas and address new ways of thinking. The diversity of thought and experience allowed them to find solutions they had not considered, while having colleagues who hold the same role and responsibility reduced the sense of isolation and alleviated them feeling the negative responses from constituents were personal. Previous research has suggested that fostering principals' social networks inside and outside of school, similar to First Teams and Job-Alikes, support leaders in adopting interventions and programming in their schools (Neal, 2020).

Closer to the day-to-day organization of the school, principals described having First Teams as being a positive support for them. While First Teams had a diversity across principals in their make-up, they most often included assistant principals and guidance counselors. The ability to rely on this First Team, to trust and to be vulnerable, was essential for them to be able to move forward and leave the school principals recognize that they were not in this alone. It was evident by the few who did not have strong First Teams within their building that they shared, more negative experiences and sense of isolation than the other participants, who reference strong First Teams.

From the data it was clear that well-being isn't something that is separate from work or "other" that you add on, but an integration of positive psychological functioning and self-care practices. Principals reported that aspects of their personal experiences that kept them focused and feeling impactful were their leadership values, skills, and relationships. Having professional structures of

support inside and outside of the district reduced their sense of isolation and provided resources to address the various changes they faced. Individual self-care practices were recognized as valuable to individuals overall positive health but varied greatly in type and degree across principals. What was notable was that all of these aspects, in combination, buoyed their overall well-being.

When it comes to self-care, there is not one particular item that principals engaged in. However, there did seem to be a balance across physical, spiritual, emotional and intellectual dimensions. These dimensions along with core values that guided principals' practice are aligned with the Humanics philosophy at Springfield College which was articulated by Professor Seth Arsenian:

The basic philosophy of Springfield College is the Humanics philosophy. Two of its most outstanding characteristics are these:

1. The Humanics philosophy is dedicated in service to all men: the poor and the well-to-do; the young and the old; men of all races, all creeds, all nations, and all stations in life; and never some to the exclusion of others.
2. The Humanics philosophy is manifested in the collegiate effort by seeking to train the whole man and woman; not just his or her intellect (Mind), but also the physical aspect (Body), and finally that intangible force (Spirit) which has enabled man, despite all his shortcomings, to rise above the other living creatures of the earth (Arsenian, 1969).

As noted previously, Murphy & D'Auria (2020) identify four major areas consuming a principal's time and effectiveness: maintenance, putting out fires, strategic improvement, and personal well-being. The Vignette of Principal Jane in Chapter One gave an example of how she attended to three of the four areas, inferring that her attention to personal well-being was limited. While it appeared

that Principal Jane spent little time on her personal well-being, the results of this study identified well-being supports such as Job-Alike opportunities, school based First Teams, being visible, having transparent communication, and maintaining positive relationships with people all positively influenced the overall well-being of leaders. The aspect of self-care was missing from this vignette and it appears to only one part of what supported well-being for leaders during the COVID-19 crisis.

Burnout, as defined by researchers Michael Leiter and Christina Maslach, “Remains a syndrome of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy. If someone is experiencing high rates of all three of these at work, that indicates they are burned out, while low rates of all three indicate they are engaged” (Lievens, 2021). The experience reflected by principals in this study did identify physical and emotional exhaustion, but there was very little indication of cynicism.

Related to inefficacy, principals felt they understood their purpose and moved plans forward to address the needs of their community. Principals primary purpose as building leader shifted from a previous focus as instructional leader to the role of crisis manager. Looking back, they described doing the best they could without much guidance. There wasn't a deep regret on their inefficacy during this time period. As a result, principals did not appear to demonstrate burnout as defined by these researchers.

When asked quantitatively how leading through the COVID crisis impacted principals' leadership and well-being, the majority of principals reflected that their leadership and personal well-being was negatively impacted to a mild to moderate

degree during the pandemic. However, this limited measure did not capture an understanding of why principals reported these degrees.

