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RESILIENCE AND ADAPTIBILITY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY
EXAMINING PRINCIPAL RETENTION PRIOR TO, AMID,
AND POST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

by

Sandra Cisneros, M. Ed.

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Dedication

To my mom, Elsa, whom this dissertation would not be possible without her unwavering support. Mama, gracias por tu apoyo durante cada etapa de mi vida y más cuando he enfrentado los obstáculos más difíciles de mi vida. Gracias por demostrar lo que significa la fortaleza, por querer a sus nietos a lo máximo y por el cuidado de ellos.

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ABSTRACT

RESILIENCE AND ADAPTABILITY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY
EXAMINING PRINCIPAL RETENTION PRIOR TO, AMID,
AND POST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Sandra Cisneros
University of Houston-Clear Lake, 2024

Dissertation Chair: Jennifer Grace, Ph.D.

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of principals prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic and the contextual factors that they described as being supportive or constraining for principal retention. This study collected data from semi structured interviews of a purposive sample of 10 principals with five years or more of principal experience from a large urban school district located in Southeast Texas. An inductive coding process was utilized to reveal a total of 21 themes for principals' challenges and supports received prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings parallel to the literature on challenges principals encounter that contribute to principal burnout. Results regarding the lived experiences of principals prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that the principal role, challenges principals encountered, and what aided

principals to overcome challenges changed over time. Participants shared that there were already challenges prior to the pandemic, but the pandemic exacerbated existing challenges making the role of a principal much more difficult even after the pandemic was over. While participants didn't share as much support that was provided to them prior to the pandemic, they revealed a sense of unity during and in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic from their colleagues, immediate supervisors, and the school community. The findings further revealed that while a principal's sense of purpose is a major driving force to overcome challenges and to remain in the role, district leaders can supplement their drive by providing a variety of supports that they value such as coaching and developing from their immediate supervisors along with effective two-way communication, autonomy from district leaders, and a platform for principals to collaborate.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

While student success is attributed to various factors, having a stable and capable leader that leads the campus with conviction is critical to positive student outcomes. Being second to teachers, principals are instrumental in increasing student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood et al., 2020). However, various schools struggle with academic sustainability due to the instability of school principals (Levin et al., 2020). The rate of principals leaving the profession is increasingly high in the United States, surpassing teacher turnover (Barnes et al., 2007; Carroll, 2007; Grissom et al., 2015; Guarino et al., 2006).

The national average of retaining a principal is four years (Levin et al., 2019). On average, principals with 10 years or more experience is 11 percent and principals that have less than two years of experience is 35% (Levin et al., 2019). Inadequate retention can be attributed to the continuous changes in school practices as well as the increasing demands from state and district policies thereby increasing principal burnout (Combs et al., 2009). The National Center for Education Statistics reported that during the Covid-19 pandemic, from 2020-2022, there was an increase in principal turnover and an estimated 11 percent of principals left the principalship. Furthermore, as accountability for improvement of student achievement increases, the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated student achievement gaps (Brock et al., 2021). Since principals play a critical role to student achievement, the present study sought answers regarding factors that contributed to principal retention pre, amid, and post the Covid-19 pandemic.

Research Problem

Widespread media coverage, due to a global pandemic from the Covid-19 virus, placed a magnifying glass on the crisis public schools are facing regarding teacher shortages. As school districts around the country face an increase in teacher shortages, district officials would benefit from hiring and retaining school principals that can retain teachers by establishing a supportive and collaborative working environment (Buckman, 2021; Johnson et al., 2012). While principals do not directly impact student achievement as teachers do, they are a major influencer in the culture of a campus that can indirectly impact student achievement (Beteille et al., 2011; Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). Therefore, having to continuously replace school principals in a school district, may potentially have a negative effect on student academic success.

At times, changes in school leadership are inevitable. Research demonstrates that changes in school leadership can have a positive effect on student achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). If a campus is consistently demonstrating low student achievement, a change in leadership is necessary (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). A new principal can bring innovative ideas to execute positive change in a campus that is low performing. However, making changes by continuously replacing principals at the same school can also have adverse effects in making school improvements due to instability (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). Increasing student achievement does not happen overnight. Plans must be created, implemented, and monitored for effectiveness. As such, time and consistency in key players implementing the plan and monitoring it, may be essential in reaching favorable outcomes (Bartanen et al., 2019). District leaders may need to find a right balance between changing a school principal as a necessity, due to poor student outcomes, and retaining principals to maintain institutional memory of systems and procedures put in

place to see academic improvement in the third and fourth year of turnaround (Redding & Nguyen, 2020).

The National Principal Survey conducted in 2021 revealed that approximately four out of ten principals plan to leave the principalship in the following three years (Taie & Lewis, 2023). Attritional factors that contribute to reasons for principal turnover include: (a) heavy workload, (b) lack of district-school collaboration, and (c) increase compliance requirements (Levin, Scott et al., 2020). Due to the heavy workload, principals believe their compensation is not suitable given the responsibility and high stakes accountability of the role (Levin, Scott et al., 2020). Principals also have difficulty with finding a work-life balance due to the demands of the role and often find themselves losing time with their family (Taie & Goldring, 2019). Even though the role of the principal already encompassed long hours, principals had to pivot their responsibilities during the Covid-19 pandemic (Clifford & Cogshall, 2021).

In spring of 2020, the education world changed as the world faced a global pandemic due to the outbreak of the virus Covid-19 (Zierer, 2021). Schools in the United States were forced to close and were required to provide online learning (Singh & Thurman, 2019). Campus leaders were not prepared for the quick turnaround of transitioning from in person learning to online (Brock et al., 2021). While online learning is not new in higher education, schools in grades K-12 were not equipped with the necessary resources, such as technology, to provide online learning (Simpson, 2020). Even if technology was not an issue, principals, as instructional leaders, were now tasked with training their teachers on how to effectively teach students in an online setting.

For teachers and students to be successful in any learning environment, the campus principal is the skilled individual to provide support when the need arises (Brock et al., 2021). However, being placed in a situation that principals may have never faced

before, would require a whole new way of thinking, changes in school systems and procedures, and continuous modification of plans. Transitioning all programs from traditional face-to-face learning to online learning would be no easy task. Various concerns arose for students in special education, English Language Learners (ELL), and those in high poverty schools (Lalas & Strikwerda, 2021). Principals were to ensure services and supports were still provided to meet the needs of all students in an online setting. Even with plans put into place, principals dealt with student attendance problems and a drop in student grades (Lalas & Strikwerda, 2021).

In Texas, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) did not rate school campuses on the accountability system for the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years (TEA, 2020). While schools and students were not held accountable for academic gains, the loss of learning and the increasing of student achievement gaps became a concern for school principals (Lalas & Strikwerda, 2021). TEA (2021) reports that students have at least 3 months of learning gaps due to the pandemic. As principals still deal with the evolving effects of the pandemic, sustainability of plans put in motion to address achievement gaps may be a challenge.

Although principals play a critical role in student achievement, the instability and turnover of principals continues to rise in the United States (Mitani, 2018). Turnover rates of principals are even higher in urban areas (Burkhauser et al., 2012). Principal turnover is approximately 25 percent higher in high poverty schools (Levin, Bradley et al., 2020). However, a consistent principal is essential to the development and achievement growth of students in high poverty and high minority schools (Branch et al., 2012). Also, failing schools that need to close student achievement gaps, due to low academic performance, experience higher turnover and difficulty attracting experienced principals (Beteille et al., 2011). School improvement can take five to seven years

(Rangel, 2018). Therefore, since principals are vital to positive student outcomes, identifying solutions for retaining principals is essential.

In summary, principals play a critical role in the retention of teachers, ensuring high quality instruction, and improving student achievement. Therefore, retention of experienced school principals may be of utmost importance if student academic progress is to occur (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). If one or more factors impacted a principal's ability to adapt and be resilient prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic, this study provides insight as to what influenced principal retention.

Significance of the Study

An increase of principal turnover can contribute to the rise of teacher turnover since teachers are more likely to leave a campus if the principal leaves (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). Staff instability creates a revolving door of educators which can negatively impact the school's organization and ultimately student success (Hanselmen et al., 2016). Recently, the Covid-19 pandemic created a large disruption to student learning for approximately 1.5 billion students internationally (UNESCO, 2020). As school districts work tirelessly to recover time lost and close achievement gaps created in students due to learning loss, consistency in school leadership is critical. If the goal of district officials is to increase student achievement, an instrumental factor to achieve that goal is a highly effective principal (Sanchez & Watson, 2021).

The education world faced many challenges with student learning when schools had to close due to the pandemic (Zierer, 2021). Some students did not return to school in person for more than a year (Zierer, 2021). As policies at the national and state level changed to address learning loss due to the pandemic, schools were tasked with closing those gaps (Clifford & Coggshall, 2021). Since principals play a critical role in positive student outcomes, defining strategies for school districts to be able to retain experienced

school principals is essential to removing barriers that may hinder academic success. The present study contributes to other studies that analyzed the various reasons why individuals are leaving the principalship and discovered alignment gaps to the adaptability and resilience of principals through the Covid-19 pandemic; thus, presenting opportunities for principal retention.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of principals prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic and the contextual factors of their role that they described as supportive or constraining. By examining the lived experiences of principals prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic, this study intended to provide an understanding on what contributed to the phenomena of adaptability and resilience of principals that influenced their decision to stay in the principal role. A total of 10 purposive selected principals with five years or more experience as a principal in an urban school district participated in semi structured individual interviews. The study addressed the following research questions:

Research Questions

What were challenges faced by principals prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic?

What aided principals in overcoming challenges prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic for principal retention?

Definition of Key Terms

Achievement Gap: The difference in performance for reading and mathematics between various student groups measures by required assessments (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

English Language Learner (ELL): A national-origin-minority student who is limited-English proficient (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

Mission: What and why schools do what they do as part of their instructional values and commitment to the school community (Glossary of Education Reform, 2015).

Online Learning: Also viewed as distance learning in which the teacher and students are physically separated, and education takes place over the internet (Stern, 2017.).

Principal Turnover: The principal does not return to the same school the following school year (Rangel, 2018).

Teacher Shortage: A need for elementary or secondary school teachers in a particular grade, subject, or discipline (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

Texas Education Agency (TEA): An agency that oversees primary and secondary public education led by a commissioner to improve student outcomes through various supports for schools (TEA, 2021).

Vision: The long-term goals for the student learning (Glossary of Education Reform, 2015).

Conclusion

This chapter explained the concerns regarding the increasing percentage of principal turnover rates amid a pandemic and how stable leadership contributes to improved student outcomes. As such, there was a need to examine factors that contributed to principals remaining in the role prior to, amid and post the Covid-19 pandemic so that districts can attain higher percentages of principal retention. An overview of the statement problem was presented, along with the purpose of the study, significance of the study, research questions, and definitions of terms aligned with the study. Chapter 2 will provide a literature review of topics related to the study.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The priority and role of school principals in the United States is focused on student performance and school safety (Chan et al., 2019). However, the role of a principal is continuously evolving due to the changes in a state's high stakes accountability to increase student achievement (Levin et al., 2020). Given that the principal is responsible for all programs related to the organizational structure of the school, some of which do not directly impact the learning and success of students, it makes their administrative role as the instructional leader difficult (Oplatka & Khalid, 2016). As such, the demands of the role contribute to the rise in attrition rates and stress amongst these school leaders which can lead to principal turnover (Van-Vooren, 2018).

Even while the principal role continues to change and the demands increase, principals were also faced with the constraints and obstacles that evolved with teaching and learning during the COVID-19 global pandemic (Akbaba & Bulut, 2021). COVID-19 had a significant impact on public education due to mandated school closures. (Jameson et al., 2020). When schools were forced to close, district officials were then obligated to continue education virtually (Jameson et al., 2020). Constant change with how schools should operate both virtually and when schools reopened, contributed to burnout of seasoned principals (Karakose et.al, 2022). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to address the gap in research regarding leaders leaving the principalship through the COVID-19 pandemic. This qualitative study examined the lived experiences of principals through the COVID-19 pandemic and contextual factors of their role that they described as supportive or constraining. By examining the lived experiences of principals through the COVID-19 pandemic, this study intended to provide an understanding on what contributed to the phenomena of adaptability and

resilience of principals that influenced their decision to stay in the principal role. To address this, the literature review focused on: (a) education and COVID-19 (b) principal influence (c) principal attrition (d) principal attrition and COVID-19.

Education and COVID-19

The year 2020 was unlike any other year for schools across the world (White et al., 2022). COVID-19, a contagious disease which posed life threatening concerns, created a radical paradigm shift in education (White et al., 2022). According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2020), to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 disease, over 1.5 billion students were impacted by the unexpected closure of schools. Furthermore, a year from when the pandemic first began, half of the students were still impacted by partial or full school closures (UNESCO, 2020). When schools closed, education was still expected to continue through teaching and learning via virtual platforms and educators were given only one to two weeks for this to be realized (White et al., 2022). According to UNESCO (2020), the closing of schools caused damaging effects in the education field which included:

Learning loss due to the disruption of not being able to learn new academic skills since schools are the main source that contribute to teaching and learning.

Lack of equitable access to technology, digital platforms, and dependable internet connectivity while schools were closed posed challenges for students, specifically students living in poverty, to continue learning from home.

Schools foster an environment for social emotional learning; therefore, by being at home, students were isolated from social interactions.

The reliance of technology for remote learning increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mukhari & Sanders, 2023). Since learning could only continue virtually, learning stopped for some students when it was impossible due to equitable access

(Mukhari & Sanders, 2023). Furthermore, while parental involvement is a strong contributor to positive student achievement, working parents were expected to be the teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic (Puspita 2021).

Virtual learning became a daunting task for parents as they became the primary teacher at home without any training (Spaull & Van der Berg, 2020). The lack of capabilities from some parents being able to assist with technology, digital platforms, and homework assignments, only further increased learning loss (Puspita, 2021).

Abuhammad (2020) explained that parental involvement was crucial for successful online learning during COVID-19; however, obstacles hindered successful parental support.

Barriers faced by parents included:

Personal barriers which involved lack of knowledge regarding technology and how to navigate digital platforms.

Technical barriers which referred to lack of access to the required internet and technology for online learning.

Logistical barriers which included online learning being a challenge for the varied learning modalities of students which only face to face learning could provide.

Financial barriers which involved lack of funds to purchase the required technology needed for online learning for all children in the household.

Ribeiro et al. (2021) conducted a study to determine parents' perceptions of their involvement in their child's learning when schools were forced to close and virtual learning occurred. A total of 21, 333 parents with school aged children in both primary and secondary schools were surveyed using a closed-ended questionnaire. Results revealed that parental support mainly involved supervision of their children attending class virtually and monitoring the completion of school related tasks. In another study conducted by Changphat et al. (2022), 99 parents, students, and teachers were surveyed

regarding their perceptions of online learning. The results for parents revealed they had a high opinion that online learning contributed to: (a) more costs, (b) increased stress (c) forcing their children to online learning due to increased pressure, (d) various distractions for students, and (e) limitations navigating platforms. These obstacles hindered parental support for virtual learning to be highly effective (Changphat et al., 2022).

Bhamani et al. (2020) used a questionnaire to gather data from 19 purposive selected parents who were fluent in the English language, contributed a minimum of three hours teaching their children, had access to internet, and no COVID-19 related illnesses. The data revealed three themes: (a) effect of COVID-19 on children's education, (b) school related support, and (d) parental involvement to aide virtual learning. Parents felt that virtual learning disrupted critical learning routines that were learned in a school setting which contribute to future work habits. Additionally, students had difficulty learning and parents were concerned of learning loss. Further results revealed that leaders and teachers were doing their best to support learning at home; however, lack of equity for technology in a household that had more than one student and lack of one-on-one interaction with the teacher posed obstacles for students to effectively learn (Bhamani et al., 2020). Nevertheless, parents tried their best to support their children through virtual learning by creating a strict schedule for their children to follow and engaging them in creative tasks but concerns over learning loss was significant (Bhamani et al., 2020). While parent involvement was vital to the success of online learning for students, it was also dependent on the effectiveness of instructional delivery from the teacher (Bhamani et al., 2020; Puspita, 2021).

In a traditional classroom, face-to-face interactions with students is essential for teachers to cultivate relationships and gather anecdotal data of student performance to best support their learning for improved student outcomes (Meisner & McKensie,

2023). With the emergence of COVID-19, teachers were instantly expected to modify their teaching and communication strategies to reduce the adverse impact the pandemic would have on educating students (Richmond et al., 2020). While technology expertise was a barrier for parents, the use of technology for learning was not out of the ordinary for teachers (Meisner & McKensie, 2023). The integration of technology is a mandated accreditation for many teacher programs; however, teaching online requires separate pedagogical knowledge for students to be engaged and learn (Meisner & McKensie, 2023).

In a study that surveyed 699 teachers in primary and secondary schools, Meisner and McKensie (2023), aimed to determine teacher preparedness and challenges faced during mandated online learning. Teachers' responses regarding if they had the capacity to offer an academically rigorous instructional program online 27.2% were not sure, 21.7% disagreed they could, and 3.3% strongly disagreed they could. Furthermore, regarding their confidence in teaching virtually 25.4% were unsure if they could, 15.1% disagreed of being able to, and 2.0% strongly disagreed they could. Overall, almost half of teachers were either unsure or knew they lacked the capacity to effectively deliver online learning and the added barriers due to equitable access and limited communication between teacher and students while at home to ensure they were working on assignments posed issues with the effectiveness of learning from home (Meisner & McKensie, 2023).

In another study Webb et al. (2021) surveyed 560 teachers to determine if teachers were equipped with the knowledge and skills to successfully implement virtual learning. The results revealed that 76% of teachers had not taken any coursework related to teaching virtually during their educator preparation program. Teachers were building their capacity while simultaneously teaching virtually as the COVID-19 pandemic continued (Webb et al., 2021). Korkmaz and Toraman (2020), sought to discover

challenges teacher faced during virtual instruction that hindered virtual learning effectiveness. Participants in the study included 1,016 teachers from varying cities to complete an online questionnaire. The constraints experienced most by teachers during virtual learning were: (a) limited connection with students, (b) effectiveness of teaching all knowledge and skills such as motor skills for drawing and writing (c) conducive learning environments for the various learning needs of students, and (d) lack of student motivation. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown educators that enhancing digital literacy knowledge is not choice any longer, but rather a need since student learning was adversely affected due to unpreparedness (Korkmaz & Toraman, 2020). In spite teachers best attempts to provide effective instructional delivery online and not create or widen student learning gaps, a significant number of students, specifically high poverty students, were unable to benefit from virtual learning due to inequitable access of the learning materials needed (Reddick et al., 2020).

Due to loss of instructional time from the COVID-19 pandemic, students required additional time to bridge the learning gap created due to school closures (Mukhari & Sanders, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic only worsened the pre-existing issues at high poverty schools (Kaufman et al., 2022). An estimated 21 percent of students in school have been labeled as living in poverty (Hussar et al., 2020). High poverty schools had more challenges than affluent schools during the COVID-19 pandemic such as chronic absences, existing achievement gaps in students which increased learning difficulties in a virtual setting, and constraints of being able to provide technology devices for virtual learning (Kaufman et al., 2022) Students from homes with greater income and educated parents had the equipment necessary for learning, scheduled learning time, and academic support from parents (Andrew et al., 2020). Lack of active supervision of time spent on learning was a major factor towards learning loss (Zhadanov et al., 2022).

Grewenig et al (2020) surveyed 1,099 parents to determine if lack of educator monitoring contributed to greater learning loss of already low-achieving students. Results revealed that daily learning time was 7.4 hours; however, low achieving students reduced that time to 3.7 hours and replaced the other time with watching television or playing video games thereby expanding their learning gaps. In another study conducted by Engzell et al. (2020), tests scores from students aged eight to eleven years old in Netherlands, where lockdown was only eight weeks, were used to determine if students from less educated homes were affected more with learning loss. The results revealed that students had a learning loss of one-fifth of the school year which was equivalent to the amount of time schools were shut down. Learning loss was 60% more for students whose parents were less educated. Thus, confirming the varying effects school closures had on students depended on their circumstances (Engzell et al., 2020). In a related study regarding the varying needs of students, Averett (2021) interviewed 31 parents to determine how virtual learning impacted students with disabilities in K-12 schools. The results revealed that schools had difficulty providing their individualized learning plan supports via a virtual platform; thereby making it increasingly difficult for them to comprehend and stay on task with the work assigned.

Since students were forced into virtual learning and were confronted with many obstacles that hindered their learning, educators, specifically principals, needed to facilitate their learning by removing barriers (Akbaba & Bulut, 2021). Principals are the ones that are responsible for leading, coaching, and supporting all stakeholders of the campus for positive student outcomes (Levin, Scott et al., 2020). During the pandemic principals not only had to deal with lack of equitable resources related to technology and a quick turnover rate regarding shifting the school setting from face-to-face learning to virtual learning, but they also had to keep a pulse on safety and learning for staff and

students (Grooms & Childs, 2021; White et al., 2022). As the main influencers in all areas that directly impact student learning, the principals are the heart of education, and it is more prevalent during a time of crisis (Gouédard et al., 2020).

Principal Influence

Educational organizations consistently endure obstacles that range from funding issues, trauma, poverty, violence, and political bureaucracy (DeMartino & Weisser, 2021). As such, principals play a critical role in how they respond to the obstacles that emerge for favorable student outcomes (DeMartino & Weisser, 2021). Principals are accountable for the overall systemic functions of their school community (Dhuey & Smith, 2018). Their responsibilities include recruitment and retention of quality teachers, leading and monitoring instructional delivery, managing student discipline, liaison to the stakeholders of the school community, including state and district authorities, but their primary goal is ensuring improvement of academic achievement (Dhuey & Smith, 2018). However, if student academic achievement is to improve, stable principal leadership is essential (Levin, Scott et al., 2020). When there is a high rate of principal mobility, there is low student performance, and an increase teacher turnover (Rangel, 2017).