Using the Definitions of Theory-Guided Dimensions of Well-Being, as outlined in Carol Ryff's research (1989), and comparing the experiences that were articulated by principals, it was evident that principals had numerous positive dimensions that were supporting their overall well-being during the crisis. Though Ryff's research was to operationalize the six dimensions of psychological well-being through a quantitative instrument, for this study a review the definitions underpinning the instruments questions were qualitatively compared to principals' experiences during the COVID crisis. Principals' positive experiences and ability to maintain their well-being were aligned with the High Scorers in the areas of Self-Acceptance, Positive Relation to Others, Purpose in Life, and Positive Growth. Due to the hierarchical structure designed by State and governmental leaders and facing an unpredictable terrain put forth by the crisis, principals had negative experiences that align to the Low Scorers in the areas of Autonomy and Environmental Mastery (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: Definitions of Theory-Guided Dimensions of Well-Being (Ryff, 1989)

| High Scorer | Low Scorer |
|--|---|
| <p>Self-Acceptance Possesses a positive attitude toward the self; acknowledges and accepts multiple aspects of self including good and bad qualities; feels positive about past life.</p> | <p>Self-Acceptance Feels dissatisfied with self; is disappointed with what has occurred in past life; is troubled about certain personal qualities; wishes to be different than what he or she is.</p> |
| <p>Positive Relations to Others Has warm, satisfying, trusting relationships with others; is concerned about the welfare of others; capable of strong empathy, affections, and intimacy; understands give and take of human relationships.</p> | <p>Positive Relations to Others Has few close, trusting relationships with others; finds it difficult to be warm, open, and concerned about others; is isolated and frustrated in interpersonal relationships; not willing to make compromising to sustain important ties with others.</p> |
| <p>Purpose in Life Has goals in life and a sense of directness; feels there is meaning to present and past life; holds beliefs that give life purpose; has aims and objectives for living</p> | <p>Purpose in Life Lacks a sense of meaning in life; has few goals or aims, lacks sense of direction; does not see purpose of past life; has not outlook or belief that give meaning.</p> |
| <p>Personal Growth Has feeling of continued development; sees self as growing and expanding; is open to new experiences; has a sense of realizing his or her potential; sees improvement in self-knowledge and effectiveness.</p> | <p>Personal Growth Has a sense of personal stagnation; lacks sense of improvement or expansion over time; feels bored and uninterested in life; feels unable to develop new attitudes or behaviors.</p> |
| <p>Autonomy Is self-determining and independent; able to resist social pressures to think and act in certain ways; regulates behavior from within; evaluates self by personal standards.</p> | <p>Autonomy Is concerned about the expectations and evaluations of others, relies on judgements of others to make important decisions; conforms to social pressures to think and act in certain ways.</p> |
| <p>Environmental Mastery Has a sense of mastery and competence in managing the environment; controls complex array of external activities; makes effective use of surrounding opportunities; able to choose or create contexts suitable to personal needs and values.</p> | <p>Environmental Mastery Has difficulty managing everyday affairs; feels unable to change or improve surrounding context, is unaware of surrounding opportunities; lacks sense of control over external world.</p> |

Four of the six dimensions, self-acceptance, positive relations, other's purpose in life and personal growth were directly tied to principals' leadership values, beliefs and practices along with having positive professional structures such as Job-Alike and First Teams. From the data it was clear that well-being isn't something that is separate from work or reliant on one activity done by individuals, but an integration

of quality leadership knowledge and skills, positive psychological functioning, and self-care practices.

Implication

Findings of this work have a number of implications. First, it is clear that principals experience a sense of isolation and great responsibility as individuals for the community that they serve. It is imperative that these individuals have supports and contacts inside and outside of their district such as Job-Alike groups and First Teams so they can reduce isolation and foster relationships that allow their leadership to grow and strengthen.

Secondly, this research has implications for the training and support of current and future leaders. It is essential for principals to have a clear set of leadership values and beliefs along with skills include visioning, interpersonal relationships, emotional intelligence relationship building communication, transparency, and cultural competency. School leaders need a level of social and self-awareness in order to recognize and honor the identity of others. These competencies will assist principals to better support the diverse communities they serve.

Finally, recognizing that well-being isn't an add-on. Care to one's well-being ebbs and flows throughout the experience of a principal. It is clear these leaders maintain the identity of school principal, both in and outside of the school. As the results from the principal's experience show they are the emotional caretaker, often hiding their own emotions in order to maintain a sense of stability for the

community. Principals must take care of themselves in order to take care of others, whether that means, physically spiritually, intellectually or relationally.

Providing leaders quality pre-service programming, in-district and out-of-district professional support structures, and support from their superintendents to develop and maintain their whole self; intellectually, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, will assist leaders to be prepared and effective during future unexpected times of crisis. Leading through the COVID-19 Pandemic has impacted school principals to think deeply and differently on how we educate our children, how we care for each other, and how we lead through crisis.

Limitations

This study was limited by the participants and their experience. Because the sample was small, 12 participants, it does not allow me to make generalizable statements about all principals. While school principals have faced other crisis in the past, COVID-19 Pandemic was experienced by school principals across the nation and world. Everyone was impacted; families, students, teachers, leaders, and communities. However, not all communities had level playing fields as they faced the arduous challenges during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

In this study of Massachusetts school principals, resources, community needs, and current performance were not examined. As a result, some principals had greater impact on their school environment and leadership related to gun violence, racial unrest, suicides, deaths, homelessness, refugees and poverty that is not reflected in this study.

When recruiting principals for this study, there was a limited number of BIPOC school leaders that have 4 or more years at their current school. Having a small number of BIPOC principals represented also limited the voices and experiences shared in the study.

The study had fifty percent of the participants working in suburban setting. Resulting in one-third from urban districts and sixteen percent from rural areas. Finding principals in urban and rural areas that met the qualifications of 4 or more years in the same school was challenging. There were lots of turnover and re-assignments of school leaders in these communities compared to their suburban counterparts. Again, perspectives from these communities were limited due to this challenge.

Principals who had a personal understanding of their purpose for doing the work, who had built relationships over a period of time through transparent communication, and who had established the trust of their teachers in school community prior to the pandemic, were nimble in making quick decisions while facing an ever-changing landscape. During the Covid-19 Pandemic, principals were in a constant state of uncertainty. Their personal and emotional exhaustion had never been to these levels and they were the emotional caretakers of others. For most, it was through professional structures, their own leadership values, beliefs, and practices, and finding their own way to self-care that assisted these leaders through the crisis.

Future Study

Experiences and lessons learned by these educators during this time, have made an impact on their current practices and shaped their vision of leadership in the future. There is more to learn and study from the experiences of principals who led during COVID-19 Pandemic.

Additional research regarding opportunity and access to job-alike groups or outside professional structures may assist leaders in rural or urban communities. From this study, there was limited use of these structures by leaders in those demographics. In addition, the number of principals who fell within the limit of 4+ years in their current school was lower in these areas. It raises the question whether the increase of professional supports would positively impact the longevity of staff in underserved or remote areas.

Examining leadership preparation programs' mission and coursework to identify what are the primary areas consistently presented for future leaders and where are there inconsistencies. In addition, further study might seek to determine to what degree is the development of a pre-service leader's North Star or "why" for leading impactful in times of crisis. As the majority of participants shared that knowing their "why" allowed them to continue to move forward through the crisis. To what degree is a leader's "why" identified and fostered in this formative learning experience explicitly or implicitly? There is always an unexpected crisis that principals face during the day-to-day running of a school.

There was a general connection across participants, which identified reliance

on their social emotional skills to navigate and lead during this time. Leaders who had established and utilized positive social emotional skills in their work prior to the pandemic, found more success leading through the pandemic. That raises the question is, is leadership shaped by nature or nurture? What experiences and skills are necessary when it comes to leadership? Can you train to be a leader or is “leadership” a natural quality that a person does or does not possess?