The teacher shortage has been an increasing cause for concern. Sutchter et al. (2019) reported a deficit of approximately 112,000 teachers in the 2017-2018 school year. Furthermore, the increasing need for teachers, specifically in critical shortage areas such as special education, science, and math, will persist by outpacing supply of nearly 40,000 teachers (Sutchter et al., 2019). Since the demand of teachers is increasingly higher than the supply, teacher retention is critical (Redding & Henry, 2019). Buckman (2021) conducted a study to determine if principals play an integral role in teacher retention. The study included teachers, principals, and students in 561 schools in 80 different school districts that were 48 percent non-Title I schools, 52 percent were Title I

schools, and less than 1 percent were Targeted Title I. The average percent of principal retention for the schools involved in the study was 5.5 years (Buckman, 2021). The results revealed that there was an unmistakable relationship between teacher and principal retention. Teachers are more likely to return if the campus principal does too. In a similar study, DeMatthews et al. (2022) sought to examine how principal turnover influenced teacher turnover, particularly in high-poverty settings, and how chronic turnover impacts the organization. This longitudinal study gathered data starting from the school year 1999-2000 to 2016-2017. The results revealed principal turnover greatly affects teacher turnover in schools of high poverty and schools that have many novice teachers (DeMatthews et al., 2022).

In another study, Kaiser and Thompson (2021) addressed how principals can positively influence teacher attrition thus reducing teacher turnover amid a teacher shortage. Utilizing a purposive sampling technique of elementary, middle, and high school principals with five years or more experience and two years at their current campus, semi structured interviews were conducted to determine how principals positively influence teacher retention (Kaiser & Thompson, 2021). The results revealed that principals can recognize teacher stressors and proactively respond to them by providing support through collaborative techniques to be able to retain a teacher. Collaboration and support from principals were crucial as teachers struggled with attrition during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lucker et al., 2022).

When school districts were faced with a the COVID-19 pandemic, skilled leadership from principals became instrumental (Rodriguez et al., 2021). Principals had to innovate unlike any other situation before to respond to a crisis that they were not prepared for (Gigliotti, 2020). In a moment of crisis leaders are either instantly “winners” or “losers” (Boin & Renaud, 2013). Leaders should respond to crisis events in a way that

raises organizational resilience (Boin & Renaud, 2013). To successfully lead in a time of crisis leaders must be able to: (a) identify the crisis, (b) make sense of the situation even through uncertainty, (c) make key decisions, (d) coordinating and aligning various departments in the organization, (e) linking or disseminating systems when needed, (f) provide timely and effective communication, (g) supporting others through the process, and (h) reflecting and taking accountability of effective and non-effective practices during the crisis (Boin & Renaud, 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic was and unprecedented crisis, but the influence of a principal was needed to respond swiftly to the continuous changes (Harris & Jones 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic principals and teacher were confronted with teaching and learning in a virtual setting while restricted to their homes (Gonzalez et al., 2020). The challenge for some educators was their limited capacity regarding digital literacy which was required for distance learning (Indahri, 2020). Rapid changes to organizational structures and systems can seem abnormal, but the principal must foster a collaborative and supportive climate so that learning can continue (Ahmad et al., 2022). Meticulous planning and continuous problem solving were requirements of principals during the COVID-19 pandemic to help support a positive and safe working climate (Amini & Ginting, 2020). Ahmad et al. (2022), conducted a study on how principal support affected teacher performance during the pandemic. The participants included 200 teachers from primary and secondary schools. Of the 200 teachers 70% were male, 42.5% worked in a high school, 39% were from middle school, and 18.5% were at the elementary level. The results of the study revealed that principals that provide instructional supports and solutions to obstacles faced by teachers, specifically those caused by limited digital literacy capabilities during COVID-19, promote a positive working climate that enhances the likelihood of improving instructional capacity (Ahmad

et al., 2022). Further findings noted that principals influence school climate and that in turn influences teacher performance. Fostering a positive climate will encourage teachers to continue to build their capacity and improve their performance thereby improving student performance. The principal does this by implementing a climate of continuous learning through professional development and supporting their learning (Ahmad et al., 2022).

The principal plays a critical role in building teacher capacity to enhance student achievement outcomes (Noor et al, 2020). In a related study regarding how principals influence teacher performance for improved student outcomes Noor et al. (2020) employed a mixed methods design using secondary data and focus group discussions from experiences principals, teachers, district supervisors, and educational experts from universities. The results revealed that principals must conduct academic supervision of the instructional program to provide guidance and tailored support for teachers to achieve improved student outcomes (Noor et al., 2020). Since teachers are the direct link to teaching and learning, and if the goal is to increase student achievement, principal retention is necessary to positively impact student academic outcomes (Levin et al., 2019).

Any organization that does not place an emphasis on accountability is predisposed to uncertainties and irregularities (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020). By ensuring accountability within an organization, officials can gather if progress is being made towards organizational goals and reveal shortfalls from those responsible (Argon, 2015). In the school setting, while accountability is for everyone, it is mainly placed on school principals (Cooley & Shen, 2003). Principals are held accountable as the primary influencer to favorable student outcomes (Usul & Kocabas, 2021). An experienced principal has the capacity to be able to positively influence others and make progressive

and sustainable school improvement which will lead to better academic gains (Clark, 2017). High performing campuses have a principal that can comprehend all components of the curriculum, coach and develop teachers, monitor learning, and carry out all administrative responsibilities for improved student outcomes (Geerlings et al., 2018). Utilizing a descriptive case study approach, Clark (2017), conducted a study by interviewing three principals, the district's superintendent, and one teacher from each school the principals presided over to determine how experienced principals build capacity within their schools to improve and sustain academic outcomes. The results revealed that experienced principals can recognize and build capacity in others within the school, build relationships with all stakeholders, and ensure execution of plans for academic growth over time.

In a similar study, Ali et al., (2021) explained practices effective principals possess and how they influence learning to make school improvement progress. Using purposive sampling, 15 stakeholders from one campus were interviewed using open ended questions validated by qualitative experts. The results revealed that school principals influence learning by: (a) being the instructional leader, (b) establishing high expectations for learning, (c) coaching and developing teachers, and (d) ensuring all aspects of the organization are conducive to learning. Ultimately, for student achievement to improve, the campus leader must have the experience and skill set to establish a culture of learning and build capacity within their staff to ensure favorable student outcomes (Geerlings et al., 2018). In another study conducted by Murakami and Kearney (2020), three principals, seven teachers, and six parents were interviewed to determine how principals influence the development of the school organization and build capacity within individuals to improve the quality of education for students in high poverty schools. The results revealed that principals have a major influence on organizational systems and

procedures that are conducive to learning. Furthermore, principals can obtain support from teachers and parents through a collaborative process of school improvement by building positive working relationships for a culture of high performance. Since principals are major influencers of positive student outcomes, principal turnover can pose a risk to achieve academic success of students (Miller, 2013; Bartanen et al., 2019).

Principal Attrition

Principals play a critical role in improved student outcomes; conversely, current workforce changes, higher academic achievement accountability, and workload demands are contributing factors to principal attrition and turnover (Cieminski, 2018). Principal turnover continues to be a concern, and it has only intensified in recent years as it is higher than teacher turnover (Buckman, 2021). In comparison to teacher turnover at 16 percent, principal turnover is 18 percent (Taie& Goldring, 2019). This poses a growing concern since the primary role of a school principal, as an instructional leader, is to help facilitate teaching and learning for improved student outcomes (Uddin et al., 2020). For a principal to execute plans that produce significant academic improvement, it takes on average five years (Gates et al., 2006; Weinstein et al., 2009). For that reason, consistency in school leadership is key in building capacity of the staff in the school for positive student outcomes (Kalman, 2020). Principals do this by creating and carrying out a mission and vision for the school to increase student success (Uddin et al., 2020). If principals, are continuously changing within the same school, it would negatively impact plans for school improvement due to plans not being carried out (Kalman, 2020).

Although principals are tasked with ensuring there is progress in student achievement, there is far more excessive attrition and stress workload, such as managerial tasks, that do not directly impact the priority of the principal role of actively supervising instructional delivery to build teacher capacity (Turkoglu & Cansoy, 2020; Noor et al.,

2020). Utilizing a phenomenology approach by criterion sampling 13 male primary and secondary public-school principals, Turkoglu and Cansoy (2020) conducted a study to evaluate what school principals perceive as excessive attritional stressors and workload in their role. After administering a semi-structured questionnaire, results revealed that principals defined attritional workload as work that limits their time spent towards relevant educational activities. Five different sub-themes emerged regarding principal workload: (a) being responsible for everything that encompasses a school organization, (b) lack of time, (c) problems with human resource management, (d) high email volume, (e) time needed for the various stakeholders of the school community, and (f) challenges with work and private life.

Principals' respond to the workload by: (a) planning the workday ahead of time, (b) delegating the workload, and (c) working overtime. Results also suggested that staff shortages are perceived as a major factor in the added workload of principals since they are now not only working on their own administrative affairs but also problem solving to ensure learning is still occurring with at times taking on other organizational roles to ensure the job is done. Further findings revealed that due to the excessive workloads of their role, principals were not spending enough time with their families, fatigue as well as stress increased, and the pressure surrounding the attritional workload was daunting. While principals are expected to problem solve to handle the excessive stressor and attritional workload requirements, strategies such as working overtime, is still a hinderance to the mental health of a school principal (Turkoglu & Cansoy, 2020).

In another study conducted by Ray et al. (2020), research sought to explore the demands that challenged and or hindered principals' self-care practices. A total of 473 principals completed a 45 questionnaire. Participants were tasked with quantifying certain self-care practices and respond to open ended questions regarding if being in a

leadership position had any influence in their health, lifestyle, and other facets of their lives and whether they would change anything about their leadership role to facilitate a healthier lifestyle (Ray et al., 2020). Results revealed that principals work long hours, have sleep deprivation, are dehydrated, follow a poor diet, exercise less, and have limited time with their family in comparison to the general population. Moreover, these unhealthy self-care practices have the potential for adverse effects on their overall success in the organization, cheerfulness, and can have an impact on their retention in the profession. Principals are expected to model healthy behaviors and practices for the stakeholders of their school communities; however, due to their stress levels, often they are unaware of their own deficiencies as it relates to their physical, cognitive, and mental health (Ray et al., 2020).

Stress is a primary factor that adversely contributes to the overall attrition and health of leaders (Ray et al., 2020). As such, many choose not to enter or leave the field of administration because of the increased stress level due to longer hours and increased accountability with non-competitive salaries (Ray et al., 2020). In another related study, Collie et al. (2020), surveyed 6,000 principals from 22 countries to determine what were the factors that contributed to a principal's well-being. Some stress related factors for principals include lack of resources, an increase in job related mandates and expectations that require mental and physical work (Collie et al., 2020). Also, issues with budget, national shortage of teachers, and the accountability requirements also contribute to the declining mental health of principals (Collie et al., 2020). The results of the study revealed that principals were less dedicated and satisfied with their role due to stress from national staff shortages, and lack of a collaborative climate was fostered.

In another study relating to attritional and stress factors of the principal role, Hauseman (2020) examined how non instructional tasks contribute to the amount of

attritional workload and stress placed on principals. Utilizing a mixed methods design on 1600 principals Hauseman (2020) conducted a comparison on how much time principals spend on non- instructional school community activities versus direct instructional leadership practices. In this study, non-instructional community activities were considered tasks that involved: (a) meetings with parents, (b) networking with community members, and (c) finding ways to market the school. Research results revealed that an extensive amount of time was needed to build partnerships and relationships with all stakeholders of the campus' organization; however, there was lack of support from other leaders to help delegate efforts in leading events to build a school community, and there was an extensive decrease in time for the principal to spend on their primary role as an instructional leader. Further analysis indicated that principals understand the benefits of building and strengthening the school community to expand opportunities for students, but also argue that time in the classrooms and being present with students and teachers is what will move the needle towards increasing academic achievement. Additionally, the intensification of stress and attrition in the principal role is magnified depending on the support received or not provided (Hauseman et al., 2020). Also, there is a higher likelihood of principals leaving high poverty schools than they are more affluent schools due to unfavorable and stressful working conditions (Loeb et al., 2010; Tekleselassie & Choi, 2021; Yan, 2020). As such, rural districts receive less leadership applications than other larger districts (Pendola & Fuller, 2018). Although there are various factors that contribute to attrition and added stress to the principal role, and can deter future leaders from entering the principalship, accountability regarding student achievement is a major influencer (Mitani, 2018).

While research shows that principals play a critical role in student outcomes, attritional factors in the principal role is a challenge (Pannel & MacBrayer, 2022).

Principal turnover ranges from school to school (Yan, 2020). In high poverty schools there is more principal turnover due to increased attritional stress factors and affluent districts paying higher salaries (Tran & Buckman, 2017). Challenges for high poverty schools' retention of principals are due to factors that impact principals such as having to maintain a high-profile collaborative relationship with stakeholders, a more extensive and varied degree of responsibilities, and lack of equity regarding resources needed (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Hansen (2018) examined the reasons principals' turnover in rural schools. This multisite study implemented semi-structured interviews to seek responses of six elementary principals as to why they left the principalship. The three themes that emerged were: (a) career opportunities, (b) family needs, (c) community expectations, (d) excessive workload, (e) lack of professional support, (f) superintendent decisions, and (g) low salary. They were categorized into (a) personal factors, (b) environmental factors, and (c) institutional factors. Based on the responses of the principals, most of the themes that emerged fell under institutional factors which are factors influenced by the organization. The institutional factors that emerged include: (a) excessive workload, (b) lack of professional support, (c) personnel issues, (d) superintendent decisions, and (e) salary. This suggests that school districts have the power to positively address and influence some of these contributing factors for principal turnover (Hanson, 2018). Furthermore, the organization can make changes to their practices to be able to retain principals (Hansen, 2018).

Kloko and Justis (2019) conducted a quantitative time-series study on principals that worked in K-12 schools in rural districts. The total participants varied from year to year. A total of 3,685 principals participated in the study in the years 2009, 2012, and 2015. This study aimed to identify challenges of principals that work in rural districts. The results revealed four themes that were correlated with attritional work-related

stressors (a) personal task management, (b) instructional demands, (c) professional task management, and (d) handling conflict (Kloko & Justis, 2019). Personal Task Management was the primary indicator of attritional stress in principals. These attritional stress related factors include: (a) feeling overwhelmed due to job mandates and obligations (b) impractical leadership expectations, (c) loss of personal time, (d) lack of work-life balance, (e) lack of time to complete work related tasks, (f) continuous interruptions, (g) high expectations of self, (h) time management ability, (i) prioritizing tasks, (j) personal health concerns, (k) lack of intrinsic motivation, and (l) being called away from the school (Kloko & Justis, 2019). Further findings revealed that as a principal's attrition and stress rises, it also can negatively impact operational systems of a school. As the education world is continuously changing, and the demand of the principal role increases through these changes, principal stress and attrition continues to grow (Weiner & Wouflin, 2017).

Principal Attrition and COVID-19

The education world was significantly impacted with the lasting effects of school closures (Harris & Jones, 2020; Trampling et al., 2021; Ujifusa, 2021). Additionally, Covid-19 has been a lasting stress factor for many individuals (Harris & Jones, 2020; Trampling et al., 2021). While principals played a critical role in ensuring that teaching and learning continued in tandem with maintaining staff and student safety at the forefront during the COVID-19 pandemic, the physical, emotional, and social health of school principals declined (Gouédard et al., 2020; Trampling et al., 2021). During a time of disaster, school principals are tasked with effectively being able to support all stakeholders including students, adapting to their new duties that come with the changes, and creating an action plan to effectively respond to the crisis (Gyang, 2020). Principals

should have various leadership skills to be able to respond to and make effective decisions during a crisis (Abernathy, 2018).

Al Saidi et al. (2020) explained that influential leaders encompass four characteristics during crisis management to be successful: (a) quick responses, (b) systematic driven skill set, (c) well versed approach that is communicated, (d) and collaborative disposition. During Covid-19 leaders had to make rapid executive decisions to mitigate the spread of the disease and be able to create systems alongside guidance and constant two-way communication from health officials (Al Saidi et al., 2020). The changes had a quick turnaround required for continuous communication to the various stakeholders of the organization because timely communication and being transparent allows for collaboration (Al Saidi et al., 2020). The quick turnaround of changes in systems and communication was necessary for leaders to have favorable outcomes for stakeholder collaboration which fosters a sense of unity through a partnership spirit (Al Saidi et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the physical, emotional, and mental health of principals was adversely impacted due to the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic (Harris & Jones, 2020; Rodman et al., 2020).

Harris and Jones (2020) explained that the role of leaders changed without new standards of leadership attributes needed, no professional development, and no strategic plan or systems to help aide and address COVID-19 in the school system. In a study that implemented a mixed methods design, Westberry et al. (2021) determined what knowledge and skills were needed from school principals to effectively lead teaching and learning in a virtual setting amid a pandemic. The 77 participating principals' experience ranged from 1-29 years of administrative experience. The results demonstrated that principals had to increase their communication skills and be more actively present in all areas of the school's organization. Additionally, principals had to remain calm even

under mass confusion, exercise lots of patience, be technological savvy, and continue to be the instructional leader to ensure learning continued. Further results revealed that the role of the principal became more challenging and increasingly stressful as schools went into virtual teaching and learning (Westberry et al., 2021).

Throughout the course of a crisis a principal will experience occurrences that will challenge their stamina to persist amid fatigue, uncertainty, rejection, and limited access to needed resources (Mutch, 2015). In the year 2020 the education world was disrupted due to the Coronavirus outbreak (Black et al., 2020). To mitigate the spread of the virus, K-12 schools, as well as higher education campuses, were forced to close and implement some form of virtual instruction for learning to continue (Black et al., 2020). When principals were faced with the COVID-19 pandemic, the rapid shift to virtual school only intensified principal attrition (Skaalvik, 2020). According to the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), the COVID-19 pandemic intensified the attrition crisis of principals. Due to the working conditions during the pandemic, survey results of elementary, middle, and high school principals, that work in urban, suburban, and rural school communities, indicated that 22.8 percent were reconsidering being in the principal role, 17.2 percent planned to leave principalship within one or two years, and five percent planned to leave immediately (NASSP, 2020).

Due to school closure mandates, educators had to modify their face-to-face teaching and learning to a virtual setting and innovate strategies that incorporated the use of technology for continued learning (Gouédard et al., 2020). The lack of equity regarding technology devices and internet access, fluid changes from health officials, and the political pressures to ensure learning continued, negatively impacted principals' well-being (Harris & Jones, 2020). Stress was at an all-time high during the COVID-19 global pandemic (Harris & Jones, 2020; Trampling et al., 2021). Although schools were one of

the organizations largely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, educational leaders had limited to no professional development in crisis management situations especially at the magnitude of a global pandemic (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). As such, principals were not only having to build capacity in others, but also within themselves to ensure learning continued during such an unprecedented time of crisis (Martinez et al., 2021).

In a mixed methods study, Martinez et al. (2021) explained the constraints faced by established principals during a pandemic as well as the changes in their role during a pandemic. Using purposeful sampling, two high school administrators were surveyed and interviewed. The study revealed that while principals felt they had the capacity to handle a crisis, added attrition and stress was experienced due to the various challenges posed by school closures and the uncertainty of a pandemic. Equity, specifically lack of resources such as technology devices for virtual learning, became more prominent and made teaching and learning more difficult for underserved communities. Additionally, creating innovative ways to communicate with stakeholders so that learning could continue also posed a challenge. Further results revealed that policy adaptability, due to continuous decisions and changes by political officials without taking into consideration underserved community equity concerns, posed increased attrition, stress and obstacles for principals (Martinez et al., 2020). The autonomy principals once had to make decisions for their schools was taken away during the COVID-19 pandemic as decisions were now made by state, health, education, and district officials (Grooms & Childs, 2021; Kaul et al., 2022). Given that schools are institutions where learning occurs and principals are the most critical individuals in ensuring continuous student achievement, by taking away the autonomy to make decisions based on campus needs, hinders the principal role as the leader of the school community which they are held accountable for (Zincirli, 2021). Nevertheless, principals had to ensure learning continued (Martinez et al., 2021).

In a time where students are challenged with learning gaps, added stressors caused by COVID-19 have a significant implication for principal turnover which can lead to adverse effects, specifically on teacher turnover, and on positive student outcomes (Kaufman et al., 2022). The implications of COVID-19 created several obstacles for principals to be able to effectively follow through with their roles and responsibilities (Kaufman et al., 2022). Some obstacles that were faced were chronic student absences, rapid changes to teaching due to virtual learning, and continuous changes with health and safety guidelines (Grooms & Childs, 2021; Kaufman et al., 2022; Santibañez & Guarino, 2021). Kaufman et al. (2022) conducted a study on 416 principals to explore how job requirements in tandem with availability of resources impacted principal's perceptions towards their principal role during the COVID-19 pandemic and whether they would return to the role. The results revealed there was a high need for principals to be able to network with other leaders to assist on how to best support and train teachers as well as determination of the best resources to use during virtual instruction for learning to continue. Additionally, due to decreased enrollment in the following school year after the pandemic began, budget constraints became an attritional challenge for the role. Furthermore, shortage of qualified teachers, substitutes, and support staff due to the COVID-19 pandemic made the role increasingly difficult especially at high poverty schools. Overall, Kaufman et al. (2022) revealed that of the 416 principals, 50% of principals did not have as much eagerness to be in the role as when they began, 43% would leave for a higher paying job, 27% indicated that the attritional stress was not worth being in the role, 21% would transfer to another school, and 9% were overall unsatisfied with being a principal at their school. Additionally, 20% of principals that never considered leaving the principal role prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, revealed they would likely leave in the following school year. The COVID-19 pandemic caused

many obstacles for principals and the lack of provisional supports only intensified attrition and impacted principals' well-being (Kaufman et al., 2022).

Summary of Findings

The principal role is a demanding profession, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated those demands by adding even more obstacles (Kaufman et al., 2022). Recent bodies of research indicate how the radical changes made to the educational environment during the COVID-19 pandemic had adverse-affects to student learning. Parents were not prepared to provide the instructional support that a teacher could do in the regular classroom (Spaull & Van der Berg, 2020). Teachers lacked capacity to effectively teach students in a virtual setting (Korkmaz & Toraman, 2020). Lack of equity and access to technology and dependable internet posed problems for students in high poverty (Kaufman et al., 2022). Nevertheless, principals are charged with ensuring positive student outcomes (Levin, Scott et al., 2020).