If a person is self-reflective, has a focus on the purpose of their work, and can demonstrate effective social and emotional skills, they can train to be future leaders. Developing course on social emotional leadership that focuses on the key skills and tasks leaders need to examine, practice and implement as leaders is important. The coursework could introduce the Five High-Leverage Practices from Transforming Education (Transforming Education, n.d.), which encompass: Establishing Balance and Boundaries, Examining Identity, Exploring Emotions, Cultivating Compassionate Curiosity, and Orienting toward Optimism. Having future leaders understand and identify these skills in the mentor leaders they observe and then intentionally practicing these skills during their practicums and classroom experiences will raise the consciousness and appreciation of these new leaders to the value and impact social emotional leadership has on the success of schools and students.

Prior to the pandemic, research identified that the emotional toll on school principals was already high and principals were experiencing elevated levels of exhaustion and burnout (Carr, 1994, Devos et al., 2007, Dicke, 2018).

Recommendations were to redistribute job responsibilities, provide professional

social networks, and provide opportunities for practicing self-care such as mindfulness and meditation (Bauer et al., 2019, Beausaert et al., 2021, Spillane & Lee, 2014). For many leaders who participated in this study, it was the access to supportive social networks and first teams that assisted them through the pandemic. However, nothing was taken off of the plate of these leaders. Instead, it was continuously increasing.

For policy makers and district leaders, it will be important to examine what supports and resources are identified prior to a crisis that leaders can access quickly. Providing education for leaders in the value and practice of self-care, ways to address the emotional impact experienced in this role, and developing crisis management plans will assist leaders to face unexpected challenges in the future. In addition, if previous recommendations regarding redistributing job responsibilities for school principals is not addressed, then we are training future leaders to enter into an ever-demanding role. Districts, policy makers, and communities must continue to ask themselves, what is needed for quality leaders to lead in our schools for as long as they can?

Conclusion

Looking ahead to the challenges and needs facing education, it is imperative that preparation programs, superintendents, administration associations, and researchers continue to examine what elements and qualities of a school leader help them thrive and stay in the profession. We must also extend the query to include

“during crisis”. School principals experience an emotional toll as they respond to crisis for individuals, schools, and communities. Continuing to examine the experience of leaders during the COVID-19 Pandemic will provide valuable insight and strategies that can be utilized to prepare and support future leaders to be wholly human, intellectually, physically, and spiritually, as they shape our students to be future citizens of our diverse and inter-connected world.

APPENDIX A: Outreach Email Request for Participation

My name is Jessica Downey and I am the principal of the High Rock School in Needham. After receiving my M.Ed. from Worcester State in 2000, I was an assistant principal in Monson and then Wellesley, MA. For the last 13 years I have been a school principal in Needham. I hope all is going well for you and that you are beginning to see the light at the end of this pandemic tunnel.

Currently, I am pursuing a doctoral degree at Boston University and studying the *impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school principals' leadership and wellbeing*. There has been much reported on the stress, impact, and strategies needed to support children, families, and teachers during the pandemic. However, little is known about the experience and needs of school principals.

I am recruiting principals for this study who have been principal in their current school for 4 more years and led during the 2020–21 school year. I understand how challenging it is to put another item on your plate which is why, with great humility, I am asking for you to please consider participating in this study.

If you are interested in participating, please email me at jrdowney@bu.edu or you can call my cell phone at [REDACTED].

The commitment and expectation from you is as follows:

- **Complete a brief electronic survey** that provides demographic and experience information.
- **Participate in one (1) individual interview** (in-person or over Zoom)
 - This interview will be approximately 1 hour.
 - Questions will focus on your personal and professional experiences being a principal from 2020 – 2022.
 - Specific attention will be spent on how your leadership and well-being were impacted during the pandemic.
- **Participate in one (1) focus group over Zoom.**
 - This focus group will be approximately 1 hour.
 - Questions will focus on any training or education principals have received in self-care, barriers and support to attend to their well-being, and recommendations for future well-being support of principals.

If you are interested in participating, please email me at jrdowney@bu.edu or you can call my cell phone at [REDACTED]. I will also reach out to you over the phone in the next week or so to inquire about your interest.

In Partnership and with Great Appreciation ~

Jessica Downey

APPENDIX B: Outreach Email 2nd Request for Participation

My name is Jessica Downey and I am the principal of High Rock School in Needham. I sent you an email over February vacation which I am confident was at the bottom of any priority list. Returning from break was definitely challenging and I hope you are keeping your head above water.

However, I can be tenacious so I am reaching out to you again. After receiving my M.Ed. from Worcester State in 2000 I was an assistant principal in Monson and then Wellesley, MA. For the last 13 years I have been a school principal in Needham. I am looking for principals to interview for my doctoral research which is studying the *impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school principals' leadership and wellbeing*.

To make it quick - would you be willing to participate? You can read the attachment for more information. If yes, just reply to this email and I will do the rest. If this email gets lost in the shuffle, no worries. I will just call your office next week. (See? tenacious!)

In all seriousness, I appreciate the time you have taken to review this email and appreciate the work you are doing.

Be Well ~
Jessica

APPENDIX C: Email with Qualtrics Survey Link

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study! I look forward to meeting with you and discussing your experience as a school principal during the COVID pandemic.

The next step in this process is to complete an electronic questionnaire. The questionnaire officially requests your consent to participate, provide background and demographic information, and briefly reflect on your leadership and well-being using a Likert scale. The survey should take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Survey: [Principals' Leadership & Well-Being Study](#)

I will be contacting you using the information provided in the survey to set up an interview. Thank you for your time and participation.

See you soon!
Jessica



APPENDIX D: Qualtrics Survey with Agreement & Consent

Agreement & Consent

Thank you for your interest in this research study that will attempt to understand the experiences of principals during the COVID-19 pandemic. The official title of this study is: ***A Phenomenological Study of School Principals' Leadership and Well-Being Through the COVID-19 Pandemic***. This research is being conducted as part of my work as a doctoral student at Boston University. Please review the commitment and expectation for participation, ways confidentiality will be maintained, and risks or benefits associated with this study. **At the end, please choose "yes" if you are willing to participate.**

The commitment and expectations from you are as follows:

- Complete a brief **electronic survey** that provides demographic and experience information
- Participate in one (1) **individual interview** (in-person or over Zoom)

This interview will be approximately 1 hour. Questions will focus on your personal and professional experiences being a principal from 2020 – 2022. Specific attention will be spent on how your leadership and well-being were impacted during the pandemic.

- Participate in one (1) **focus group over ZOOM**.
This focus group will be approximately 1 hour. Questions will focus on any training or education principals have received in self-care, barriers and supports to attend to their well-being, and recommendations for future well-being support of principals.

You will be ***assigned a pseudonym*** to ensure that your ***identity is kept confidential***. I will label the Zoom/audio-visual recordings, notes and electronic survey responses with the pseudonym rather than your name. These recordings will be stored in a secure database hosted by Boston University. All recordings will be used to create transcripts of discussion and will be kept in a secure location for the duration of at least seven years. Any transcription or reporting from the interview will not identify you, your school, or district.

Your ***participation is voluntary***, and you may choose to skip any questions or end your participation at any time during the interviews, surveys or focus groups. There are ***no risks*** associated with your participation in this research study, ***beyond potential risk of confidentiality***. Please be aware that the interview and focus group interview on ***Zoom will be recorded***. While we will do all that we can to keep

these recordings secure, Zoom recordings cannot be made and stored 100% securely. Zoom requires the use of a web browser but does not require any software download. For more information about Zoom security and privacy, please see the Boston University webpage on Zoom Meetings.

In addition to the members of the research team, the following people or groups may review your study records for purposes such as quality control or safety:

- The ***Institutional Review Board*** at Boston University. The Institutional Review Board is a group of people who review human research studies for safety and protection of people who take part in the studies.
- ***Central University Offices***.