The influence of a principal to improve student outcomes is paramount through fostering positive working relationships with stakeholders of the school (Clark, 2017). Additionally, amid a national teacher shortage, principals are a major influencer in retaining teachers by building their capacity and providing ongoing support (Kaiser & Thompson, 2021). Even though principals are instrumental in the education of students, the role encompasses various factors that contributed to their attrition and turnover pre-pandemic such as excessive non instructionally related workload (Turkoglu & Cansoy, 2020). Furthermore, during the pandemic, principals needed to overcome all obstacles to ensure learning persevered which further increased their attrition and turnover (Al Saidi, et al., 2020). Since principals play a critical role in improving student outcomes, this study served to fill the gap in the qualitative literature by focusing on the contextual

factors experienced by principals prior to, amid, and post the pandemic that contributed to them remaining in the principal role.

Theoretical Framework

This study operated through the lens of the motivator-hygiene theory and the resilience theory. Fredrick Herzberg developed the motivator-hygiene theory which influences job satisfaction. In the development of this theory, participants related their work experiences for either having strong feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction towards their job. (Kian et al., 2013). Herzberg identified factors that contributed to feelings of satisfaction as motivators while those that contributed to dissatisfactions as hygiene factors (Kian et al., 2013). Herzberg noted that factors that resulted in job satisfaction were related to the individual's actual performance of the job while those that contributed to job dissatisfaction were factors related to the environment. (Kian et al., 2013).

Motivators for job satisfaction include: (a) achievement, (b) accolades, (c) self-fulfillment, (d) responsibility, (e) advancement, and (f) growth. The hygiene demotivators for job dissatisfaction include: (a) bureaucracy, (b) relationships, (c) work conditions, (d) status, (e) salary, and (f) job security (Alshmemri et al., 2017). Motivation factors are needed to improve job satisfaction and retention of individuals in their job is dependent on whether dissatisfiers, hygiene factors, outweigh the motivators for job satisfaction (Herzberg, 1966). Therefore, Herzberg hypothesized that job satisfaction and dissatisfaction are two separate mind sets and not opposite of one another (Herzberg, 1966). Job satisfaction is critical in leadership since it directly impacts an individual's loyalty and sense of belonging to the organization they work for (Wang et al., 2018). However, when roles in an organization change, work intensification becomes a concern due to job expectations, role ambiguity, work overload, and conflict (Wang et al., 2018).

The consequence of this is that it impacts an individual's job satisfaction due to occupational stress caused by adversity.

Positive outcomes in the wake of adversity are determined by resilience (van Breda, 2018). Resilience can be defined by either an intrinsic attribute of an individual or capacity of a person to be able to respond and act positively even through adversity (van Breda, 2018). The Resilience theory stemmed from psychological, psychiatric, and human development regarding medicine, but more recently has emerged in the education field (Ledesma, 2014). Resilience theory contends that adversity is not what matters but how an individual responds to it is what is significant (Masten, 2018). At times when individuals face events that pose challenges and frustration, resilience is what aides individuals persist and succeed (Masten, 2018). Richardson (2002) explained that the resilience theory encompasses self-development of every individual's own ability as well being able to develop supportive environments that foster resilience in others. Furthermore, the resilience theory can explain the intrinsic motivation within individuals that encourages them to expand their knowledge, seek self-fulfillment, and act selflessly (Richardson, 2002).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, principals were accustomed to the high stress levels, hardships, and mental as well as emotional strain (Wells & Klocko, 2018). However, stress was increasingly high amid the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, the resilience theory aligns with examining the lived experiences of principals and their resilience through the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, by examining the lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher could determine motivation-hygiene factors that impacted principals' adaptability throughout an unprecedented time that contributed to the contextual factors of their role that they describe as supportive or constraining to shed light on how to improve job satisfaction for principal retention.

Conclusion

This chapter presented a review of relevant literature relating to the purpose of the study, which is to analyze the contextual factors that contributed to the phenomena of adaptability and resilience of principals that influenced their decision to stay in the principal role prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic. In the following chapter the methodological aspects of this study will be detailed to include the research purpose and questions, participant selection, data collection procedures, data analysis, triangulation of the data, representation of findings, and privacy and ethical considerations.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Overview of the Research Problem

For this study, the researcher implemented a transcendental phenomenological methodology. A transcendental phenomenological methodology permitted the researcher to focus on in depth descriptions and personal meanings of an individuals' lived experiences (Peoples, 2020). Transcendental phenomenology aims to remove personal biases when examining a phenomenon (Peoples, 2020). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to conduct a thorough investigation of the lived experiences of principals prior to, amid and post the COVID-19 pandemic and examine contextual factors of their role that they describe as supportive or constraining. By examining the lived experiences of principals prior to, amid and post the COVID-19 pandemic, this study intended to provide an understanding on what contributed to the phenomena of adaptability and resilience of principals that influenced their decision to stay in the principal role.

Principal burnout increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (Skaalvik, 2020). Harris and Jones (2020) explained that the rapid changes in the education world negatively impacted principals' well-being thereby increasing turnover. While there is some research on principal turnover through the pandemic (DeMatthews et al., 2022; Kaufman et al., 2022; Lopez et al., 2022), in current research, few studies have examined what contributed to individuals remaining in the role of a principal through the COVID-19 pandemic. Evaluating what contributed to principals remaining in the role may offer crucial information for districts to increase principal retention. For this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain rich descriptions from principals' lived experiences through the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter will present an overview of

the research purpose and questions, methodological tradition, context, positionality, participants, data collection, data analysis, triangulation, privacy and ethical considerations, and representation of the findings.

Research Design

For this study, the researcher used a transcendental phenomenological approach. A phenomenological approach examines a phenomenon through comprehensive descriptions of experiences that can be classified for analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Since the research is focused on the lived experiences of principals through an event, the researcher selected to conduct the research through the phenomenological qualitative lens. The researcher intended to bring focus to the participants detailed descriptions of their lived experiences as principals through a global pandemic. By having participants provide detailed descriptions of their experiences, the researcher intended to gain an understanding on what influenced principal resilience and adaptability for principal retention.

Phenomenology aims to remove any assumptions or preconceived notions (Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenological approach reveals the layers of experiences participants may or may not be aware of (Patton, 2023). A challenging aspect of phenomenology is to keep an open mind when providing descriptions of things as they are in the world (Moustakas, 1994). However, refraining from drawing conclusions and strictly being an observer and analyzer of the descriptive experiences of the participants, allowed the researcher to completely immerse in the phenomenological research (Patton, 2023). Reflexivity is self-awareness of potential biases and assumptions that are derived from the lived experiences of a researcher (Rennie, 2004). As such, the researcher utilized journaling as a method of reflexivity to hinder any biases that emerged (Morrow, 2005).

Research Purpose and Questions

Moustokas (1994) explained that there are two underlying questions that guide a phenomenological methodology to explain the phenomena: (a) What are the individuals' lived experiences with the phenomenon? and (b) What were the situational factors or events that formulated the outcome of the experience in the phenomenon? This transcendental phenomenological, study focused on the lived experiences of school principals prior to, amid, and post a global pandemic and how the phenomena of adaptability and resilience contributed to the outcome of those experiences. This study was guided by two research questions:

What were challenges faced by principals prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic?

What aided principals in overcoming challenges prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic for principal retention?

Context

Located in South-East Texas, this urban school district serves 194,607 students. This school district in which the study took place is one of the largest districts in the United States. It is composed of 274 campuses (167 elementary schools, 39 middle schools, 37 high schools, and 31 combined schools). Table 3.1 details demographics obtained from the Texas Academic Performance Report regarding ethnicity and programs of students in the participating school district for the 2022-2023 school year. The data demonstrates that this school district serves a large percentage of Hispanic students, and more than half of the student population is considered at-risk and economically disadvantage.

Table 3.1:
District Student Demographic Data

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Total Student Membership	194,607	100%
African American	41,157	21.67
Hispanic	117,613	61.92
White	18,281	9.62
American Indian	312	0.16
Asian	9,121	4.80
Pacific Islander	144	0.08
Two or More Races	3,306	1.74
Economically Disadvantaged	150,922	79.46
Emergent Bilingual	70,203	36.96
At-Risk	123,187	64.86
Special Education	26,544	13.98

Data collection occurred in Spring of 2024 four years since the COVID-19 pandemic started and almost a year since the pandemic was declared as being over. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, changes at the national, state, and district level occurred. School closures occurred, virtual instruction occurred, and instructional learning loss resulted (Grooms & Childs, 2021). The school district where the study took

place made the decision to close schools in March of 2020. Students would be mandated to remain virtual until October of 2020. When schools reopened, the superintendent, at the time, provided parents with the option for students to remain virtual until fall of 2021 or return to school for face-to-face learning. Even though schools fully re-opened in fall of 2021, the parameters for reopening set by state, local, and districts officials posed challenges for face-to-face learning to occur. The school district had mandatory mask mandates which made some parents angry, and they refused to send their students to school. Students and teachers had to socially distance themselves by 6 feet in all areas of the school building. The school district saw a decrease in enrollment. According to Texas Education Agency, in the year 2019-2020 the district had an enrollment of 210,061 students. When schools reopened in 2021-2022, the district was 13, 118 students under enrollment. This is significant because it meant some schools did not meet their enrollment projections; therefore, their funding was cut.

Positive student outcomes is a priority for the district, and it is measured through the state's accountability system. According to TEA, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the district was a B rated district for positive student outcomes. During the 2019-2020 school year, schools did not take the state's accountability assessment. Furthermore, while the district took the test for the 2020-2021 school year, some students opted out of the state test, and performance of students did not count for the schools and district that year. However, for the school year of 2021-2022, schools' accountability rating was vastly measured using their progress measures related to student academic growth from the previous school year of only students that took the test. As such, since accountability focused largely on student growth and not student achievement, various schools were able to perform well, and the district was able to maintain its B rating. Conversely, changes to the state testing and school accountability system in the 2022-2023 school

year negatively impacted that. Students took a new version of the state’s accountability test. The test was once a multiple choice only test but now includes items such as short answers and extended responses to literature. Additionally, students took the test completely online and no longer had the option of paper and pencil tests. Furthermore, since the test versions are different from one year to next, the data cannot be comparable for student progress. As such, the weight of accountability will come from student achievement. This is important to the study because school closures created learning loss (Donnelly & Patrinos, 2022). While no official word has been provided around the new accountability parameters and ratings, district officials are predicting an influx of an additional 80 schools being rated as a D or F school due to student achievement.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic the district faced the possibility of an intervention from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) due to “failure of governance” and low academic performance of a high school. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic occurred in March of 2020, the attention turned to providing students with educational services in a virtual setting. The matter of a state intervention resurfaced in spring of 2023. TEA issued a new board of managers and appointed a new superintendent in the summer of 2023. Since then, a total of 28 academic priority campuses were reconstituted under the New Education System (NES) and 57 campuses opted to become NES aligned. Under this model, campuses receive additional support for improved student outcomes. This information is important to the study since it has been a significant occurrence post the COVID-19 pandemic that has impacted district policies and procedures that were in place pre-COVID-19. The district saw significant changes to teaching and learning throughout the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, by understanding principals’ experiences and leader moves that were made during this crisis, it can provide insight on what aided principals to remain in the role.

Positionality

Working in an urban school district has many challenges. There are issues with equity which in turns impacts student achievement and affects the workload of those that work in underserved communities (Lareau & Goyette, 2014). Lack of resources and support perpetuates the problem of equity (Thompson & Thompson, 2018). Of the nine years as an elementary principal, the researcher was rated as a highly effective principal as noted in the appraisal system due to favorable student outcomes in a high poverty minority school. While working in an underserved neighborhood school, the researcher prioritized providing equitable opportunities for all students to overcome any academic challenges. Additionally, the researcher was a principal prior to, amid, and post the pandemic and has firsthand knowledge of how school leaders faced many obstacles to ensure academic achievement occurred throughout the pandemic. As such, the researcher's experience allows her to be a connoisseur of the details that matter in educative spaces, which aided in analysis, (Eisner, 1991).

The role of a principal encompasses various responsibilities that fall under two categories. There's a managerial side to successfully implement systems and operate the organization as well as the instructional side to ensure academic achievement increases. A principal must be well versed in both. The researcher struggled personally with the challenges of the role and how it impacted a work-home life balance. The struggle to achieve that balance was exacerbated when a global pandemic impacted the world. Therefore, the development of this study came from the researcher's own experiences on how the principal role has evolved throughout the years due to various factors including a global pandemic. As a result, the researcher planned to evaluate what contributed to principal retention throughout the pandemic.

The researcher understood that personal biases need to be made explicit (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher acknowledged that being currently employed in the school district where the research will take place could bias interpretation of the results. Serving as an Executive Director that supervises five principals in the district could be construed as potential bias. However, to minimize personal bias, the researcher only selected principals outside of her current division. Additionally, the researcher suspended any judgements through bracketing to ensure focus on the experience (Peoples, 2021). Additionally, member checks were conducted during and after interviews to ensure precise capturing of responses of the participants. The researcher also asked the participants to review the transcripts for accuracy. These added precautions hindered potential biases and allowed for participants experiences to be forwarded (Moustakas, 1994).

Participant Selection

Purposive sampling was used to select individuals that would produce relevant information (Creswell, 2013). The researcher conducted a purposive selection of 10 principals that have five years or more of experience. A total of five years or more of experience was needed so the researcher could gather descriptive experiences of principals prior to, amid, and post the pandemic. Table 3.2 demonstrates demographics for all school principals regarding gender, race/ethnicity, years of experience with the district, and age. The demographical data for principals, as it relates to gender and race, reflects that 73.6% of principals are female. Furthermore, there's an equal percentage of 36.2% for African American and Hispanic principals. As it relates to years of experience of school principals, the demographical data reveals that the average years of experience for principals is six years, and most principals have five years or less of experience.

Table 3.2:
District Principal Demographic Data

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Total Principals	271	100
Total Elementary Schools	168	63.4
Total Middle Schools	39	18.7
Total High Schools	37	17.9
Combine/Other	30	
Male	72	27.5
Female	190	72.5
African American	105	38.7
Hispanic	90	33.2
White	64	23.6
Asian	10	0.03
Two or More Races	2	0.01
Average Years of Experience	6	
1-5 Years of Experience	194	71.5
6-10 Years of Experience	31	11.4
11-19 Years of Experience	39	14.3
20+ Years of Experience	7	0.02

The 10 selected participants were sampled by engaging in individual semi structured 60-minute interviews. By continuously sampling data, saturation was accomplished when concepts could no longer be derived (Creswell, 2013). Implementing a comparative method, while connecting the process of reviewing notes and transcripts to derive any additional and relevant categories until nothing more can be obtained, allowed the researcher to establish saturation (Saunders et al., 2017). Research began in the spring of 2024. After gaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher obtained the campus principals' emails from the Public Information Request through the Texas Education Agency. Once the participants were purposive selected, they participated in an individual semi structure interview. Upon retrieving data from the interviews and triangulating the data to establish reliability and validity, the researcher used the data collected to answer the research questions.

Data Collection

Prior to data collection, the researcher gained approval from the University of Houston-Clear Lake's (UHCL's) Committee for Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS) as well as the Institutional Review Board (IRB). After receiving approval, the researcher obtained the emails of all principals from the Public Information Request through the Texas Education Agency. To collect the data, all district principals received an email regarding the purpose of the study, the procedures for the research, length of time required for their participation, confidentiality, explanation that participation is strictly voluntary, consent agreement, and their right to resign from the study. Included in the email, the researcher requested that willing participants have five years or more of experience to be purposive selected so they can provide rich descriptions of their lived experiences prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic. Once the researcher

determined eligible participants and obtained their voluntary consent to be part of the interviews, participants were given an option of three dates and times to choose from for a 60-minute in person or virtual interview.

In qualitative research, interviews allow the researcher to ask questions that provide descriptions while also allowing follow up questions to seek clarification (Creswell, 2013). The researcher conducted the individual semi structured interviews with the 10 selected principals while audio recording the participants responses. The use of a reflexive journal, to bracket previous knowledge, was implemented throughout the interview process, to analyze the researcher's beliefs and hinder any possible biases that could compromise the process of data collection and interpretation. Also, to protect the identity of the participants, the researcher assigned them pseudonyms. Prior to beginning the interview, the researcher reminded the participants of the purpose of the study, procedures, and their right to withdraw from participating in study at any given time. The questions utilized in the individual interviews provided the researcher with rich descriptions for data analysis regarding the principals lived experiences through a global pandemic. The data derived from these interviews were categorized by themes that emerged. Data obtained from these interviews were always secured in a password protected file on the researcher's computer and a locked file drawer. Data acquired will be kept by the researcher for the required five years before being destroyed.

Data Analysis

Phenomenological research aims to comprehend a phenomenon holistically (Peoples, 2021). In phenomenological analysis, patterns are identified through sentences and phrases (Saldana, 2016). Analysis needs an extensive review of data collected from the transcripts of the interviews. (Saldana, 2016). A total of 10 school principals with five years or more of principal experience participated in individual semi structured

interviews to answer questions related to their lived experiences through a pandemic. The interviews were recorded through Zoom, transcribed, and member checking as well as peer review occurred to establish credibility, transferability, and validity of the data. As part of member checking, the participants were asked to review their transcripts to ensure the researcher captured their responses accurately. Once the researcher verified accurate representation of the participants responses, the researcher began the inductive coding process which included two cycles of coding. There are cycles to coding in qualitative research (Saldana, 2016). The primary purpose of qualitative coding is data condensation not reduction to be used later for revealing of patterns, grouping, theory building, and declaration development (Saldana & Omasta, 2016). Saldana (2016) explained that cycle coding is necessary to evaluate any deficiencies that may have presented themselves in the previous cycle. In the first cycle of coding there is close attention paid to the participants actual words and not the researchers (Saldana, 2016). Second, the researcher reads the transcribed responses numerous times to ensure there is no misinterpretation of the participants' lived experiences (Alase, 2016). In the second cycle, the researcher codes responses by boxing phrases or sentences which will then be used to categorize responses into key words to be able to identify codes, categories, and themes in the final stage (Crowe et al., 2015). The researcher used the themes that emerged to answer the research questions regarding principals' lived experiences through the COVID-19 pandemic and analyzed what contributed to the phenomena of adaptability and resilience of principals that influenced their decision to stay in the principal role prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic.

Qualitative Validity

Korstjens and Moser (2017) explained that to ensure validity of qualitative research, there must be trustworthiness through inclusion of credibility transferability, dependability, and conformability. Due to qualitative research being interpretative, a researcher should be self-aware of his or her role in the research when interpreting the findings, and how personal experiences can affect the findings (Creswell, 2013). Bracketing prevents bias judgements or views to be able to assess an event as is (Patton, 2015). To examine distinctive beliefs and reduce any potential biases, the researcher bracketed previous knowledge and experiences in a reflexive journal throughout the interview process. Additionally, during the interviews the researcher also hindered potential bias by avoiding the use of leading follow up questions. Throughout the process of triangulation, the researcher collected data from semi-structured interviews, conducted member checks, post interviews follow up if needed for clarification, and peer debriefing to not only strengthen but also demonstrate the credibility, transferability, and validity of the research. After completing the individual interviews, the researcher listened to the audio recording several times to ensure words were not added or omitted. Additionally, member checking occurred so that participants could review transcripts for authenticity and clarify if needed. Researchers implement member checking to check for accuracy of the data by asking participants to review the findings for accurate interpretation (Creswell, 2013). This study also incorporated peer review, and the results were reviewed by other content experts. Peer reviews are conducted by other content experts to examine the work of the researcher to enhance the credibility of the research and data analysis (Given, 2008). Interview questions were also peer and mentored reviewed prior to the interviews to ensure quality and validity.

Representation of Findings

While participants were purposive sampled as principals with five years or more of principal experience, a profile of demographical data of the participants were represented in the findings. The authentic descriptions of the lived experiences of the principals were detailed as their own. The researcher incorporated direct quotes from the participants to further validate authenticity. Also, depending on the overarching theme, some participants responses were combined.

Privacy and Ethical Consideration

Prior to data collection, the researcher will obtain approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the University of Houston – Clear Lake’s (UHCL’s) Committee for Protection of Human Services (CPHS). Participants were solicited through the public information request. An initial demographic survey regarding years of experience was asked to be completed by willing participants to seek eligible participants to interview for the study. Interview participants were given information regarding the purpose of the interview for the study, length of each interview, disclosure of recording and transcribing responses, assurance that confidentiality would be exercised using pseudonyms, their participation was voluntary, and information regarding their informed and signed consent to participate in the study. Furthermore, participants were informed that their participation was strictly voluntary, and they could withdraw from participating without consequence. Notification were also provided to inform participants that their participation level of consequence was minimal. The data collected remained securely locked in a cabinet and pin drive in the researcher’s office. The researcher will maintain the data for five years as required by the CPHS. After the deadline has passed, the researcher will destroy all data files associated with the study.

Conclusion

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of principals through the COVID-19 pandemic and contextual factors of their role that they describe as supportive or constraining. By examining the lived experiences of principals through the COVID-19 pandemic, this study intended to provide an understanding on what contributed to the phenomena of adaptability and resilience of principals that influenced their decision to stay in the principal role. Through purposive sampling and semi structured individual interviews, the researcher collected data that provided rich descriptions of principals' lived experiences through the COVID-19 pandemic. Chapter IV will provide a detailed representation of data collection, and the interview data will be analyzed and discussed in further detail.

CHAPTER IV:

RESULTS

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of principals prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic and the contextual factors of their role that they describe as supportive or constraining. By examining the lived experiences of principals prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic, this study will augment current knowledge by providing an understanding on what contributes to the phenomena of adaptability and resilience of principals in their leadership role. To obtain a more thorough understanding of the experiences of principals prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic, a qualitative approach was implemented for this study. As explained in the previous chapter, semi structured interviews were conducted, and interview questions were utilized to gain a deeper understanding of principals' lived experiences. Furthermore, this study was designed to address the following research questions:

What were challenges faced by principals prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic?

What aided principals in overcoming challenges prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic for principal retention?

The aim for this study was to examine how the lived experiences of the participants and the challenges faced prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the supports to overcome challenges, impacted the decision of principals to remain in the role. The qualitative data gathered from the interviews was analyzed through inductive coding to identify related patterns and derived themes. This chapter presents the findings that emerged from the qualitative data analysis and addresses the qualitative research questions at the core of this study.

Research Design

A transcendental phenomenological approach was implemented to obtain details regarding the lived experiences of principals prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic. This study was designed to gather insight on the contextual factors that principals describe as supportive or constraining that impact their resilience and adaptability to remain in their role. Ten participants were purposive selected from a large urban school district to participate in semi-structured interviews. Interviews took place via zoom and at the preferred date and time of the participant. Questions asked during the interview can be referenced in Appendix C. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Following the interviews, and after transcribing the data collected, participants were given a copy of their transcripts for member checking to ensure responses that were recorded, accurately conveyed what they communicated and to clarify if necessary. To identify the emerging themes from the data collected, an inductive coding process was implemented.

Setting

Located in Southeast Texas, a large urban school district was used for this study. For the purpose of this study and to maintain confidentiality the district will be referred to as Blue Independent School District (BISD). It is composed of 274 campuses (167 elementary schools, 39 middle schools, 37 high schools, and 31 combined schools). Table 4.1 details demographics obtained from the Texas Academic Performance Report regarding ethnicity and programs of students in the participating school district for the 2022-2023 school year. The data demonstrates that this school district serves a large percentage of Hispanic students, and more than half of the student population is considered at-risk and economically disadvantage.

Table 4.1:
District Student Demographic Data

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Total Student Membership	194,607	100%
African American	41,157	21.67
Hispanic	117,613	61.92
White	18,281	9.62
American Indian	312	0.16
Asian	9,121	4.80
Pacific Islander	144	0.08
Two or More Races	3,306	1.74
Economically Disadvantaged	150,922	79.46
Emergent Bilingual	70,203	36.96
At-Risk	123,187	64.86
Special Education	26,544	13.98

Table 4.2 demonstrates demographics for all school principals that work in this school district. The table indicates demographics regarding gender, race/ethnicity, years of experience with the district, and age. The demographical data for principals, as it relates to gender and race, reflects that 73.6% of principals are female. Furthermore, there's an equal percentage of 36.2% for African American and Hispanic principals. As

it relates to years of experience of school principals, the demographical data reveals that the average years of experience for principals is six years, and most principals have five years or less of experience.

Table 4.2:
District Principal Demographic Data

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Total Principals	271	100
Total Elementary Schools	168	63.4
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Combine/Other	30	
Male	72	27.5
Female	190	72.5
African American	105	38.7
Hispanic	90	33.2
White	64	23.6
Asian	10	0.03
Two or More Races	2	0.01
Average Years of Experience	6	
1-5 Years of Experience	194	71.5
6-10 Years of Experience	31	11.4
11-19 Years of Experience	39	14.3
20+ Years of Experience	7	0.02

To gather participants, principals were contacted via e-mail informing them of the study and asked if they would be willing to participate. The 10 principals purposive selected for this study were principals in the school district prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic. The participating principals were assured that their identities would remain strictly confidential. As such, each participating principal, school they lead, staff members, executive leadership, and district that were named during the interviews were assigned pseudonyms.

Description of the Participants

The requirements for the participants were to have at least five years of principal experience and work in the large urban school district described in this study. The five years of principal experience were required to account for their lived experiences prior to, amid, and post the COVID 19 pandemic. Ten principals that responded the quickest to the request to participate in the study, and that met the required criteria, were asked to schedule interviews to collect data. To protect the privacy of the principals, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant. The pseudonyms assigned to the participating principals are: Allison, Brooke, Carmen, David, Fatima, Heidi, Isabel, Jason, Jazmin, and Katherine.

Profile of the Participants

The two requirements to be participants in this study were for principals to have a minimum of five years principal experienced which would account for the necessary experience to answer the research questions. Additionally, they should be principals in the district described in the study. Since those were the only requirements, the demographics for the participants were different as it relates to gender, age, race, years in education, years as principal, and grade levels served. Table 4.3 provides a breakdown

for each participant and their detailed demographical information and table 4.4 provides the frequency and percentage of the participants demographics.

The data demonstrates an average of nine years of principal experience between the 10 participating principals. Of the 10 principals that participated in this study 70% are Hispanic, 70% are female, and 70% at the elementary level. Additionally, 70% of the principals range in principal experience between six to ten years. In comparing it to the district's principal profile, 63% of principal work in elementary, 72.5% are female, 33.2% are Hispanic, and 11.4% have experience ranging between six to ten years.

Table 4.3:
Individual Principal Profile

Name	Gender	Age range	Race	Years as a Principal	Grade Level
Allison	Female	31-50	Hispanic	6	1 st – 5 th
Brooke	Female	31-50	Hispanic	10	PK-5 th
Carmen	Female	31-50	Hispanic	7	PK-5 th
David	Male	31-50	Hispanic	6	PK-5 th
Fatima	Female	51-70	Hispanic	20	PK-5 th
Heidi	Female	31-50	African American	6	6 th -8 th
Isabel	Female	31-50	African American	9	6 th -8 th
Jason	Male	31-50	Hispanic	5	PK-5 th
Jazmin	Female	31-50	Hispanic	6	PK-5 th
Katherine	Female	51-61	White	16	9 th -12 th

Table 4.4:
Overview Principal Profile

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Total Principals	10	100
Total Elementary Schools	7	70.0
Total Middle Schools	2	20.0
Total High Schools	1	10.0
Male	2	20.0
Female	8	80.0
African American	2	20.0
Hispanic	7	70.0
White	1	10.0
Average Years of Experience	9	
1-5 Years of Experience	1	10.0
6-10 Years of Experience	7	70.0
11-19 Years of Experience	1	10.0
20+ Years of Experience	1	10.0

Allison is currently an elementary school principal at BISD with six years of consecutive principal experience at the same school. She has been an educator for 23

years. Her educational career experience ranges from elementary, middle, and high school as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal. The reason she became a principal was because it was a goal for her and the next step in her career. After she leaves the principalship, she shared she wants to community to remember, “Allison always did what's best for children.”

Brooke has 10 years of principal experience all in the same elementary school in BISD. Her career as an educator began in 1992. Some of her education experience was being a teacher in Germany for seven years. Additional experience includes teacher, teacher specialist, assistant principal. The reason she became a principal was to make a positive impact on students, parents, and teachers in a grander scale. Regarding how she wants to be remembered, Brooke shared:

Brook cared. She cared enough to make sure that I learned. She believed in me. I want kids, community members, parents to say she pushed us, even teachers. She didn't let up on me even though I wanted to give up. She didn't give up.

Carmen has been a principal for seven years all at the same elementary school in BISD. She has been in education for a total of 29 years. Becoming a principal occurred by chance after being a teacher, curriculum coordinator, and assistant principal. She enjoys watching students learn and grow. Regarding her legacy, Carmen shared:

I just want my community to know that I care and that's basically it. I just want them to know that I care and that I do everything from my heart, you know working through the pandemic was hard, but you have to love your community. You have to love your kids. You have to love your parents, and you have to love your teachers no matter what their differences are. Everybody comes with different personalities but at the end of the day you have to have that love. I think that that is one of my things, you know, I love my kids no matter how difficult or challenging they are. I really love my kids. I think

about them like my kids. My own personal kids. Sometimes what my kids used to say when they were younger is, mom, you love your students more than you love us which is not true, but I just want them to know that I care and that I did everything from my heart because I love them.

David has been an elementary principal at the same school for six years. His education career began 28 years ago and his experience ranges from elementary, middle, and high school as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal. As a teacher he felt limited regarding the number of students that he could make a positive impact on. Therefore, he chose the path of leadership to make a difference in the lives of even more students and teachers. Regarding his legacy, David shared:

I'm the one who cares about the community. The one who you can invite to the quinceaneras or the weddings, and then there I am, you know, eating your food. Because that's what I do, right? I mean, I get so close to them that I want for them to feel that I'm part of their community. So I mean, yeah, I just want for them to, to think about me as the person who, who inserted himself in their system and that I was just one part of them. You know, somebody who cares about the community.

Fatima is one of seven principals with 20 or more years of principal experience. She has been a principal for 20 years. She currently serves as a principal of an elementary campus. With 32 years of experience in education, she has been a teacher, teacher trainer, and assistant principal prior to becoming a principal. Becoming a principal came from other leaders realizing her potential to lead. However, it has since then become a passion for her. For her legacy as a principal, Fatima shared:

I want my students to know that, or anyone, right, that I led the school in a professional way. I want them to know that I love them. I tell the kids daily that they are

loved. Yeah, I want them to say Fatima really loved the kids. She always, she did this special thing for the kids. I want them to say that I gave them beyond the academics.

Heidi became a principal six years ago and has remained in the same middle school since then. Her educational career began 19 years ago, and her experience as a teacher and assistant principal has aided her in her current position. She wanted to become a principal to be the primary leader of learning and support students in becoming well rounded individuals both academically and socially so that they could be prosperous after graduation. In responding to her legacy, Heidi shared:

The legacy that I wanna leave behind is... I want every student of mine, the campus, I want them to say that I am a better person than I was the day before because of the people and the systems that were put in place here to make me successful.

Isabel has been in education for 28 years. Her experience ranges from teacher, teacher specialist, and is currently a principal. When she was a teacher specialist, she saw the need to improve the quality of instruction, so she decided to lead the effort by becoming a principal. In her 9 years as a principal, she has successfully led turnaround efforts of an elementary school and currently a middle school. When asked about the legacy she wants to leave behind, Isabel shared:

Kids can. That our kids, our economically disadvantaged, African American, Hispanic children, who come from very rough neighborhoods, can learn, can behave, can excel, can go on to do great things because they were created for greatness to begin with so they can do great things. You just have to have the right people in place, the right systems in place, and a whole lot of love to show them that they can and then you just don't give up on them.

Jazmin has been an elementary principal for 6 years. She began her education career as a bilingual teacher 21 years ago. Becoming a principal stemmed from her

passion of wanting to impact more students with receiving high quality instruction by coaching teachers and building their capacity. Jazmin shared:

I want them to know that I was, you know, I was there advocating for our students. That I was always there to ensure that our students, regardless of our demographic area, received the best high-quality instruction available, and that my top priority was, and will always be our students.

Jason began his career in education 15 years ago as a teacher, teacher specialist, and assistant principal before deciding to become a principal. Being a principal of five years stemmed from him feeling it was a calling. He wanted to make an impact by implementing effective academic structures and cultivating positive relationships in underserved communities. Jason shared:

The legacy that I want to leave is that I had an impact not only on the students and staff and parents, but an entire community. That there was one person that was able to bring about change, just one person that was able to make others, like, inspire others, and move them to make change. I think that legacy there, it would be pretty...pretty awesome in nature. So I think just the moving the community, having an impact, and just being that beam of inspiration for people would be pretty awesome.

Jazmin started her education career 25 years ago and has been a principal for 16 years in either elementary, middle, and currently high school. When she was a teacher, and then a reading specialist, she felt she had a gift that she could share with many more people and that is why she became a principal. When asked about the legacy she wants to leave, Jazmin responded:

I want them to know, the kids that graduate from my school, to always remember that I was cheering them on. I, you know, I wanted success for them, and I was willing to do whatever I needed to do to ensure that...that those opportunities were there.

Data Analysis

This study examined the challenges of principals prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic and what aided principals to overcome those challenges for principal retention. Data was derived from individual participant interviews which were recorded and transcribed to ensure validity and trustworthiness. Interview questions were peer reviewed to ensure alignment with the research questions. Member checking occurred by providing participants with their transcripts to clarify or add to their responses and to validate the accuracy of participant's recorded responses. Additionally, peer review was conducted to ensure credibility. Although there are various studies on principal turnover, this study was designed to offer insight on principal retention even through a crisis such as a global pandemic. Themes that emerged after the inductive coding process are detailed in the next section.

Emerging Themes

For this study, the focus was on the lived experiences of principals prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic. During the individual interviews, participants shared their professional and personal challenges along with what aided them in overcoming challenges faced. Interviews were conducted one on one and occurred only once. During the interview, participants were asked 20 open ended questions designed towards finding out challenges they had and aides that supported them throughout the pandemic.

Research question one focused on the challenges principals had prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic. Research question two focused on what aided principals prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic. The data in line with the research questions were categorized into themes that described the lived experiences of the principals. The consistent themes that emerged during the study were: (a) establishing a shared vision, (b) workload, (c) work-life balance, (d) improving leadership density, (e)

lack of resources, (f) systemic overhaul, (g) motivation, (h) emotional and mental health, (i) social emotional guidance, (j) reset, (k) learning gaps (l) professional development, (m) mentorship, (n) supervisor support, (o) collegueship, (p) unity, (q) resilience and purpose, (r) sound board, (s) executive guidance, and (t) resolve. Different themes emerged for each research question and for the different time periods of pre, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic. A discussion for each research question along with summarized responses from the participants is detailed in the following section.

Research Question One

Research questions one, *what where challenges faced by principals prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic?*, was answered by a total of 10 principals. During the inductive coding process a total of 11 themes emerged regarding challenges principals faced prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic. Challenges prior to the pandemic included four themes: (a) establishing a shared vision, (b) workload, (c) work life balance, (d) improving leadership density. Challenges amid the pandemic included four themes: (a) lack of resources, (b) systemic overhaul, (c) motivation, and (d) emotional and mental health. Challenges post the pandemic consisted of three themes: (a) social emotional guidance, (b) reset, and (c) learning gaps.

Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic

All participants agreed that the primary role of principals prior to the pandemic was to be the instructional leader and ensure student safety. Heidi said, “The primary role was to make sure that students were learning and growing, so I would say that I was the lead learning facilitator on my campus.” Jazmin also shared the same sentiment expressing, “My highest priority was to ensure that all students were receiving high quality instruction every day.” Aside from being an instructional leader the principal roles prior to the pandemic was to ensure safety. Fatima commented, “Another

responsibility was of course safety of the campus, and assuring that every parent should feel comfortable once they left their child at my door and that they felt and knew that they were taken care of well and that they were safe.” Like her colleagues, Carmen responded,

It was about making sure that my kids were learning. The students were learning at the highest level. That was like the number one thing, and it goes kinda together with the safety piece and the safety component. If the kids are not feeling safe, or if they're not safe coming to school, then they can't feel comfortable learning.

Essentially participants conveyed that student safety and being an instructional leader go hand in hand and one cannot be without the other. If students do not feel safe, then they cannot learn. As such, principals had to keep both at the forefront.

Establishing a Shared Vision

Participants were asked to share challenges that they faced both professionally and personally in the principal role prior to the pandemic. Based on the responses, the principal role required thick skin and laser like focus on organizational goals which principals were expected to attain and held accountable for. This posed a challenge since not everyone in the school community understood that expectation. Heidi communicated,

It's always said that the principal role is a very lonely job and that is a challenge sometimes because there is no one else on your campus who has the balcony view of your campus that you do. Likewise, it's lonely because you may have other principals that you are part of a cohort with but their balcony view is of their campus. So you know you have comrades in the work, but the viewpoint that they have is still very different from yours for your campus. So I think it's a challenge because oftentimes in the work of education as teachers, as assistant principals, even as district leaders oftentimes you have a cohort of others that you may be able to kind of rely on for that support and looking at

something. As a principal that buck stops with you, yet you know you're the only one with the viewpoint of your campus the way that you see it.

In a similar response David described the importance of establishing a mission and a vision for the campus to improve academics, but the challenge was, David replied,

You know, personnel, that are like not buying into the mission and the vision that we have on campus. Maybe some of them might not agree on how we are going to, you know, to reach every single student. How we gonna be implementing processes. And I would say, that's the challenging part because you don't want a person who is on your campus basically going against your mission and vision because you know, that person might be impacting the students learning in a negative form, right?

Allison expressed the same views stating, "An assistant principal may not see all the pieces like the principal does because the principal knows from a district or state level what the expectations are or the goals that need to be met and sees all of the moving pieces inside a building." The role of the principal requires tact to be able to handle the varying perspectives from the different stakeholders of the school community. It is delicate balance of maintaining laser like focus on the mission and vision of the school, but also making sure that everyone in the school community supports it. Regarding expectations, Brooked shared,

So principals when they take over a school, it's not something easy. It's not! You're held accountable for the success of the...of your school, and that's one of the hardest is being held accountable to the success, you know, depending on how big your school is of 900 kids and accountability scores. That's one of the biggest stressors of principal, the accountability of the whole school. And then, if you don't do well, depending on the ranking, then people are judging you right.

Consequently, due to accountability expectations, principals were not always well liked, and it posed a challenge, but even so they had to maintain the goal at the forefront as achievement is to what they were held accountable to. Jazmin stated, “Maintaining your focus all the time on the goal, with obviously our students as our top priority, you do want to create a positive relationship with teachers and make them happy, but that can’t happen because you always maintain that focus to be our students advocate and ensure that they are always our top priority” In a similar response, Jason expressed:

...so you have to make sure that you conduct yourself professionally to achieve so that won't get you in trouble... or not might get you in trouble, because I hate to put in that that context... but in a way where you're doing everything you need to do for students not adults and going above and beyond. Really, you're a face of a community and making sure that you really do your due diligence and doing things correctly to achieve goals.

While participants shared the challenges of onboarding the staff in sharing the same vision and mission, certain expectations could be burdensome. The expectation from district leaders to run the campus in certain way that does not account for the intricacies and complexity of the community was a challenge. This was an internal battle for these participants since they were expected to have a shared vision for how the campus should be ran according to district expectations. Fatima shared:

Sometimes I feel like my hands are being tied. I would like to do what's best for students and instead have to give in to a cookie cutter kind of system that I don't think is what's best for my students. So sometimes not having that flexibility or the discretion to be able to run the campus as I see fit due to my years of experience. And my years of experience should be able to dictate that I can.

In conversing about the various systems that are on the operational side of a campus, some of the expectations on how principals were required to execute tasks took away their autonomy which created even more barriers for principals. Katherine shared:

When I talk about my challenges as a principal and... and part of it is being a leader... is seeing a clear path to something, but not being able to get there because of the rules, the bureaucracy, you know, that it's someone else's vision sometimes, and that that is a challenge.

Participants shared that the different perspectives from the various stakeholders of the school community could become distractors. As principals they had to navigate through everyone's expectations and at times feeling alone due wanting to do what was best for their campus, but not always having the support to do that. As such, it was a constant internal battle of knowing and doing what was best for their campus to achieve goals they were responsible for, or simply following what others expected of them to do. By not having clear and established core values across the district for all stakeholders to adhere to and allowing principals to individualize their plans based on their campus need, makes the job of a principal that much more difficult in attaining goals they are held accountable for.

Workload

In conversing with the participants, it was evident there was frustration centered around expectations of academic achievement and the various other responsibilities they were tasked with that were outside of instructional practices. This was cumbersome due to the excessiveness of compliance items, which were part of the day-to-day operations, that needed to be executed. Brooke explained, "The workload can be a distractor to what truly matters and is expected of a principal, which is instruction but if principals don't

take care of the workload, which is also expected, it could cause problems for them with the community and ultimately be a downfall for principals.” David explained:

... during the week it is impossible for you to complete everything that you have to complete. So bringing work home and using extending the period of time just to complete some tasks, that has been a challenge because before you recharge your energies and your spirit, here comes a new wave, right. Is another wave after wave, and it's intense, you know, every single day is intense.

Similarly, Heidi remarked, “And so the things that still need to be done managing the budget, compliance pieces, those things are typically things that I tackle outside of the school day.” Likewise, Isabel explained, “You're kind of like a manager making sure that everything is running smoothly, your systems, your routines, your procedures, and compliance... that everything is in place.”

The various compliance tasks and day to day operational items that were required of principals took a significant amount of time to execute. Allison shared some of the day-to-day tasks that were required of her. Allison revealed,

So many systems...so when it comes to instruction, what is it that we're wanting in the classroom? What do we want posted? What do we want in the hallways? And then we follow up and then they check up on us. What are our expectations? Those checkpoints. And then the operational? Making sure that we have a system for how things are done from the office standpoint. Where it comes down to signing in visitors, allowing people to come into the building, parents, things like that. How our communication is passed down to teachers, to faculty, and staff. How things are purchased, how people get supplies, things, you know. What programs we offer, what events activities that that we have for our students, for our families. All of those have to

be tied to our goal, to our mission. And how is it that we are executing that? What are we putting in front of our students? So it's a lot.

While participants wanted to ensure everything was done during work hours, it was an almost impossible task. There was not enough time in the day to complete everything that was required of them during the regular work hours. Jazmin explained, "We want to do everything that we can on our day-to-day basis at our schools, but there are so many different things that are happening all at once so we're prioritizing those high leverage needed areas that require focus." Jason shared there are various compliance pieces to the role that involve district and state mandated action items that a principal can delegate but is ultimately held liable for. Jason shared, "The bigger picture is, you're running systems within a campus, so even though you can't do everything you have to ensure that everything runs properly. Carmen agreed with her colleagues stating:

The biggest challenge for me is all the compliance, or all the different departments within our organization that we need to complete and look over. And so sometimes that becomes a challenge because you cannot...it's like a household, you're running your house. So you have to make sure that you are taking care of everything. It's like I have to make sure that I'm taking care of all of the bills. So you know, you gotta take care of all that at the school level as required.

Being an instructional leader means keeping teaching and learning at the forefront; however, the managerial side of things became a workload issue and required a significant amount of time. Nonetheless, a principal's workload is still a major accountability factor and they are expected to complete it. Heidi explained, " So the things that still need to be done like managing the budget, compliance pieces, those things are typically things that I tackle outside of the school day to make sure that I'm

able to be out and about and visible and have a pulse on kind of what's happening in the school, trying to intercept issues as I see them arise and coaching my TIER II leaders.”

Due to the excessive workload, it caused the participants to work longer hours. That in turn led to taking away their personal time. The workload that principals are tasked with, as described in the participants responses, can pose a threat in the longevity of a principal because it creates an environment for principal burnout.

Work-Life Balance

Due to the various responsibilities of a principal, the time that is spent on executing work-related tasks can depreciate the quality of their home life and their own self-care. Katherine acknowledged that there were various times that she had to set aside her own health to ensure the school environment was effective for everyone else. Katherine responded, “And I think one of my biggest challenges is remembering that, you know, if my cup is empty, I can't share with anyone else and so reminding myself to take care of me is important.”