While there will be no direct benefits to you as a result of this study, the findings of this work may inform the field of educational leadership. You will not receive compensation if you choose to participate. Specifically, voices from school principals will inform developing professional networks, address gaps in leadership preparation programs, and identify practices for educational leaders to examine in order to support leadership development and longevity. If you have any questions about your participation, please feel free to contact me at jrdowney@bu.edu. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Robert Weintraub, at rjtraub@bu.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any complaints or concerns and want to speak with someone independent of the research team, you may contact the Boston University Charles River Campus IRB at 617-358-6115 or at irb@bu.edu. The IRB Office webpage has information where you can learn more about being a participant in research, and you can also complete a Participant Feedback Survey.

QUESTIONS IN SURVEY

Are you willing to participate in this study?

- Yes (1) No (2)

Section 1 of 4

Contact Information

- Last Name
- First Name
- Preferred Email Address for Contact
- Preferred Telephone Number for Contact

Section 2 of 4**Experience in Education & Leadership**

- Have you ever been a classroom teacher Yes/No
- How many years of teaching experience do you have?
 - 0
 - 1-3
 - 4-6
 - 7-9
 - 10-12
 - 13-15
 - 16+
 - Not Applicable
- If you have not been a classroom teacher, what roles did you have prior to becoming an administrator? (Short Answer)
- How many years of administrative experience do you have? (Combine all time in any administrative role in education, such as assistant principal, director, department chair, principal etc.)
 - 0
 - 1-3
 - 4-6
 - 7-9
 - 10-12
 - 13-15
 - 16+
 - Not Applicable
- How many years have you been a school principal? (Short Answer)
- How many years have you been the principal in your current school? (Short Answer)
- Were you a school principal leading a school in Massachusetts during the 2020-21 school year? Yes/No
- Were you the principal in your current school during the 2020-21 school year? Yes/No
- What was the level of the school you led during the 2020-21 school year?
 - Elementary School
 - Middle School
 - High School
 - Other

- For the school you led in the 2020–21 school year, how was your district's regional area identified?
 - Rural
 - Urban
 - Suburban

Section 3 of 4

COVID Impact

- To what extent was your LEADERSHIP negatively impacted during the COVID pandemic? 1(Severe) – 5 (None)
- To what extent was your WELL-BEING negatively impacted during the COVID pandemic? 1(Severe) – 5 (None)

Focus and Training on Well-Being and Self-Care

- To what extent did you focus on your PERSONAL WELL-BEING during the COVID pandemic? 1(Never) – 5 (A Great Deal)
- To what extent did you have TRAINING IN SELF-CARE prior to the COVID pandemic? 1(Never) – 5 (A Great Deal)

Section 4 of 4

General Demographics

- Gender
 - Female
 - Male
 - Prefer not to answer
 - Other
- Are you Hispanic or Latino? Yes/No/Prefer not to answer
- Which one or more of the following would you say is your race?

APPENDIX E: Individual Interview Questions

EXPERIENCE

Take a moment to think back to your experience from January 2020 through today. Now jump ahead to 20 years from now, and a young aspiring school leader asks you what it was like being a principal during the COVID-19 Pandemic. What will you tell them about your experience?

IMPACT - Leadership

In what ways did the experience of leading through the 2020–21 school year impact your leadership?

Are there ways your leadership was strengthened, weakened, changed or remained constant?

Do you have any story or experience that particularly demonstrates how COVID impacted your leadership?

GROWTH/CHANGE - Leadership

What lessons or takeaways regarding leadership did you acquire during this time?

IMPACT - Wellbeing

You reflected on the degree your well-being was negatively impacted during the pandemic.

Thinking about how you responded, what was the impact?

Are there ways your well-being was strengthened or weakened, changed or remained constant?

GROWTH/CHANGE - Wellbeing

Did the pandemic have you grow or change in your thinking or practice regarding well-being and self-care?

PRACTICE - Wellbeing

What do you do to take care of yourself?

What is your self-care?

FUTURE - Holistic View

What are you looking forward to in the future?

Think back to that aspiring school leader. What would be your advice to them?

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