A work life balance does not come easy considering all of the tasks principals are required to do; however, Allison shared the importance of finding a balance by replying, “Finding the balance to not burn out as a principal and learning to delegate and not take the load of everything is a need.” Time became a major constraint in the principals lives because it was difficult to manage all that came with being in the principal role. Carmen shared:

The biggest challenge in the work is time. The time frame is you're there from 6 in the morning, and you're the first to get there, and then the last one to leave. So that kind of puts a dent into your personal life because you have to balance it. But sometimes you get home really late and you don't have time to do anything including sometimes during the day, eat. So you just get home and straight to, you know, getting ready for bed

and then doing it over and over again. It's a routine so that becomes a personal challenge. Sometimes you have to try to balance this as much as you can. And sometimes some days you're not gonna be able to balance, for me it has never been 50/50 it has always been more 90/10 with work taking over.

Similarly, Heidi shared that the work can consume most of her day, Heidi replied, Depending on what's going on at work, life balance, even though you try to manage it, depending on the time of year, what's going on, it's often hard because you want to make sure that your students are well, your staff is well and that may interfere sometimes with the personal, your personal life. And for myself, I am a workaholic, okay, I'll say it all out, and I know that I can get wrapped up in things especially if I'm trying to close something out before the day is over. It could turn into getting home sometimes after 8 o'clock and picking up fast food on the way home and then you know you eat, shower, sleep, rinse, and repeat, and so sometimes I hear it from my husband, but I think he's become a little more understanding.

David expressed that it takes him a little longer to complete tasks on a day-to-day basis so that interrupts the flow of efficiently managing his time to execute all items, David explained,

I'm not that super-fast learner or implementer if you can call it. It takes a little bit of time for me to absorb, digest, and then implement. Some other people might be more effectively managing their time and energy, but it takes for me an extra time, extra hours. I'm always willing, you know, to go on the extra mile, that's what I do. So and that, of course, brings some situations at the personal level, right? Cause having families, your job is just part of your day. It is not your whole 24 hours. This shouldn't be your whole 24 hours. But then you get so involved into your job because you love your job because

you love the community, the students. You have to, you have to balance it out in order to be more efficient in all the aspects of your life. You have to balance it out.

The consensus of the participants was that the immense amount of work impacted their family life. Finding the balance to be able to dedicate the time to effectively run a campus, but also run a household was difficult to achieve. Isabel has “non negotiables” as it relates to her time. She has church on Sunday and lunch with her husband; however, outside of that time, it’s open for work. Isabel shared:

You're on call at any time for families and for your teachers. I give my cell phone to everyone. So people call me at any time if they need some support. So it's just basically a 24/7 job. It can be challenging. Luckily, when I became a principal, my kids were in high school, so we were able to talk about it and I still was able to go to all the games, all the stuff. But the kids were able to drive, so that kind of helped me and my husband. He's also in education, so we just had to learn how to communicate about the time that it takes to do this job.

Although her children are grown ups now, Fatima shared her regrets of not dedicating as much time to her own children due to the time constraints of having to manage a school, she expressed,

Over the years I've been in education 32 years and you know my kids have known me only as an administrator all of their lives, but I missed out on some things. It's a regret that I can never fix. So definitely family time is a challenge and sometimes it's been friction in the marriage you know. In the end we always make it work, but that's definitely hard.

If Fatima could give advice to principals, she says, “Make sure to not miss out on important family events.” Jazmin agreed with Fatima that work should not consume a

principal's life and that time for family is "invaluable and should be cherished". Jazmin replied,

We must ensure that we're able to step away at certain times, so we can also be there for our family and for ourselves. This role is very demanding, and there's a lot of weight put on you, but you also want to be successful in your role. However, at the same time, one of our main purposes being in this role brings in a higher quality of life for our family; however, if we're not able to enjoy those moments with our family, then we're not doing justice to them.

Based on participant's responses, they strived to get better at managing a work-life balance. However, sometimes it is not possible because of the various responsibilities. Additionally, since so many people depend on them, they felt a high sense of responsibility to ensure that time was dedicated to them.

Improving Leadership Density

Professional development is no stranger to educators. A challenge for some educators is to stay current with new educational practices. Such is the case for Allison. Allison shared how education was and is continuously evolving with new data tracking systems, new assessments, new learning objectives, and so much more. Therefore, her challenge was building her capacity, she responded, "It's making sure that I continue to grow in the field of education, making sure that I stay abreast of the latest instructional strategies, techniques, the latest technology resources programs so that I can bring that back to my teachers." However, according to Brooke, the professional development received, specifically from the district, was not always effective to help her grow. Brooke stated:

They think they're giving you professional development to grow you but they're not individual, they're not doing the individual learning. I feel like as I moved up in this

role as a principal, I'm sometimes clumped up with brand new principals, as if I've never had certain trainings before, yet I've been a principal for 10 years. So I noticed that there is no true differentiation when we go to trainings.

Both participants shared the importance of being well versed in all areas of education. However, some of the trainings they received did not improve their capacity as an instructional leader. This posed a concern for them since they had to lead others in best practices to improve student learning and achievement. Since principals are held to a standard of improving academic achievement, developing and growing them is necessary to achieve that expectation.

Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

Participants felt that the changes that had to be conducted from health officials and district leaders due to the COVID-19 pandemic made their job extremely challenging, and they became coordinators of everything instead of instructional leaders. Fatima explained, "It was clearly very different. I feel like we all kind of lost control a bit about what we were supposed to do and how we're supposed to do it." Like her colleague, Brooke replied, "I would love to have said that I was the instructional leader, but I wasn't because I was trying to be more like of a problem solver and figure out how to now navigate for us the system." While some agreed that safety was still just as important as it was pre-pandemic, others felt they were trying to stay afloat with the many challenges that came with being a principal amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lack of Resources

During the COVID-19 pandemic a challenge for principals was the lack of resources for students to engage in virtual learning. Allison replied, "Technology was the challenge, the fact that not everyone had the resource technology, resources, internet devices, things like that, and they were not knowledgeable about the technology and how

to operate it. Carmen also shared the challenge of having to do virtual learning but there was a significant lack of technology. She had the added layer of still being fearful of the pandemic, but she knew she had to get devices and connectivity in the hands of students. Carmen exclaimed her frustration, “We had to go out there, into the field, and basically expose ourselves and go find the computers!”

The lack of computers was the resource that was in high demand and the most significant frustration for principals since they knew that instruction needed to continue. Not only was it required of them to ensure learning continued, but it was also something they wanted for their students as well. However, the dismaying and prominent fact of inequity became a barrier to achieve that quickly. Jason also shared:

There was really very a small amount of direction especially when it came to getting technology for the kids. It was like, go to your campus, see what you have round up any type of old laptop or device, and make piecemeal of whatever you can. Well, I still need about 200 laptops. It just became a mess. Right? So then you would have to ask parents to... well use your phone, or do you have a laptop, or can you borrow a laptop, or let me call XYZ High School down the road to see if they have any devices or any iPads.

Similarly, David also struggled with obtaining devices for his students. David elaborated,

We didn't have but I think only 170 computers laptops that we could, you know, deliver to our 700 plus kids when it was decided that we're gonna be going virtual learning. So it was a super difficult time because I have to go to buildings around, you know, and collect, you know, some kind of devices in order for me to deliver to the students.

Katherine didn't struggle with devices because high schools were one to one when it came to laptops, but she explained about the limitations regarding connectivity,

she responded, “The Wi-Fi Hotspots we had were very limited in time and speed, and so we give kids things to do that they couldn't do because the hotspots weren't, you know, strong enough to for the bandwidth of the video we wanted them to watch or whatever.” Jason and Brooke also shared that Wi-Fi connectivity was a concern. Brooke would ask parents to use their phones as a temporary solution. However, Brooke’s community struggled with getting resources for almost a year and a half. According to the participants responses, technology was not the only resource principals were trying to provide. Fatima said, “We were trying to simulate the classroom as best that we could; however, all that came with having to buy all the poster boards and buy other things, but we really weren't prepared.” In a similar response, Heidi shared the different resources she also tried to provide students. Heidi explained:

Just trying to do your very best to provide the support, not just with learning, but also with just basic needs which included computers and workbooks or textbooks, kinda whatever, whatever we had. So it was it was going to the school and assessing, you know, what do we have? The resources were limited because when we were all shut down you were limited to what you could do from your home to support or guide someone else. And so you know, you were very limited in the impact that you could make. That is what I found to be most true during Covid just the inability to have access to resources that would really support your campus, the learners, and adults.

The participants’ responses revealed how difficult it was to be expected to conduct learning in a virtual platform when the basic necessities were not available for all students. The lack of control to get those resources into the hands of the students only added to their frustration. The quick turnaround to prepare online schooling amid the pandemic required an incredible amount of time for principals to revamp systems and coordinate everything. From providing packets of learning materials to aide students and

parents as they awaited their devices, to gathering connectivity hot spots from the district, the process seemed almost impossible.

Systemic Overhaul

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the way that schools operated was completely restructured based on decisions made from the government and school officials. Part of the challenge was that principals struggled with the continuous changes. Heidi remarked:

The challenge of that whole continuous improvement. That was too much of it. Because things change, you know, sometimes 3 or 4 times a day, and it was a challenge because as soon as you thought, okay, I have a plan. Then it was, Oh, no well, now we're doing this. Okay come on team new plan. Make the new plan. Oh, no, it's changed. I remember there was a day like literally we heard, like 4 or 5 different things about what to do around the same thing, and so it became really frustrating. And at some point, it was like, well, okay, I might just wait till the end of the day because they're gonna tell us something new in the morning and by the afternoon it's gonna be something different. So I think that that was a big challenge around something else that, you know, I couldn't control.

David also expressed how difficult the new protocols they had to put in place were. He knew the protocols had to be executed because it was due to the pandemic, but the restructuring of learning online and then the changes made to the building once students returned to for face-to-face learning amid the pandemic was a big task. David remarked,

It was intense because I feel like I didn't have any control of making things work for other people. I felt like I was handicapped making sure we have to address and implement 4 or 5 protocols at the same time. Yeah, you feel like impotent about it because that was not the way that you think or you convene that things are gonna work.

Brooke also added that decisions made at the executive level weren't always, what she thought, "was best for students". She understood they were just trying to make sense of things, but Brooke worried about what learning would look like. Brooke said, "I wanted to teach kids during the pandemic, I wanted kids to read, I wanted to do all of these things, but yet my hands were held behind even by the district, right, because they have their own policies, their own rules, their own things." Jason expressed how there was little to no direction on how to fulfill his role. Jason also shared, "A challenge was communicating with my school district on directives and how to do certain things we were unaware of how to do."

The new systems that had to be put in place, as outlined by district officials, completely changed the "normal way" of a school system. Principals found themselves restructuring everything they knew. There were no more systems. They had to start from scratch. Heidi shared:

I felt like we had to be magicians a little bit During COVID-19 because, while you know that your role again is to facilitate learning and to have the structured environment in which learning could happen, Covid-19 took us out of that structured environment. Could parents help students read? What does that schedule look like? The challenge of being able to you know truly progress monitor the systems. No more enjoying the day going into classrooms, being in the hallways, checking in on instruction, being able to coach and model and things like that, you weren't able to have that same impact. So you know, you couldn't quote unquote walk the hallways and check in, you know, on kids.

Participants shared that many students were left behind academically because they had to search for technology. They shared how lack of equity in underserved communities became prevalent during this time. Furthermore, participants revealed that

after the chaos of hunting for devices for students stabilized, they had to restructure the way teaching was conducted. Participants responses revealed the struggle with how to transfer best practices of teaching and learning in a virtual platform. Carmen shared her anxiety with having to switch from school to online learning.

It was a very big learning curve because I had to, as a principal, had to learn how to navigate learning how to use the resources, how to use our Microsoft teams and not just how to use it for me but also the teachers. There was teachers that they had not, they didn't know anything about computers. All they knew was how to turn it on and check their emails. So that was something also very challenging is sitting with them on the phone and you were trying to guide them, you know. Do this, you know, push this button, click this thing on the computer because they didn't know how to do it.

Carmen further shared that it was difficult to ensure learning continued when technology didn't work. She added,

It's like, you know, that the students are missing and that there's a big learning gap but you really don't... you feel helpless. You don't know how to fix it, because some of the times some programs you didn't even know how to work, or you got them to work and then something like glitch or something will come up, and you're in the middle of a lesson and the internet dropped. Or you have a great, you know, everybody logs in and then all of a sudden, you know, again the internet drops, or there's a glitch. And so you are having to waste time and it's not just one or two minutes. It's sometimes 30 minutes. You have to waste time trying to fix the technology problem so it was a lot of frustration.

Participants responses indicated that teaching and learning no longer looked or felt the way teachers, students, parents, and principals once knew. Katherine communicated, “Our teachers were struggling with what that instructional design looked like and how to really leverage the equipment to boost teaching and learning.”

Participants shared there was a major struggle to learn various digital platforms. David shared:

I mean instructional part of it we know it was gonna be very...very inconsistent. It was gonna be very irregular. Me personally, I wouldn't, I wouldn't demand, you know, for students to be implementing at that level of high expectations, right? Because we have to understand the conditions were totally different from what the students, teachers, parents are used to. So I know that instructional delivery was gonna be impacted. I would say, on a hundred percent level cause you, you wouldn't be able to monitor what the kids were doing and the teachers were doing. Monitoring students and teachers through screen it was, it was not the best practice, anyways, but that was what we could do at the time. For the pandemic, it was mostly I'm adjusting myself to conduct our businesses through, you know, Teams or Zoom. That was a challenge for me. Cause I was just used to be face to face with people right? We cannot guarantee that instruction was going to happen. I mean it was like a losing cause from the get go, because we know that teachers and students were not gonna be, you know, receiving or providing instruction like we were doing it before the pandemic.

David also explained, "It was hard to see that happening because the campus was projected to be an A, but I knew the scores would go down after because no consistency in teaching." Like David, Jason expressed how COVID-19 changed his campus's trajectory, Jason shared:

We were doing well, but how do you close gaps when there's no teacher in front of a student? They're in their mom's room. You have teachers having difficulties, managing regular classroom technologies, not knowing how to use the clever touch or view sonic or smart board. Because yeah, you could get on a virtual call with no problems but the other piece is keeping the kids attention for an entire lesson and that is a

conundrum within itself, because we started using all of these different applications like Pear deck and Near pod, and then also, like Quizlet, and just to be extra effective online, or virtually, you have to be very tech savvy. And that wasn't like just regular tech savvy but like really tech savvy to make these things effective.

David added, “There were already “normal issues”, but the COVID-19 pandemic added an extra layer of issues that needed to be resolved.” Isabel communicated how keeping students engaged in a lesson face to face already posed challenges then adding the layer of learning online made things worse. Isabel expressed, “It wasn’t just the technology issue, but getting kids engaged on technology when they were just learning it, and making sure that they were learning something, and they were, you know, being able to retain information and actually mastering concepts.” Fatima shared she too struggled with finding ways to engage students virtually. Some teachers excelled more than others, but her own capacity as a principal, during the unknown world of teaching virtually, made her understand just how difficult it would be to ensure learning continued, Fatima explained,

If we thought it was difficult prior to the pandemic, the pandemic really showed how difficult teaching could be. You had several different capacities like you had teachers who were just so with it and they were ready to jump in the newest trend and then you had some of these teachers who had great difficulty such as knowing how to log on and knowing how to interact with students and everything in between. I would go into some of the virtual classrooms to see what was going on and it was just so plain vanilla as compared to what another teacher was doing. Others were using Near Pod and all the other virtual platforms. It was difficult during that time because I wasn't equipped to do all the technology teaching with various platforms. Oh, my goodness, it was so

challenging for me because I know how to teach and I know best practices and I knew what I needed to do in front of a classroom, but to engage virtually was very challenging.

Heidi shared similar sentiments stating, “I had to make sure that they're learning so finding ways to just make learning still meaningful and engaging, but we have so many students that I know that did not they, didn't learn during that time, and that's just the truth of it.” Jazmin also shared the lack of learning that occurred remarking, “It was almost a year and a half of them not receiving the same level of instruction that they had been receiving.” Brooke expressed the COVID-19 pandemic, “It was a wrench in the whole education system.” She further communicated the struggles of online engagement stating,

How do you do turn and talk with kindergarteners? How do you do think pair share or share with your partner? There is no partner. Everybody was on there, you know, unless you had breakout rooms, but then you couldn't really monitor 20 breakout or 10 breakout rooms right to see the kids are actually talking. So those were the complexities. Students had so many distractors. Kindergartners if they didn't like you, for the moment, they got up and walked away from the computer. You couldn't, I guess, as an educator, you couldn't stop them. The teacher would tell me, Oh, this parent keeps talking, you know, keeps turning off the camera. I peeked into classrooms and tried to give feedback to teachers but I understood their plight. Right? Because I'm like, Okay, you know, you need to have more engagement. They're like, well, how do I get more engagement when half of them are turning off their video cameras. Not like I can undo the video camera you know and make them show me. That was the really hard part when we had to deal with the pandemic.

The education world was completely overhauled, and principals struggled to find ways to make the system work. However, when teachers did not have the pedagogical

knowledge to effectively conduct teaching and learning in a virtual platform and students were not logging in or staying on task, the responsibility and expectation of a principal to ensure teaching and learning continued became increasingly stressful since they too did not immediately have the tools to help guide their teachers during an unprecedented time.

Motivation

The participants' responses revealed that due to the restructuring of their systems and how schools operated, keeping everyone engaged and motivated was negatively impacted. Fatima explained, "The struggles during the pandemic was trying to get the students in class, so if we thought getting the kids to school was hard, getting them to log into virtual school was even harder." Heidi shared her experience with lack of student motivation, she replied, "They like to sleep in and so waking up to log in, no, they like to play video games. They don't like to sit on their computer and listen to somebody." Motivation suffered due to the lack of engagement and engagement suffered due to the change in systems. Carmen stated, "A program didn't define or didn't teach the students what they needed to learn they still needed that human body to guide him through the lesson, and it was just sitting in front of the computer and do this program so that was kind of like, a big challenge is really having that human component guiding the students and going over different examples."

Jason felt that the lack of motivation also came from lack of expectations from district leaders contradicting the message he tried to convey. Jason shared:

So you know we would hear from district officials, well, if they can show up it's okay, don't force them. And you know, if they can, it's okay. To me that's lowering expectations, you know. It's, no, go to school. Yes, it's virtual, but you need attend, period. So now we have to pull this way like we have to pull students that got accustomed of thinking that schools not important.

Students were not the only ones that struggled with the change in systems. According to the participants, due to the change in systems, teachers were also struggling with not giving up. Isabel replied, “It was helping teachers to stay motivated when children were not paying attention, were not listening, would put their toys in front of the camera and walk away, so keeping teachers motivated through that.” The many changes that had to occur to the education system caused a ripple effect of issues for principals that they were not prepared for. Jason explained,

A lot of what we're doing was, we were kinda making it up as we went which was, you know, eye opening. So in in essence, we're trying to make sense for everyone with very little information. If that makes sense. But it wasn't like a structured way to conduct business. It was kind of like survival in essence.

The requirement of changing the way teaching and learning was conducted created a motivational barrier for students and teachers. It was already a struggle to maintain student engagement in a face-to-face setting. By taking that environment away, and adding one that had students at home, it created the perfect set up for students to be distracted. As such, their lack of motivation created a lack of motivation in teachers. In addition to student disengagement, teachers were burning out with trying to figure out a whole new way to conduct teaching. What they once knew was thrown out the window, and principals had to confront that challenge to ensure learning continued.

Emotional and Mental Health

According to the participants responses, people forgot that educators were still going through the same problems as everyone else in the world. Principals had to face the fact that their students, parents, teachers, and themselves would struggle with fear and mental health from COVID-19 during online learning and when they returned to school

for face to face learning. Jazmin knew learning had to continue but it was difficult because her staff was going through life changing events. Jazmin shared:

Understanding the hardships that everyone around us was experiencing was difficult both personally and professionally. I had several staff members that lost a mother, a father, a relative. During that time, there were a lot of losses that happened. These were staff members that were trying to do their job as a teacher in providing education for our students, so that in itself was a big hardship that I had to deal with at that time. It was finding that balance of being able to be compassionate to those that were suffering and going through those difficult times but at the same time finding a way to ensure that our students were still receiving uninterrupted instruction.

Some of the participants faced their own personal fears while having to restructure the school setting and aiding everyone else during the COVID-19 pandemic. Isabel and her husband were both in the hospital with COVID-19. She replied, “It was personally very scary and challenging for us, and we had to have serious conversations with our own children because we didn’t know what would happen.” Katherine had to balance her own fears and running a school while her daughter was in the hospital in intensive care for 9 days in a foreign country. Like her colleague, Carmen also had a fearful event with her daughter which gave her anxiety regarding COVID-19. Carmen shared:

I try not to get emotional about it. In the summer of 2019, I had my daughter in life support with a 10% survival rate because she caught what they thought it was a flu. She was basically in a coma for almost 3 months. And when I had already gone through the experience and that traumatic, and I think that I was I don't want to use the word empathetic, but I was more cautious about everything in the sense of making sure that everybody's up taking care of themselves because I had just faced losing my daughter.

The doctor's giving me 10% survival rate. Doctors telling me she coded. So I had gone through a roller coaster ride already. I didn't want anybody else to go through what I went through. Thankfully my daughter survived. It was fearful. It was traumatic. I just gone through a traumatic experience, and I didn't want to go through it again, so personally, it was very difficult.

Once students returned to school, the fear of COVID-19 was only heightened. Heidi explained her initial struggles when students returned from virtual learning was everyone's fear of COVID-19. David shared that all he could think about was not getting sick, he said, "I had made sure that I was healthy you know, and I put it in my mind, I'm the only one who cannot get sick." Parents and teachers were fearful of getting sick.

Allison shared:

My staff they had resistance in returning, the just being scared of the exposure to being face to face. So not only staff, but also parents. You know, just again being scared of getting Covid and returning and making sure that the building was safe. And you know asking about the precautions that we're going to be taking. I was reassuring our parents that we were taking the right precautionary measures in returning to the building.

Jazmin also shared how scared the parents were in having their children return to school. "I feel like you know, at that time, and even now parents still are scared because there are still Covid cases going." Brooke explained that she understood the fear because she had many families lose family members to COVID-19. Carmen also understood the fear by sharing:

There was still a lot of fear that that you felt from everybody. We were also losing friends, family members at the same time. So there was a lot of fear sometimes that took you away from a focusing, you know, in the professional sense, in the instruction component. I think so much about all the fear and all the pain that was really going on,

and of not knowing you know of what it was gonna be... things weren't the same and things haven't, have not been the same.

Katherine shared her struggles with teachers' fears of COVID-19. She stated, "We still had adults that were very afraid of getting sick and adults that were losing parents, spouses, you know, because they were sick. I mean, I had one teacher say to me if I die, it's on you because she did not feel like she should be forced back to school."

Participants responses revealed that school did not look the same when students returned. There were many protocols that had to be put in place in the participant's district such as social distancing, masks, rows of desks facing one direction, students sitting on one side of the table socially distanced to eat lunch, teachers wearing visors and vest covers, and nobody could drink from the water fountains. Jason remarked, "The aftermath was almost unreal, and it was traumatic like for them, but, like, that's what safety felt like."

Aside from the emotional fear everyone felt, principals also had to deal with the ramifications that COVID-19 had on everyone's mental health. Heidi shared her experiences by replying,

We had students who felt isolated, not just students, adults, too. You know I did have an employee who died by suicide during that time. And I know that there was some isolation felt, and those things were, you know, not being shared. And so I think that there are some mental health effects from the pandemic that I think schools have resources for but, you know, when you're separated from people, and again they don't share, and you can't, you know, you can't force people to share you just don't know. You don't know how to support that if you don't know. And I think that some of those things we just won't recover from as well as the emotional and mental impacts of isolation, or a fractured household or, you know, loss of a job, death of a family member, any of those

things that may have happened, and not having the support that would have existed if we were in person. I think all of those things linger and are unfortunate at the same time.

Fatima shared that during the pandemic it became more prevalent how difficult students' home lives were. She described, "At school you don't see all of their sadness and all their tribulations that they're going through at home, but then we got to get a clear view of it during the pandemic." She further shared because of longevity of being at home, the social emotional aspect of aiding students through that to support their mental health became more prevalent. Jazmin added how she experience her own personal challenge with her own children struggling with socializing when they returned to school.

David shared that personal connection is important to aide mental health and he felt "handicapped" not being able to reach people on a personable level. Carmen described how difficult it was to get students to focus on learning, she replied,

We're surrounded by stress. We are surrounded by a lot of anxiety and to a certain extent some depression. People were losing family members. I think that everybody was in a survival mode through the pandemic we were in the survival mode and is, how do you survive and still do, basically your job? It's like you're thinking about everybody's safety and making sure that you're thinking about all your kid's mental health. You're thinking about all the teachers and their safety. And how are they keeping themselves healthy you know, and so that it's an added stress level or an added challenge that you have no control over.

During the COVID-19 pandemic there was an incredible level of uncertainty. The fear of getting sick, seeing others get sick, and or losing loved ones, affected individuals significantly. While principals were expected to run an instructional program virtually, they too were dealing with the health, emotional, and mental factors that the pandemic

created. However, they had the added stressor of aiding those they served through their struggles while keeping their own personal struggles at bay.

Post the COVID-19 Pandemic

Participants recognized that due to the challenges faced during the pandemic, as principals tried to keep instruction at the forefront, social emotional support and transforming the campus culture became their primary role post the COVID-19 pandemic. Katherine stated, “Students made the role of principal a lot more social and emotionally driven work and the same thing for adults. The role changed, and it became a much more people driven role and called for a lot more empathy.” Jason shared the same sentiment replying,

I had to aide mentality of a lot of staff members in dealing with the trauma at the same time as trying to be an educator. Just something to highlight is that we had a lot of SEL moments or a social learning by really being in touch with, you know, with your feelings and your mental health and those of others and having empathy for them.

Challenges that were faced during the pandemic, made principals have to revamp the culture of the campus. Isabel remarked, “We had to put systems in place to get kids, teachers and parents used to being back in school, and you put systems in place to make sure that we're building culture relationship, a family environment for them, and learning, so it's like transformation.

Social Emotional Guidance

According to the participants, COVID-19 created lasting effects on people’s emotional and mental state which in turn impacted the learning environment. It was a new challenge for them because there weren’t isolated incidents of it. Many staff members and students were exhibiting struggles with it. Jason observed continued issues with mental health, he replied, “We lived a trauma without really knowing we lived a

trauma.” As such, he had to focus more on the social emotional learning component before the academic. Brooke also agreed with her colleagues and detailed, “I have to change the way I look at kids now and start looking at even the social emotional piece of children as a principal when before, yes, it was there, especially working in Title one, but now I think even more so it's at the next level.”

Due to the issues experienced amid the pandemic, principals were facing socialization issues amongst students. Katherine explained her struggle with trying to get some normalcy back due to the difficulty of managing student behavior. She remarked, “We saw an increase in students not responding to and respecting the rules of school and how we do things, so that was, that was a lot harder.” Fatima shared her increasing concern with how some children faced many challenges alone and that being out of school “in their safe place” created problems when students returned. Fatima relayed,

There became a raised awareness of social emotional issues. Students told us stories about what happened and most of them were very sad and it was very concerning. I heard on the news that, child protected service cases went down significantly because usually educators are the ones reporting it. Which means who's watching the kids? If we weren't the ones who were noticing the things that were going wrong with children while they were in our school, who even knows what's going on with them.

David shared the same sentiment by explaining that many students came with a lot of trauma. He explained, “Trauma was the main point, I mean instruction of course, but their mental stated, their mindset, you know, that social emotional aspect has to be in place and that was my main concern post the pandemic.” Heidi shared some of her efforts on how she too had to guide the challenges of social emotional support for students. She communicated, we had to be intentional cause they're not gonna sit there and learn if

they're disrupted mentally, we had to address it.” Jazmin shared her concerns with the many outburst that increased since the pandemic replying,

There were things that happened post pandemic with our students. They missed out on so much in terms of socializing that I saw in our classrooms they had a hard time with adjusting. There's more behavior problems now because students missed those skills that they needed to know when being in the classroom.

Participants’ responses indicated that principals couldn’t even begin to address academics because of the social emotional aspect that hindered students from learning. Participants shared that the district they work for had all campuses factor in time into their daily schedules for social emotional learning and ensure each campus had a counselor. This was due to how prevalent it was that students were struggling with their social, emotional, and mental health.

Reset

During the height of the pandemic, the educational system was interrupted. How schools operated underwent a massive overhaul. However, when students returned, principals were faced with the task of getting back to the systems that worked for student learning. Isabel shared, “It was a challenge to restructure our systems again and ensure there was a focus on academics.” That was no easy task for principals regarding students, teachers, and parents. Fatima mentioned,

Students had to reconnect themselves. They had to relearn how to be students. I wondered what happened to them during that time because during that first month parents were arguing about things. We kept getting phone calls. It was just fussing and complaints and we had to keep calming things back. I was having meetings to say you know, we're not your enemy. What's going on? It's never been a part of our culture in our

school to have parents like that. They were so angry and cursing. I don't know what happened but immediately after the pandemic there was a lot of bitterness out there.

Students had to re-learn how to be in a school environment according to Heidi. She expressed,

There was a challenge of students who had not had structure, and so really having to support students and reentering a structured environment. Typically, here are our systems, we implement the system. We practice the first few weeks and students fall into the routine, and that did not happen like that, so we kinda had to relearn that approach.

Heidi further expressed students were used to waking up late and as long as they did their work they would be counted for attendance. However, returning to school that was not the case. Like Heidi, Katherine explained, “Students could review the lesson on their own time, and as long as their work was turned in by midnight, they were given credit for the work and the participation, and I do still think it was really important to have some flexibility, but it made coming back to school a lot harder.” David explained it as “having to reset the students’ mindset.” He elaborated, “It was about learning some processes again because there was no academic structure or behavior structure that they, that they have had for such a long time.”

Not only were students and parents in need of restructuring, but teachers did as well. Brooke explained how she struggled with the mind set of teachers. She replied, “For me the biggest changes from pre pandemic to post the pandemic was there was a lot of people that were dedicated to education before the pandemic because, I think, they had a lot of wise, and they wanted to do it because they knew they impacted kids.” Jazmin shared her worries with teachers wanting to leave because of the restructuring, she relayed,

Sometimes it can be defeating, right? You feel like you're working so hard. You're doing this. You're doing that. You're trying this. And the students are still not performing at the level that you expect. And so oftentimes people just feel defeated. Post pandemic have been some of the most hardest years of my life as an educator. I have seen teachers and staff members burned out, and so it hasn't been easy to keep everyone with that same passion that they had before,

Jason too shared his struggles with not only getting students and parents back on board with how schooling need to occur, but also with teachers. Jason communicated,

I was fighting teachers because they had reprioritized like their lives. Family is more important now, not work. I'm not gonna stay after work to do that. No, no, no, I'm gonna worry about my family. So then how you're pulling teachers like, come back and do the work. It was a huge struggle, because before the pandemic everyone was kinda like in line. Everyone's okay. I'll I'll do the extra hours. I'll make sure to close the gaps. Post pandemic was like eh, we're going on vacation, or we can't go to school. The teachers their whole priorities changed, and it became a little bit of a conundrum, you know, and you would think things would go back to normal, but they didn't.

There were various challenges that teachers faced when returning to school that it posed a challenge for principals to have them reset. Fatima expressed, "The challenge was to try and to build and restructure that morale back up on our campus and telling everyone that we can still do this work, we just get a have a bit more urgency with it."

Once students returned to campuses for face-to-face learning, principals thought things would get back to normal. However, principals quickly found there would be a new normal. Part of the new normal was to reset the minds of students, teachers, and parents. Teaching and learning still mattered, so principals had to find ways to restructure the school community's thinking to remind them of that. It was a stressful task to get

everyone back on board towards academic achievement especially during a time where there was a significant loss of instructional time.

Learning Gaps

According to participants responses, from March 2020 to October 2020 all students in the district the participants work in were virtual. Students were given the option to stay virtual for the 2020-2021 school year. By the 2021-2022 school year all students returned with some COVID-19 protocols still in place such as mandatory face masks and social distancing. However, after the pandemic was declared over on May 11, 2022, principals were still faced with the lingering effects it caused on learning, specifically academic achievement. Jazmin stated, “Covid put a ramp on student achievement.”

All participants spoke on learning loss struggles post the COVID-19 pandemic. Allison remarked, “We’re still having students with learning gaps that were affected from the pandemic because of not being in a classroom setting.” Isabel stated, “Students have a lot of deficits because they missed basically months and months of instruction, so it's very difficult to move on to the next grade when you've missed 3 or 4 months of instruction and in some cases a year and a half.” David shared, “I know some of them they didn't apply anything during the pandemic when they were at home.” Brooke also shared her thoughts on the time students lost regarding learning. She exclaimed,

Oh, I can tell you, for a fact that gaps are still following these kiddos! We're the instructional leaders, but how do we make sure that we are still repairing what was lost during the pandemic. It's like realizing that all the kids for that year and a half, almost 2 years, no learning happened. How do I now try to get everyone, not just your low kids but all kids, to gain back the year and a half or two. That to me was the biggest realization

because originally, you think oh, they learned, we did something, they have something, but no.

Fatima shared the same sentiment stating, “We knew students came back with gaps, nobody had to tell us, and there was no report or anything that would have told us afterwards that would be shocking to us.” Like her colleagues, Heidi and Jason shared their concerns with the struggles of aiding students in the learning gaps. Heidi communicated,

A massive challenge are the learning gaps. I was talking to a former math curriculum person, and they were sharing with me that there was a study that the students who were in, I believe, third grade through tenth grade and I may have the grades wrong but anyway, it was a study about students learning math. And that those students will never recover if they didn't learn the math during the pandemic that they'll go through K through 12 without recovering because math builds upon itself. And so, if they were not logging in, not receiving instruction or education, they fell behind which is unfortunate and sad, you know, for those students as well as you know the system. Every educator wants their kids, you know, to be successful, to learn. And I think that some of those things we just won't recover from.

Katherine also expressed concerns regarding mathematic gaps. She explained, “We're seeing a very big gap in mathematics for kids that were in those critical pre algebraic and algebraic years in middle school during the shutdown and during the Covid instruction. It left a gap in in knowledge and understanding and a gap in conceptual understanding that, I think, is gonna be difficult for us to close that gap for that that group of kids.”

Jason also explained the consequences and challenges faced post pandemic. Jason shared,

We're struggling with having a generation of kids that are gonna struggle from this. Now, do I think students are resilient? Yes. Do I think they could catch up fast? Yes, but that doesn't mean everyone. So I think we widened the gap, the achievement gap amongst a lot of students. The pandemic widened academic gaps for students, and we won't know the full extent of it until later, if at all.

Participants shared that the challenge of still being held accountable to learning made it much more critical to ensure there were plans in place to close the gaps. Carmen stated, “We lost time and then we lost a lot of learning due to all that, so post pandemic there was a bigger sense of urgency in making sure that we were closing the learning gaps.”

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a major barrier in the primary role and expectations of the principal which was to be an instructional leader that works towards improving academic achievement. It became increasingly demanding for principals to work tirelessly to find solutions on how to help students with new learning gaps and or widened learning gaps. Post the COVID-19 pandemic students still struggle with those learning losses. Participants' responses indicated that the learning loss incurred during the COVID-19 pandemic may never be recovered for those generation of students.

Research Question Two

Research question two, *what aided principals in overcoming challenges for principal retention prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic?*, was answered by a total of 10 principals. During the inductive coding process a total of nine themes emerged regarding aides principals received prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic. Aides prior to the pandemic include two themes: (a) professional development, and (b) mentorship. Aides amid the pandemic include four themes: (a) supervisor support, (b) collegueship, (c) unity, and (d) resilience and purpose. Aides

post the pandemic consist of three themes (a) sound board, (b) executive guidance, and (c) resolve.

Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Professional Development

All participants shared that some form of professional development whether it was provided through the district or by seeking it out on their own, which aided them in overcoming the challenges they had prior to the pandemic. When it comes to district training, Allison communicated, “Those are the ones that have helped me because there have been so much.” Similarly, Isabel shared, “We received all kinds of training on how to manage our time, and trainings on instruction and coaching teachers up, all kinds of trainings.” Jason also stated, “I feel like I've received a lot of professional development to become an effective principal.” David also stated, “There has been so many trainings, I can't remember them all, but they helped.”

Trainings principals received when they first became a principal were invaluable since they helped them prepare for the various tasks that they would be responsible for. Brooke described,

The first-year principal's cohort I feel like the group that I had of principals and the person that was holding those, I think he, the gentleman, understood what we needed. The training was honestly, it was a big help. Oh, my goodness, I'm trying to remember all the classes because it was like 2 weeks of courses. It was an opportunity to actually dive into the programs that dealt with, you know, with budget programs, the expectations, and we had binders of how to run reports for all of the things, and I've noticed that nowadays some of these younger principals are not getting those opportunities.

In speaking of how else the trainings have helped them as principals, Katherine remarked,

I now have an innate and developed sense of how to teach. And so that's probably where the professional development along the way has helped me. I developed the ability to kid watch. You know, watching kids to see where are they becoming confused with this. Where do I have them? And then where do I lose them?

Heidi described her trainings, which were provided by the district, that helped her become a better coach for her staff and how to “facilitate thinking” for others to guide them on the right path. Jazmin appreciated that the district also sought out trainings that would not only help administrators with professional challenges, but also personal challenges. Jazmin explained,

All the trainings that we have had have helped to ensure that we do maintain our focus on student learning. Our district has provided trainings in areas about finding that work life balance with how to leverage our work time. So, we do receive support from our leaders; however, as an individual that is something we are tasked with doing. It's something that we must value, take, and do for ourselves.

While Jazmin found the district trainings useful for the challenge of work life balance, Fatima sought out additional ones to aide her further. Brooked also shared she sought her own professional development that was tailored to her areas of need to sharpen her own leadership skills. Jason responded, “Books are a great professional development, and I read a lot of them regarding principalship, so those help.” Like Jason, Carmen turns to books stating,

Some of it is self-training. You have to read about the different things that are going on that help you. If it's a challenge of work when it comes down to the instructional component, just have to read about it. Just taking time to learn on your own basically, and doing a little bit of research of what best practices are and doing refreshers on practices.

There's an importance of ensuring principals receive high quality training that is individualized based on their needs. Principals appreciate the trainings that help them with changes in the educational system. They have a growth mindset and want to be better for their community. If trainings are not offered, they seek training themselves through forms of books and or videos on best practices.

Mentorship

Participants expressed that the role of the principal cannot be done alone. There will be times that as principals they will not have all the answers. For that reason, they turned to others when they needed guidance and support. Some of the people they turned to for guidance are their immediate supervisors, lead principals, and colleagues.

Fatima spoke about executive leadership and the support they provided to aide her in her challenges. Fatima said,

I was very fortunate that the vast majority of my SSOs before were those that I highly respected. There were some that came that were already known to have been great principals, so they had that expertise, they already had that reputation. I felt this is a good person to be able to guide me because they've already been through that for many years and know what's happening in my seat, because if the goal is to support me, I really feel that I can be very honest.

Similarly, Isabel had the same experience with executive leadership support to overcome barriers in the field. She replied, "The biggest support or training is kind of the one-on-one training that I receive from my administrative support, those have been my biggest training, like, job embedded on the spot coaching that has really helped me learn how to balance workload, have like work-life balance, and how to get everything taken care of."

Participants explained that executive leadership were in their role because they demonstrated they had the capacity to navigate the various obstacles of the principal role. Since they had been in the principal seat prior, principals turned towards them as their first line of defense. David remarked, “All the time I feel the support because what I don't know, I call those guys.”

Other participants turned to lead principals and other principals for guidance. Allison shared turning to other principals for guidance on best practices and what was working for their campus aided her when facing challenges. She stated, “I learn from them, and really we learn together.” Carmen shared it was about learning from one another. She responded, “It's a lot of networking a lot of learning from each other.” Brooke revealed her gratitude for her lead principals. Brooke described,

I think it's that mentorship that if I didn't have awesome ladies when I wanted to cry or figure out my community, I don't think I would be a tenured principal. I was given a mentor. but they were not, they were retired principals. She was really good, but she was not a current principal or higher up.

The term two minds are better than one is true for principals. Establishing practices in which principals have mentors is of value to veteran principals. Whether it's a colleague in the same position as them or an executive leader that can help make sense of things when there's confusion or provide support on how to improve practices for student learning, establishing mentors for principals can help them overcome challenges and reduce stress and frustration which could lead to burnout.

Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

Supervisor Support

Participants responses indicated that during the pandemic, their executive leadership was extremely supportive whether it was through assisting them throughout

the entire process, providing them with the autonomy they needed, or simply showing empathy for what the participants, as principals and humans, were going through. Fatima explained that even though her supervisor may not have had the answers because “everyone was on the same boat,” they helped by doing their best to find the answers. Heidi shared how grateful she was for her supervisor. She communicated,

Whenever things will come like down the pipe, you know, it wasn't a delay in sharing the information, and so I felt like, you know, I had someone who was truly trying to help us stay abreast of what was going on. And also served as like a thought partner. Okay, so less think this out. Let's look at it. What is the best plan? How might we be able to improve it? And so I, I really appreciate that. And, you know, if they found anything from other schools' other districts that they were doing that might have helped. We all were figuring it out, and just the honesty of that, I think, was refreshing. I felt supported and so because of that, I felt like I could continue to do the work as a principal, because I knew that I had someone who might not have all the answers but would support me in trying to find them or help me and the campus however they could.

David was also appreciative that he could turn to his supervisor for support. David shared,

Well, everybody was in the same, the same situation, right? But we always relied on our immediate supervisors, you know, to make decisions because at the end of the day those guys are the ones who are going to support us when situations happen. I mean our scope of work or knowledge just reaches up to some point, right? So, my supervisor at the time was really supportive. I mean, they were like calling every time checking with u. But I think those guys have been supportive all the way, right? I never felt like I was just making a decision that was going to have some repercussions without consulting with my supervisor. I felt supported. I mean all the way. And I appreciate that those guys are

there for each one of us cause there are some different aspects of our implementation that we cannot do without them.

Along with her colleagues, Isabel also explained her gratitude for having leaders that have helped her over time, specifically during the pandemic because she wanted school to continue virtually immediately. Isabel replied,

So I was very blessed. I've really been blessed with my support that I've had over the years. Of course, it's been someone different every year, but the people that I've had, have been a blessing to me and they, you know, they just supported me in the work that I was doing. They supported me when I was like, Oh, no, we're going to be up and running. And we were up and running. So it was just support.

From helping search high and low to find technology and Wi-Fi connectivity for her students to providing professional development for her teachers, Jazmin described how she was thankful for the support. Jazmin remarked, "There was just a lot of communication amongst us to let us know, you know, what our next path was going to be, and just very supportive." While Jason acknowledged that his supervisor didn't have the answers, his supervisor helped by gathering ideas from other principals that would help assist him. Jason said,

As the time went on, I think that it did progressively get better once executive leaders did understand, and really got used to it. I think there was more assistance in uniforming our practices and relay the information like, hey, these are pretty good ideas. Let's try to share this information on. Which I mean, that's not a bad idea. I mean, you know, you have to understand that you're not the smartest person in the room. So as the pandemic went on, or, as COVID-19 went on, executive leadership did do a better job in trying to uniform at least areas within a school district.

Carmen described her experience with her supervisor was not only helping her in figuring things out, but also providing her with empathy to let her know things would be okay. Carmen shared,

I think one of the biggest support for me was having them or me, knowing that everybody kind of was going through the same thing and that it was in a sense, was it would? It's okay to be okay not to be okay. So if you're not okay, it's okay. We're all going through it together. But for me, the support that I received is how can I help you? Let's try to make it better. But I think overall the leadership team, to me, was the best support. If they didn't know how to do something, they would connect us to the right people to help us navigate.

Allison shared the sentiment about her supervisor having empathy during a difficult and challenging time. Allison stated, "They were also trying to navigate through this Covid era or pandemic and so they were limited just as I was limited, so they were very in a sense understanding." Katherine spoke about the superintendent and the empathy that "exuded" from her. Katherine communicated, "I can distinctly remember the compassion that that Dr. Jane had for us, kids, and families and it was, you know, you don't, you don't get that from all leadership." Heidi also commented on the check ins that she had with her immediate supervisor and how it relieved some of her anxiety. Heidi shared, "Also, just allowing at times to kind of vent around, you know, things that might not have been going so well, and also just that whole personal check-in. How are you? How's your family?"

Many quick decisions had to be made for their campuses. There wasn't a playbook to tell principals what to do exactly during the pandemic, but a characteristic of a principal is to be a problem solver and be decisive. Isabel shared how having the autonomy from her supervisor to make those decisions helped her. Isabel replied, "They

supported me in my decisions. and then they were there like to give feedback or to give ideas, but it wasn't like, you need to do this, this is what you're gonna do. No, no, no.” Similarly, Katherine described how thankful she was for the autonomy to make decisions for her campus. Katherine shared,

I think that to some extent you know my support, my supervisors, you know, allowed me to talk through the pieces that went into you know, went into setting a plan. They were respectful of the knowledge that I had to develop the plan. Gave me some feedback on some pieces that would be helpful, and then you know, let me make decisions that were good for my community and that's, I think, one of the hardest things to do as a supervisor is to is to step back, so I think it was, it was the support and the confidence and the side by side, figuring it out that really made a difference.

Having an effective two-way communication with supervisors was valued by the principals. Even if their supervisors did not have the answers, they were able to provide the support by finding solutions to problems. Additionally, principals appreciate when there is no dictatorship on how things should be done. Supervisors are more of a thought partner and understand that principals' campuses are unique depending on the demographics of their community; therefore, supervisors can empathize with the unique challenges they encounter and collaborate with them on how to overcome them.

Colleagueship

Principals relied on other principals as well as their leadership team to get them through the various challenges of the pandemic. Heidi commented on how principals helping one another was a small support group. Heidi replied,

Other principals aided because I think that that was a time in education in which none of us were in a situation that we knew how to navigate. And so, you know, everyone had different ideas or good ideas or borrowed ideas. But I think that it really created like a true think tank because there, there was no expert even with having the online programs of schools that had existed pre-covid you know, there was still even with that struggles that were encountered. And ad so I just, I think that, you know, we all found benefit in just having opportunities to kinda chat with each other. And you know, form some good systems. So I think that, that was a really good support during that time.

Fatima described that only another principal can truly understand what it really meant to navigate the complexities of the pandemic and the school system. Fatima responded,

If you get with other principals, sometimes they're the only other people that can understand what you're going through. When we're going through things, the only other person that can know exactly what you're feeling is another principal, so I relied on that a little bit to come up with solutions because we're both sitting in the same spot. That was helpful. We would ask if anybody knew how to do this or that and then we'd all jump in and help each other out. A principal informal cohort of support is what really, is what helped me push through and navigate through the pandemic.

Katherine shared the same experience as her colleagues expressing how principals were helping one another with getting resources and how to do things during a “confusing time.” Similarly, Carmen shared how she would be able to turn to her

colleagues and ask clarifying questions and ideas on how to best support her teachers. Carmen communicated, “Networking with my colleagues that was, I guess, a blessing in disguise, because that was one of the greatest support when it came down to if I don't know how to do this or if we need to do that.” Jason also asserted the vital role his colleagues played into aiding him amid the pandemic. Jason described,

So I think what was the most supportive was principals relying on principals. So I had a lot of like peers or colleagues that we would like just frequently be talking about, How do you do this? And how do I do this? And just share a bevy of ideas. I think that was a big support because we were living it. We kind of understood, you know, when you get like feedback from up above, and they're not really troops on the ground. They don't see the entire picture, so when you work with a colleague or a peer, then there's a better perception of what's gonna work or what's not gonna work.

While Jazmin and David also sought support from other principals, they relied heavily on, and were grateful for the support, of the immediate leadership team such as an assistant principal, teacher specialist, or nurse. Jazmin stated, “One of the biggest supports that I had at that time was my tier. 2 leaders because they really stepped up.” She further expressed how they helped her support teachers regardless of the long hours. David also shared his appreciation for his leadership team, specifically, his assistant principal and nurse. The assistant principal helped him navigate technology because he felt it would take him longer to figure things out regarding technology. However, his assistant principal was “tech savvy.” As for his nurse, she helped keep parents calm. Between the two David stated, “Those 2 were the super super support for me because without those two I wouldn't, I wouldn't have been able to do it, because it was too much.”

Since principals and their leadership teams were all going through the same thing and knew the complexities of navigating issues amid the pandemic, it was to their benefit to collaborate with one another and figure things out. Principals relied on everyone else's strengths to supplement their areas of needs while offering their strengths to others. It was through this networking and collaboration that also helped principals overcome challenges through the unknown.

Unity

Participants expressed how during the pandemic there was a sense of accord of wanting to get through the challenges of COVID-19 together. Additional support that was given to the principals came from the teachers, parents, and community members.

Carmen replied, "We all came together, I think, as a community and a district." Fatima shared how teachers that were well versed in technology became teacher leaders to help guide others in developing new skills regarding technology. Fatima communicated, "I learned who were teachers that did develop a savviness to certain things, and they became the ones who were teaching the other teachers." Carmen also shared her thankfulness for her teachers' willingness to pivot during the pandemic stating,

I think just the support of again of my team. The teachers were willing to learn and so that kind of helped a lot because they were willing to learn they were willing to, you know, be risk takers. They would make themselves available throughout, you know, the day, sometimes even after hours, for the children. So that was a great support system. They would come together, and grade level teams do presentations and share them, so that in itself helped a lot.

Furthermore, Carmen shared her gratefulness for the parents' willingness to help wherever possible.

According to Isabel, there were a lot of things that required manpower during the pandemic. Isabel specifically spoke about getting materials to students and how teachers helped with that undertaking. She remarked, “The teachers were very supportive, that we, you know, we had to set up drive thru for picking up resources and things like that and the teachers were out there in the drive thru, so it was really everybody working together.” Additionally, Isabel shared her appreciation for her community and the support they provided to her students. Isabel explained,

My community. Third Ward! Third Ward was, Oh, my God. U of H they were huge in getting us technology, making sure the kids had everything that they needed at home to be successful. It was amazing. They came out and gave food, water, and just an overabundance of support from the community. Third Ward stepped up tremendously.

Heidi had a similar experience with her community members sharing, “We had a lot of people begin to reach out from outside of our district to offer support to students and families, and so we were able to, you know, receive some more resources and things to really help out, you know, where needed.” Participants’ responses revealed that there were a lot of challenges to overcome during the pandemic, but there were support systems through the people within the school who gathered to aide them in overcoming challenges. The school community eased a principals’ stress of gathering resources and figuring out how to conduct virtual learning because the stakeholders helped them with finding those resources and also helped with whatever was necessary to provide learning materials to students.

Resilience and Purpose

There were various challenges, as described by the participants, during the COVID-19 pandemic, so when participants were asked if they considered leaving the principalship during the pandemic, all participants replied, “no”. Some of the participants

shared it would require lots of flexibility to adapt to the new learning environment and others explained their “why” remained at the forefront to push through.

Participants recognized that education is always evolving, and even though there was no precedent on how navigate the changes caused by the pandemic, as leaders they had to be flexible and pivot. Heidi explained, “The pandemic as devastating as it was for, for people, I think it really taught us as educators a lot about really being adaptive and recognizing that you have to be prepared to navigate learning at all times and be resilient.” Like Heidi, Allison also explained the need to pivot stating, “Although it was challenging, it was just something that we had to adjust and learn and do the best that we could, and so I felt that, you know just with anything new, it would just take time but that we would be able to get through it.”

Fatima also expressed how she had to alter her thinking stating, “I knew that we had our work cut out for us so my thoughts were, what are new skills we have to pull out of our sleeves to make it work?” David shared how things changed, but the responsibility of being a leader did not. David remarked,

This profession is the same you know, being a responsible leader, responsible educator, and I mean, that shouldn't change for whatever reason. Now, I think I can serve them better, and I have this certainty that, whatever happens, we can always overcome it. We went through difficult challenges, so if we went through that, we can go through anything.

Jason communicated it is in his nature to problem solve and that was a major component of the pandemic. Jason expressed, “It felt good to do your best, and it was rewarding in a sense.” He further elaborated by commenting that he knew that he was part of history and that added to his cause of self-fulfillment. Katherine shared the same

sentiment stating, “I needed to be there to learn and add to what I already knew and sharpen my skills for my students and families.”

During uncertain times, participants revealed another reason they did not leave during the pandemic was because of the need to provide stability to their communities. Heidi expressed, “You know, students, families needed some familiarity with the people that supported them at the school, and so I never thought twice about not providing that.” Similarly, Fatima stated, “Every community to thrive needs stability and with the right person because stability is important.”

Isabel shared her passion for transformation of low-income schools and how a stable leader is needed for those schools to thrive. Isabel replied,

If you are in a situation where you're transforming a school, and kiddos who are economically disadvantaged and who have had people leave their lives multiple times, they are looking for consistency. You can't leave them when things are bad. When things are really bad in children's lives, they need consistency. Consistency goes a long way with helping kids to transform and helping them to continue to have a desire to learn.

Participants shared that their “why” kept them at the helm of the principalship amid the pandemic. When asked about their “why,” participants revealed their “why” is their commitment to education and or why they got into education in the first place. David expressed his “why” stating, “Advocating for kids is my priority all of the time.” He has remained at his campus since he was an assistant principal, so he was not going to leave considering he knew generations of families. Fatima explained her why as,

This is my calling. I think this is God's calling that he brought to me and not only do I feel my role in life is to help children primarily, but secondarily it's to help adults. Anyone who asks me for help I think that's God's way of saying you need to help this

person, so I do it. I didn't leave the principal role during that time because then I felt like I would be giving up on children, and that's the last thing I would ever want to do.

Correspondingly Brooke expressed her reason for staying by stating,

I really do enjoy my job. It was frustrating but I almost felt like, who else? Right teachers were leaving? Older colleagues were leaving. Like a lot of my colleagues said I was so blessed to have left before the pandemic. I don't know if I would have returned. But I think of my why. I make a difference in the lives of not only my students but the parents, the teachers, the community. I do see the impact of a principal. When you leave, when those things, like a pandemic happen and they rely on you, it impacts not only like I said one person or 2 people, but it impacts the whole community.

While the pandemic was taxing on a principal's mental due to having to navigate the various challenges of the pandemic, principals understood that through uncertain times is when they were needed the most. Heidi explained, "I had mental exhaustion during that time, but I didn't consider leaving because I still felt a purpose, and I still felt a commitment to the community that I served, and so I felt that you know, in that tough time that, you know, we needed to stand together more than ever." Jazmin also shared how difficult things were during the pandemic; however, she replied, "I knew it wasn't going to be easy, and I think it was a lot harder than I had anticipated, but my resolve was to be there with our students and with our teachers."

Carmen shared her fears of the pandemic, particularly with what happened with her daughter, but that she knew the students needed her so her fears dissipated. Carmen remarked, "You have a responsibility to your students and to your staff, and you can't just leave them hanging because there's a sense of responsibility that you owe to the community because you gave your word, so you have to fulfill that commitment."

Similarly, Isabel passionately expressed why it was important to continue as a principal during the pandemic stating,

Leaders don't jump ship when the boat is sinking. That is not true leadership. It's when times get tough that you have to stay in the fight. No, that's when you show them how much you really really love them and how much you're going to be there for them through the hard times.

True educators at heart have a sense of commitment and determination to stay during the difficult times because there is a sense of purpose. Principals have a responsibility to their community and when things get difficult the community turns to them to lead them down the path of success. As the leader, principals must model resilience by breaking down barriers so that students can excel. Principals are advocates for children and their future. As such, giving up on them is never an option.

Post the COVID-19 Pandemic

Sound Board

Much like amid pandemic, participants expressed the value of having thought partners whether it was an immediate supervisor, district leaders, or their administrative teams, to navigate through the lingering effects of the pandemic. Allison stated, "Colleagues and other principals listened and gave me ideas on how to do better." Fatima expressed how her administrative team "were awesome" in listening to her and helping her overcome instructional challenges.

Other participants spoke about their immediate supervisors being able to listen which was helpful to work together in getting their schools back on track. Isabel said, "The leaders that I had, I have been able to have very transparent conversations about the way that we would work together and communicate, and so that helped me be more

supported.” Jason shared expectations regarding accountability didn’t change, so having someone to talk things through about that was paramount. Jason explained,

I think down deep, we know that's the right thing to do is to have extremely high expectations. So support, like you know, just having me reflect on my own practices, or what I could do to enhance certain things on my campus. You know, sometimes 2 or 3 brains are greater than one. So being able to have that and giving yourself space to have that collaboration and discussions with others and it'd be okay to talk about things.

There is also an importance of cultivating a positive relationship with a supervisor so that when problems arise, it facilitates the communication. Carmen remarked,

I'm gonna be very transparent, and I've always always had really great colleagues, really great leaders. I've always had great connections with them, and I think that they were always willing to support. I guess I've been blessed, or I've been lucky that I've always had great partnerships with whoever I work with or under when I need something. That helps me know that I have somebody that is willing to support me so that I'm able to support the teachers and the students and the community. They're there for me in in the professional manner and also in the personal manner. I think you build that connection where you feel comfortable, asking for support and you feel that you don't have to hide. If I need help, if I need anything, they're there for me, and I don't have to, I don't have to think twice about asking. So there's a big big great support system behind them.

Making connections with colleagues or supervisors eased the principals’ worry of the unknown and of not having to figure it all out on their own. Heidi detailed,

Having a thought partner will take you a long way, especially when you don't, you don't know which way to go, and I think that it helps in some ways bring down anxiety. It might not relieve the stress, but it will definitely not increase it, because you know, you kinda have a network of listeners, someone else in the fight either with you or

in the same fight. I think that as a principal in the pandemic and out of pandemic you have to accept that you don't know everything. You have not encountered every situation, even though sometimes you think you have, you have not, and that is okay just make sure that you stay connected to help navigate those things.

Having someone to talk things through with continued to be an important and helpful way for principals to navigate the various challenges that the pandemic created. There was not a play book for how to solve problems that still lingered from the pandemic. That is why principals had to turn to others and figure out solutions to the newly created problems.

Executive Guidance

While some of the participants revealed that their executive leaders provided a listening ear and had good communication with them, participants also shared the importance of them using their experience to guide them through the various challenges they encountered post the COVID-19 pandemic. With that comes a caveat according to Isabel. Isabel shared, “You just have to have executive leaders who have experience and can guide you because they understand the possibilities that can happen for kids when they have the right systems, the right procedures, the right teachers, and the right leaders in place, I had that.” Similarly Carmen shared how her leader guided her. She communicated, “The problems we were now solving it together. It was like, okay, how would you do it? How do I teach this standard to my kids? You know, based on your professional experience and your expertise, and she guided me, so it helped.”

Heavily relying on the experience of executive leadership made participants feel secure with having their support. David stated,

It's important that I feel comfortable with the support that I'm receiving, right, because something that might make you think about leaving places is like you fighting

the fight by yourself. Cause this is really too much sometimes. When I was in doubt, I just called, and the support was always offered. Actually, sometimes my leader was asking me, what do you need? And I had to think about it like, you know, you have covered everything, so I feel like I had the support, and at any time. She was available 24 /7, I mean, I didn't call her 24 /7, but I know she's there, and so it made me, it made me more confident having that support.

There was comfort in knowing a principal could turn to their executive leader in the aftermath of pandemic to help grow and perform better. Jazmin explained, "Just knowing that I have someone that has my back, and it's going to be there to guide and that wants the best for my campus as well, helped me."

Responses indicate that coaching and developing was important to principals as they navigated through the challenges post the pandemic. Supervisors that guided them through the process were quintessential in easing the unknown. It may not have always been through their own experience since they weren't principals during the pandemic, but they connected them with others to help support them. Katherine communicated,

You know my leaders were good about putting us together with people that had good ideas about things. If I was struggling with, I don't know how else to find kids, or I don't know how to do other things, and I've exhausted all my good ideas, then they could connect us with other principals that had tried something different, and we're seeing some success with it.

Like Katherine, Heidi described how her executive leader truly supported her and if her leader didn't have the answer, she would search for it. Heidi explained,

Executive leadership really became connectors, after the pandemic. Connectors to resources, to knowledge, to suggestions. When problems presented themselves, or questions, you know, if they did not have an answer or have a support, they were able to

kind of reach out and find something or find someone who did something well, so it was very helpful. I think that after the pandemic, you know, I felt like the executive leadership support was still really strong, and because of that, I felt like I could continue to do the work as a principal, because I knew that I had someone who might not have all the answers, but would support me in trying to find them or help me and the campus however they could.

Principals appreciated that government and district leaders provided support with one of the major challenges which was the learning gaps. Allison stated,

I think about just in the immediate aftermath we did get more support from our leaders. We got more funding, and so we were able to have additional staff to help with the pulling of students. We were able to intervene earlier in the year with after school tutorials. We were able to purchase resources for teachers during intervention time, so there was help to try to close the learning gaps.

Just as the school community turns to the principals for guidance, principals also need a leader that they can turn to for some clarity and direction. Principals can see the various needs of individual classrooms and use best practices from one classroom to aide the other, supervisors can do the same from campus to campus because they have a bigger scope of the district and can network with other supervisors from various campuses to find solutions to similar problems. Principals appreciate the willingness of supervisors to help wherever possible and value the trust cultivated to be able to be open and honest about their needs.

Resolve

While various supports were attributed to principals in remaining in the role, all the participants expressed that their purpose and will is what kept them in the role even after the pandemic. Heidi expressed, “We just couldn’t give up, it wasn’t an option, so we

thought outside of the box for our students.” Jazmin acknowledged it was a lot of work that had to be done, but she kept reminding herself, “There’s always a light at the end of the tunnel, and things will get better.” Isabel communicated, “It showed our kiddos that we could overcome anything, so we got back in the work made the campus an A because it’s about staying until you get it done.” Similarly, Carmen shared her same sentiments about staying the course for the students. Carmen communicated, “The work continued. It didn’t just pause, so we had to continue the work and finish strong because we could not give up.”

Some participants drive was an underlying factor for them to continue; however, had their personal reasons for remaining at the helm. David shares a similar background to the community he serves, so he can relate to their challenges and advocates for them. David replied,

We are in this profession not because we wanted to become millionaires. We are in this profession because we enrich our society with the kids that we touch day in and out. Being the changing agent, you know, for so many students. I don’t have kids on my own, but I make all those 600, 700, a thousand, sometimes students, that we have on campus my own kids. Taking care of students, it has been a a real, a real pleasure for me, cause each one of them has provided me with some rich experiences. I mean the fact that I have them on campus, it’s a blessing for me because I absorb a lot of energy from them, right? So that’s what keeps me going, seeing them grow and seeing them learning.

Fatima shared that being a principal is her passion and she enjoys seeing the children grow. She further explained that having been in the principal position for 20 years means she has uncovered her “calling.” Allison, agreed that being around children gives her a sense of purpose. She explained, “Children need adults in making sure that

they learn, have great experiences, and do what's best for them and that's me because I put children first." Like his colleagues, Jason remarked,

I stay for the kids and the work of the nature, like seeing progress. It's a greater calling. You really have to understand that it's gonna be more about them and their family, and it has to do more with society as a whole. So if you're not up for that challenge then move to the side and let others like answer that calling, but if you are, you have to do your absolute best because it's more than anyone might consider.

Working at a high school, Katherine enjoys watching students become adults. Katherine communicated,

I really appreciate watching kids and I guess, it sounds trite, but blossom as they... as they learn more, they develop more confidence. They kind of move into being adults of their... little adults of their own. And I really appreciate watching that happen for... for kids. You know I feel like I'm still useful and needed, and that I'm still effective, and so as long as I can be those things, then I'm staying.

Correspondingly, Brooke elaborated on her reasons for remaining in the role. She replied,

I just feel like I would lose who I am, like, I would lose that educator that I've always been ever since I was a kid. I've always been a person that wanted to help kids out, and so now I think because I have such a commitment, I want to make a difference in kids lives. If I just thought, it's just as job, I think I would not have been a principal this long.

Participants responses indicated any job has challenges, but the job of a principal impacts many lives. The principalship takes a strong sense of will and purpose to continue to remain in the role for a long time and not give up on those that depend on

them. Supports can be provided to aide in the challenges faced, but without a purpose, it can be easy to burn out due to how demanding the role is.

Summary of Findings

The findings regarding the lived experiences of principals prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that the principal role, challenges principals' encountered, and what aided principals to overcome challenges changed over time. Participants shared that there were already challenges such as learning gaps prior to the pandemic, but the pandemic exacerbated existing challenges making the role of a principal much more difficult even after the pandemic was over.

According to the participants, there are remnants of the pandemic that lingers still to this day and it has worsened the challenges they faced before the pandemic. They continue to face even longer hours and struggle with getting everyone motivated and back on track to share in a common goal which is student success. However, due to the various learning gaps and social emotional issues of students, teachers are burning out.

While participants didn't share as much support that was provided to them prior to the pandemic, they revealed that during and in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic, there was a lot of support from their colleagues, immediate supervisors, and the school community. Additionally, though there was mention of immediate supervisors and the support that was provided, there was not a lot of mention about district leadership such as the school board and superintendent from the participants. Furthermore, participants described there was a sense of unity and guidance all around to help them navigate the various challenges amid and post pandemic which in turn aided their purpose and contributed to them remaining in the principal role.

Conclusion

This chapter presented a qualitative analysis of principals' lived experiences prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic. In general, the challenges principals faced changed over the different time periods of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the different supports they received that aided them to overcome those challenges. Chapter V includes a discussion of the findings of this chapter in comparison to the results of the literature review in Chapter II, implications of the findings concluded for this study, and recommendations for future research studies.

CHAPTER V:
SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This transcendental phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of principals prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter discusses the analyzed data collected from principals which was reported in chapter IV. Furthermore, this chapter presents the relationship to the theoretical framework, connections to the literature, implications, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion of the Findings

Principals play a crucial role in a student's learning environment; therefore, turnover of principals can adversely impact school performance (Buckman, 2021). Previous researchers have examined the importance of principals in the improvement of student achievement (Bartanen et al., 2019; Boyd et al., 2011; Branch et al., 2012; Burkhauser et al., 2012; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood et al., 2020; Miller, 2013). Additionally, researchers have explored the challenges principals face and why there is a growing number of principal turnover (Alenezi, 2020; Chan et al., 2019, Collie et al., 2020; Combs et al., 2009; DeMatthews et al., 2023; Grissom & Bartanen, 2019; Hanselman et al., 2016; Husain et al., 2021; Kaufman et al., 2022; Levin & Bradley, 2019, Rangel, 2018; Yan, 2020). However, research on what has contributed to principals staying in the principal role, regardless of the various challenges faced prior to and throughout the Coronavirus pandemic, is limited.

This study was designed to analyze what contributed to principal retention despite principal attrition faced from challenges that occurred during the changes in education prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the participants' responses, regarding challenges and what aided principals to overcome the challenges, 20 categories

emerged from the data analysis. Challenges prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic include: (a) establishing a shared vision, (b) workload, (c) work-life balance, (d) improving leadership density, (e) lack of resources, (f) systemic overhaul, (g) motivation, (h) emotional and mental health, (i) social emotional guidance, (j) reset, and (k) learning gaps. Aides to overcome challenges prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic include: (a) professional development, (b) mentorship, (c) supervisor support, (d) collegueship, (e) unity, (f) resilience and purpose, (g) sound board, (h) executive guidance, and (i) resolve. After reviewing the findings, I determined that school district leadership does not always understand the depth of the various intricacies that arise for principals when policies are changed through an evolving education system, including a crisis such as COVID-19.

Further results of the findings revealed there are lingering effects of COVID-19 that still exist today, such as student learning gaps, social emotional issues with students, and lack of motivation from the school community such as students, teachers, and parents. Additionally, the challenges that existed in the principal role pre-pandemic are still very much present and have exacerbated due to the lingering effects of COVID-19. Also, with changes made to the state's accountability system, which determines a principal's effectiveness, it has made the principal role that much more difficult. Therefore, considerations are needed from the school district to have an organized and uniformed way to leverage systems and best practices that veteran principals value and attribute as aides to retain them in the role, as well as foster a culture of purpose in aspiring and current principals so that they do not give up when the going gets tough. By focusing on the best practices that support principals throughout the various challenges they encounter, principal retention can increase; thereby, providing stability to the school community which then helps maintain or improve student achievement.

Relation to Theoretical Framework

A description of the connection between the theoretical framework and the findings from the study will be outlined in this section. The theoretical framework utilized for this study includes two models. Fredrick Herzberg's motivator-hygiene theory includes motivators and demotivators relating to a person's satisfaction or dissatisfaction towards their job (Herzberg, 1966). Principals explained the many challenges that they faced prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic which contributed to job dissatisfaction.

Herzberg's motivator-hygiene theory describes hygiene demotivators for job dissatisfaction as: (a) bureaucracy, (b) relationships, (c) work conditions, (d) status, (e) salary, and (f) job security. (Alshmemri et al., 2017). Participants described the various adverse working conditions that contributed to their frustrations and anxiety of the unknown and almost impossible expectations that have been placed on them throughout their principalship including amid and post pandemic. From the increasing workload prior to the pandemic, which affected their work life balance, to revamping their entire systems for a successful educational program amid and post the COVID-19 pandemic, participants revealed that the working conditions have always been difficult, but more so during and post COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants also described that as accountability measures change at the state level, the bureaucracy at the district level of how things should be done and they are directed to do, has added to the already existing pressure principals have since students have significant learning gaps, specifically in math, that were already there prior to the pandemic, but are even greater now post pandemic. None of the participants discussed salary, job security, and status as factors for dissatisfaction. Participants described that

true leaders are not in the principal role for the money or the status. They are in the role to make a difference in the lives of students and the community that they serve.

Motivators for job satisfaction include: (a) achievement, (b) accolades, (c) self-fulfillment, (d) responsibility, (e) advancement, and (f) growth (Alshmemri et al., 2017). In this study, all participants revealed a sense of responsibility to the students and their community amid and post the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the participants described their reason for staying in the principal role a “calling.” They explained feelings of responsibility as the main reason why they remained in the principal role. The passion conveyed by the participants responses revealed that being a principal means doing what is necessary for the community to excel even through a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants also described their reason for staying as a calling, their why, and part of their identity as the years have gone by. In tandem with a sense of responsibility, participants described a sense of self-fulfillment. Jason and David described that being there for students gives them joy and makes them feel “blessed” to see students progressing in their learning.

The Resilience Theory describes an individuals’ intrinsic motivation to push forward and adapt even through frustration acquired from adversity (Masten, 2018). The role of the principal was already frustrating due to the evolving changes in the education system. However, nothing could prepare them for the adversity they would encounter during and post the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants expressed there was chaos in trying to get students learning virtually due to limited resources, staff capacity, and their own personal challenges with the fear of COVID-19.

Post the COVID-19 pandemic, dealing with the significant learning loss of students, while accountability for student achievement increased, and having to change people’s mindsets about school being important, only added to their frustrations.

However, participants shared that because of their responsibility to the students, they persisted and were determined to stay committed and stay the course to continue to advocate for students and their success. As Isabel shared, “We are the model for the students, we do not give up, so they don’t either.”

Connection to the Literature

Dhuey & Smith (2018) identified the various tasks and responsibilities that principals are held accountable for which includes being the lead communicator with stakeholders of the community, as well as district officials, the day-to-day operations of a school organization, student discipline, teacher recruitment and retention. However, the primary expectation of a principal is to ensure they are improving their instructional program and increasing student achievement (Dhuey & Smith, 2018). This expectation of principals remained the same prior to, amid, and even more so post the COVID-19 pandemic.

Prior to the pandemic, principals were already faced with an instrumental amount of workload which affected their work-life balance. In agreement with Hauseman et al. (2017), participants revealed that all their time is spent in the classrooms during the instructional day to observe instruction and ensure student learning is occurring. However, this caused principals to work on the compliance expectations of their role outside of working hours; thus, contributing to principal attrition.

During the pandemic principals had to restructure how they operated their day-to-day practices. Schooling had to be conducted in a virtual platform for nearly three months. For the district included in this study, principals had an additional year of conducting a hybrid model which consisted of both virtual and face to face learning. The need to revamp an entire educational system, in which teaching and learning was conducted both virtually and in a hybrid model, contributed more to principal attrition.

Westberry et al. (2021) identified that while principals were operating under mass confusion, encountering more barriers, and an increase in their stress level, they still had to continue to be an instructional leader. Conversely, participants revealed that while principals were still expected to keep instruction and student learning at the forefront, the various barriers due to changes in policy because of COVID-19 and lack of resources made it an almost impossible expectation for principals to achieve successfully.

The participants in this study all work in Title I schools, which means they have a high concentration of economically disadvantage students. They noted that the number one barrier and stressor for teaching and learning to continue, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, was a lack of resources with technology and Wi-Fi connectivity. Martinez et al. (2021) recognized that lack of equitable access to technology for underserved communities contributed to more stress and attrition of principals. Due to the unavailability of resources principals had to get creative to ensure there was learning material available for all students. Participants did this by having a drive thru for parents to stop by and get packets of work; however, that was an added barrier for learning to continue. There would be no teacher available for students to learn how to complete the work. As such, parents were having to aide the students at home with the work. However, Pupusita (2021) explained that parents had limited instructional capacity to be able to aide students in their learning at home.

Participants explained how parental involvement was at an all-time low because parents were dealing with their own challenges and their priorities shifted. While Abuhammad (2020) explained the barriers for parents to be involved included lack of knowledge with the virtual platforms and lack of capacity to aide in the learning, participants revealed an added barrier was that parents had to continue to work, were losing family members, and didn't place an importance on education as they once did. As

such, students were not being actively monitored to ensure they were engaged in the learning and not watching television, playing with video games, or being present all together. Elementary principals shared it was incredibly challenging to keep a student in pre-kindergarten or kindergarten engaged on screen and secondary principals struggled with getting students to attend classes.

In addition to limited capacity of parents, participants also shared the various challenges faced with the capabilities of their teachers to be able to continue teaching students through a virtual and hybrid model setting. Furthermore, participants added that their own capacity, even though they are the instructional leader, was limited from being able to provide the instructional support teachers needed. Meisner and McKensie (2023) acknowledged that educators did not have the necessary pedagogical familiarity to help aide student engagement for learning in a virtual platform. Martinez et al. (2021) explained that principals had to simultaneously build their own capacity to be able to develop their teachers for learning to continue. However, due to the lack of supervision of students, as Grewenig et al. (2020) recognized, coupled with the limited pedagogical knowledge of principals in aiding teachers to effectively deliver instruction in a virtual environment, participants experiences detailed that students went back to school with significant learning gaps and social emotional issues.

Learning gaps in students was not new to the participants. However, to the participants surprise, students that were on grade level and high achieving students returned to school with learning gaps and the gap widened significantly for those with pre-existing learning gaps. Post COVID-19 learning gaps have become a dismaying task for principals to strategize on how to recover nearly two years of learning loss. Mukhari and Sanders (2023) explained students required additional time to bridge the gaps. While government officials and district officials have provided additional funds and resources to

increase interventions and tutorials to help close the gaps, students still struggle today. As Heidi explained, “Every educator wants their kids, you know, to be successful, to learn, and I think that some of those things we just won't recover from.”

Learning gaps was not the only added barrier for principals post pandemic, mental health and social emotional issues were something new principals had to actively respond to. Part of the drawbacks from closing a school is that students were isolated at home and had little to no interactions (UNESCO, 2020). Schools cultivate an environment for social emotional learning (UNESCO, 2020). When students returned, principals had to intentionally address students’ basic needs. Discipline issues arose and students lacked motivation to learn. Therefore, all participants, as part of the district’s plan, included time in their daily schedule to conduct social emotional learning activities. Participants explained if students’ basic needs aren’t met first, they will not learn.

Like Harris and Jones (2020) noted regarding a principals mental and physical health being adversely impacted from the stressors of COVID-19, during and post the COVID-19 pandemic the participants shared how they had to manage their own health issues and fears to continue to run a school. Participants attribute their capability to continue amidst the stressors in part to the various supports systems. As Hauseman et al. (2017) described, when principals do not receive support, the stress intensifies; thereby, increasing attrition. Participants shared that they received various support prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic from their immediate supervisors. Whether it was through connecting them with people that had the answers, or obtaining resources for them, the participants appreciated their empathy and support to overcome challenges.

In addition to supervisor support, a repeated theme of support prior to, amid, and post COVID-19, as revealed by the participants, were their colleagues. Kaufman et al. (2022) recognized the power of networking with colleagues on how principals could

better help support teachers for teaching and learning to improve. Principals learn from one another and even though the barriers faced were new to everyone, only principals truly understood the complexities of how COVID-19 exacerbated pre-existing challenges. Therefore, they could work together to find solutions to overcome those challenges.

The findings revealed that principals learn best from one another and turn to one another for support; however, there isn't an established or uniformed way for principals to do this. A district's strategic plan could benefit from establishing practices that provide several platforms for principals to collaborate. An example would be setting time during monthly district meetings in which principals share best practices through modeling and providing artifacts. Additionally, providing opportunities for principals to shadow one another on areas they need improvement, could prove advantageous as an added layer of support for growing and developing leaders to aide them in overcoming challenges and remain in the role.

Implications for Practice

This study researched challenges faced by principals prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic and the aides that helped principals overcome those challenges to keep them at the helm. Since there is an ever-growing rate of principals leaving the profession, my research study aims to enhance existing district policies and current organizational practices to enhance principal capacity so that they are better prepared for any crisis and to retain principals in the field. By understanding how to foster a culture of trust for principals to be able to share challenges and what helps them overcome them, principal supervisors and executive leadership at the district level can make informed decisions on whether decisions they make create more barriers for principals; thus, increasing the chances for principal burnout. Based on the findings of this study for principal retention, principals value coaching and developing from their immediate

supervisors along with effective two-way communication, autonomy from district leaders, and a platform for principals to collaborate.

As policies and practices are put into place for the new school year, districts could benefit from a strategic plan that targets how executive supervisory leadership members will coach and develop principals. As part of the plan, coaching and development would be dependent on the principal's individual strengths and needs. Based on the findings, existing principals are receiving professional development from the district that they have already received in years passed which can add to the frustration of not feeling supported. An individualized plan for professional development co-created with the executive supervisor and the principal can bridge gaps in the areas of need for principals allowing them to build their capacity to further aide them when challenges arise. Additionally, day to day positive coaching and feedback from immediate supervisors on instructional practices, such as how to make improvements to campus systems and instruction, would support and benefit the growth and development of campus leaders. As part of the strategic plan, supervisors could benefit from receiving training on how to effectively communicate with principals to establish trust. Based on the findings, the principal role continues to get increasingly difficult; therefore, having a supervisor that can empathize with principals for the difficult tasks that they encounter, but also find ways to bridge the gap between policy and the barriers they face by showing them how to overcome them, can provide additional aide in retaining principals.

Principals may not always understand decisions that are made at the district level and why certain policies are put into place, and due to the evolvement of educational practices and challenges, district leaders may not always understand how much those changes make an impact at the school level. While some decisions must be made in accordance with the laws, the strategic plan can include having a platform in which the

superintendent and additional district leaders sit with veteran principals to discuss potential implications for upcoming changes in policy. This could benefit the decision-making process by providing principals the opportunity to have input, feel valued, and maintain a level of autonomy.

The findings revealed that principals learn best from one another and turn to one another for support; however, there isn't an established or uniformed way for principals to do this. A district's strategic plan could benefit from establishing practices that provide several platforms for principals to collaborate. An example would be setting time during monthly district meetings in which principals share best practices through modeling and providing artifacts. Additionally, providing opportunities for principals to shadow one another on areas they need improvement, could prove advantageous as an added layer of support for growing and developing leaders to aide them in overcoming challenges and remain in the role.

Reccomendations for Future Research

Parallel to the literature, the findings of this study indicate the importance of addressing strategic and tailored support for existing principals due to the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of this study provide an opportunity for future research. It could be beneficial to conduct research on district plans that focus on ways to address the various needs for each campus caused from the COVID-19 pandemic to further aide principals with the lingering challenges. An examination of district plans, based on the different make of the school's population, could provide further insight on how to assist principals in their role for principal retention.

Future research for principal retention could also entail a focus on whether a principal's entire educational experience affects their resilience and adaptability to remain in the role when facing adversity in a crisis. A focus on their professional

experience such as how long they were a teacher, assistant principal, or any other educational role could provide insight regarding experiences that helped aide their resilience and adaptability. Furthermore, research can explore the trainings principals received throughout their educational career and how they helped prepare them for the role. This recommendation for future research could aide districts in reviewing their policy requirements for individuals to become principals as well as providing a guideline for principal preparedness programs which can train individuals to overcome challenges including a crisis.

In gathering participants for this study with a minimum of five years or more experience in the principal role, few were from secondary schools. Additional research may benefit from focusing on whether the grade levels that principals serve affects their willingness to remain at the helm of the principalship. The perspective of secondary leaders would be valuable for districts to see if there are any inequities of support given to secondary leaders versus primary.

Conclusion

This study implemented a transcendental phenomenological approach to analyze the lived experiences of principals prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic to examine the contextual factors of their role that they describe as supportive or constraining. Using this qualitative method allowed me to examine principal's lived experiences and gather an understanding on what contributed to the phenomena of adaptability and resilience that influenced their decision to stay in the principal role. The research questions were focused on the challenges principals faced through an evolving education system, including a global pandemic, as well as what aided them in overcoming those challenges and contributed to them remaining in the role. The findings revealed that while a principal's sense of purpose is a major driving force to overcome

challenges and to remain in the role, district leaders can supplement their drive by providing a variety of supports that they value such as coaching and developing from their immediate supervisors along with effective two-way communication, autonomy from district leaders, and a platform for principals to collaborate.

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APPENDIX A:
INTERVIEW COVER LETTER



University
of Houston
Clear Lake

DATE

Dear Principal,

As a doctoral student at the University of Houston Clear-Lake, I am conducting a research study to explore principal's experiences prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a lack in research regarding principal retention prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic, and I aim to fill the gap in the literature. I have completed chapters 1, 2, and 3 of my dissertation, and I am now looking to gather the necessary data in order to complete my study. Since you are a principal with five years or more of principal experience, you are being solicited to participate in a semi-structured interview. The data obtained from this study will provide feedback on the contextual factors that principals deemed supporting or constraining prior to and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. This semi-structured interview will take no more than 60 minutes to complete. All your responses will be kept completely confidential. No obvious undue risks will be sustained, and you may end your participation at any time. In addition, you will also not benefit directly from your participation in the study. Requested Actions:

- You will receive an email from DocuSign containing the Informed Consent Document. The document will ask for your electronic signature as a participant in this study. Please complete at your earliest convenience.
- Click the link below to schedule your interview for the study.

Your willingness to participate in this study invaluable and your cooperation is greatly appreciated. Should you have any further questions, please feel free to contact, Sandra Cisneros.

Thank you.

Respectfully,

Sandra Cisneros

Doctoral Candidate/ Educational Leadership

APPENDIX B:
INFORMED CONSENT



University
of Houston
Clear Lake

INFORMED CONSENT: ADULT RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

You are being asked to participate in the research project described below. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate, or you may decide to stop your participation at any time. Should you refuse to participate in the study or should you withdraw your consent and stop participation in the study, your decision will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled. You are being asked to read the information below carefully and ask questions about anything you don't understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

Title: RESILIANCE AND ADAPTIBILITY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXAMINING PRINCIPAL RETENTION PRIOR TO, AMID, AND POST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Principal Investigator(s): Sandra Cisneros

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Jennifer Grace

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to examine the lived experiences of principals prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic and the contextual factors of their role that they describe as supportive or constraining. By examining the lived experiences of principals prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic, this study intends to provide an understanding on what

contributed to the phenomena of adaptability and resilience of principals that influenced their decision to stay in the principal role.

Procedures: For this qualitative study, the researcher will solicit a purposeful sample of at least 10 participants that have 5 years or more of principal experience to participate in a semi-structured interview. Participants will answer open-ended questions on their lived experiences as principals prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic.

Expected Duration: 60 minutes

Risks of Participation: There are no anticipated risks associated with the participation of this study.

Benefits to the Subject

There is no direct benefit received from your participation in this study, but your participation will help the investigator(s) to better understand what contributed to principal retention prior to, amid, and post the COVID-19 pandemic.

Confidentiality of Records

Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of your study records. The data collected from the study will be used for educational and publication purposes, however, you will not be identified by name. For federal audit purposes, the participant's documentation for this research project will be maintained and safeguarded by the Principal Investigator or Faculty Sponsor for a minimum of three years after completion of the study. After that time, the participant's documentation may be destroyed.

Compensation

There is no financial compensation to be offered for participation in the study.

Investigator's Right to Withdraw Participant

The investigator has the right to withdraw you from this study at any time.

Contact Information for Questions or Problems

The investigator has offered to answer all of your questions. If you have additional questions during the course of this study about the research or any related problem, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Sandra Cisneros by telephone at [REDACTED] or by email at cisneross9319@uhcl.edu

Signatures

Your signature below acknowledges your voluntary participation in this research project. Such participation does not release the investigator(s), institution(s), sponsor(s) or granting agency(ies) from their professional and ethical responsibility to you. By signing the form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

The purpose of this study, procedures to be followed, and explanation of risks or benefits have been explained to you. You have been allowed to ask questions and your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. You have been told who to contact if you have additional questions. You have read this consent form and voluntarily agree to participate as a subject in this study. You are free to withdraw your consent at any time by contacting the Principal Investigator or Student Researcher/Faculty Sponsor. You will be given a copy of the consent form you have signed.

Subject's printed name:

Signature of Subject:

Date:

Using language that is understandable and appropriate, I have discussed this project and the items listed above with the subject.

Printed name and title: Sandra Cisneros, Student Researcher

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:

Date: Click or tap here to enter text.

THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON-CLEAR LAKE (UHCL) COMMITTEE FOR PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS HAS REVIEWED AND APPROVED THIS PROJECT. ANY QUESTIONS REGARDING YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH SUBJECT MAY BE ADDRESSED TO THE UHCL COMMITTEE FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS (281.283.3015). ALL RESEARCH PROJECTS THAT ARE CARRIED OUT BY INVESTIGATORS AT UHCL ARE GOVERNED BY REQUIREMENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT.

APPENDIX C:
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL



University
of Houston
{ Clear Lake

Hello, my name is Sandra Cisneros

I want to take the opportunity to thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this research project. By conducting this research, I hope to have a better understanding on how you navigate the various responsibilities and challenges of being the school's principal.

To facilitate the interview, I will be recording via zoom and using the captions and transcription to be able to transcribe our conversation. During the interview, if you would prefer to stop at any moment, please let me know. May I record the interview? After looking over the Informed Consent agreement, you agree to partake in the interview? Before we begin, do you have any questions?

1. How many years have you been a principal?
2. Why did you become a principal?
3. Describe what you enjoy most about being a principal.
4. Describe your responsibilities as a principal and rank them from order of importance starting with the primary role.
5. Describe the challenges both professional and personal of being in the principal role.
6. Describe the training and professional development you received that aide you in overcoming these challenges.
7. Describe your primary role as a principal during the pandemic.
8. Describe challenges you faced both professionally and personally as a principal through the pandemic.
9. What is your perception of executive leadership support you received to overcome challenges during the pandemic.

10. Describe any other supports that aided you during the pandemic.
11. How did the challenges experienced during the pandemic differ from pre-pandemic?
12. Did you consider leaving the principal role during the pandemic? Why or why not?
 - a. What reflections do you have about the decision to stay now?
 - b. In hindsight would you do anything differently?
13. How was the principal role different in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic from what it was pre-pandemic?
14. Describe the challenges you faced in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic.
15. How have you worked to overcome those challenges?
16. What is your perception regarding executive leadership support to aide in overcoming challenges in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic versus what it was prior to and amid the pandemic?
 - a. How do you attribute the support you received to your own retention and willingness to stay at the helm?
17. When the next pandemic comes in 10 or 100 years from now, what advice would you give to principals having to lead during such a crisis?
18. What legacy do you want to leave behind as a principal?
19. Is there anything else you would like to add to the interview?

APPENDIX D:
CITI CERTIFICATE



Completion Date 02-Feb-2022
Expiration Date 01-Feb-2025
Record ID 47149188

This is to certify that:

sandra cisneros

Has completed the following Citi Program course:

Not valid for renewal of
certification through CME.

Social-Behavioral-Educational Researchers
(Curriculum Group)
Social-Behavioral-Educational Researchers
(Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

University of Houston-Clear Lake

CITI

Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

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