TEACHING AND LEADING IN TIMES OF CRISIS: EDUCATOR EXPERIENCES DURING COVID-19

by

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Abstract

TEACHING AND LEADING DURING TIMES OF CRISIS: EDUCATOR EXPERIENCES DURING COVID-19

by
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The COVID-19 pandemic had significant impacts on education, and the crisis was further complicated by rising tensions around multiple aspects of teaching and schools in general. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of elementary educators who worked during the pandemic and to examine how leadership practices affected teachers' experiences during this complex time. This study was designed as a phenomenological qualitative study utilizing an interpretive approach seeking to describe, understand, and interpret the experiences of six elementary school teachers and five elementary school principals during the COVID-19 global crisis. Each of the eleven participants was interviewed twice using semi-structured interview protocols adapted from McAdams' (2007) Life Story Interview. This study analyzed teachers' accounts through the lens of burnout and resilience theories. Findings from this study revealed educators have experienced unprecedented stressors and emotional exhaustion. The study articulated the importance of supportive relationships and leadership practices. Consequently, stakeholders must understand the experiences of educators and look for more ways to support them during times of crisis.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, schools around the world were faced with the unprecedented crisis of COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant impacts on education. In the spring of 2020, educational systems across the country had to pivot and rapidly change the way they taught students. As one principal described it, "we essentially took everything that we know about how we teach children, and we changed it all overnight." This crisis has been further complicated by rising tensions around multiple aspects of teaching and schools in general, impacting schools and educators across the country. To understand the current challenges facing educators, it is helpful to start by looking back at the timeline of how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted schools in the United States.

The first US cases of coronavirus emerged on January 19, 2020, and by February 25th the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued a warning that schools needed to prepare for coronavirus (Education Week Staff, 2021). Soon after, schools began closing. Washington state became the first region to experience school closures; Bothell High School closed for two days for cleaning after a staff member's relative tested positive on February 27th. On March 5th, the entire Northshore District in Washington state (24,000 students) announced it would close and shift to online learning for up to 14 days. Northshore was the first district to announce a school closure in the United States (Levinson & Markovits, 2022).

On March 11th, the World Health Organization officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic and the next day Ohio became the first state to announce the statewide closing of schools. By March 16th, 27 states and territories had followed suit, issuing orders or recommendations that all public schools cease in-person instruction. At this point, more than half of all students in the US were impacted by school closures (Education Week Staff, 2021).

The pandemic reached a monumental point on March 25th when all US public school buildings were closed (Donohue & Miller, 2020). The closures were not limited to the United States; students in 165 countries experienced school closures. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2020) reported that 1.37 billion children were home due to COVID-19 school closures at the end of March 2020.

What began as an anticipated two-week closure shifted to a much longer time frame as schools across the country began to announce they would stay closed for the remainder of the 2019-20 school year. Kansas was the first to announce they would not reopen, with a statement on March 17th, and Maryland was the last state to announce its schools would stay closed with an announcement on May 6th. Only two states, Wyoming and Montana, reopened for part of the 2019-20 school year (Zviedrite et al., 2021).

These closures came with a shift to online learning. School leaders and teachers scrambled to put together online learning systems for students. By May 7th, 80 percent of teachers in the US reported interacting with many of their students daily or weekly via virtual platforms (Education Week Staff, 2021).

Throughout the summer of 2020, school reopening became a contentious debate across the nation. On July 7th, President Donald Trump hosted a White House summit in which Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos urged schools nationwide to fully reopen buildings as soon as possible. Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, stated that teachers would be "part of the experiment" of reopening schools (Education Week Staff, 2021). The American Federation of Teachers responded to reopening discussions by stating that teacher strikes could be used to keep schools from reopening if adequate safety measures were not in place (Education Week Staff, 2021).

At the beginning of the 2020-21 school year, Arkansas, Florida, Iowa, and Texas were the only states that required some form of in-person instruction (Ferren, 2021). Conversely, 74 of the 100 largest school districts kept their buildings closed and offered remote learning as the only instructional model for over 9 million students (Ferren, 2021). By October, many of the US school districts were utilizing a hybrid learning model with a mixture of both in-person and remote learning. However, the situation continued to evolve as the nation headed into winter. On November 19th, New York City public schools shifted back to a fully remote model due to a rise in infection rates, leading other districts to follow suit (Education Week Staff, 2021).

On December 8th, President-elect Joe Biden vowed to open all schools in the first 100 days of his presidency, a vow bolstered by the development and rollout of vaccines. On December 28th, Knox County Health Department in Indiana began vaccinating educators (Education Week Staff, 2021). By February 9th, nearly one-fifth of National Education Association members reported being vaccinated and another 18 percent reported having appointments scheduled for their vaccines. In early March, President Biden directed states to prioritize educators for the vaccine (Education Week Staff, 2021). The promise of vaccinated educators gave hope to a return to in-person learning, while also sparking debates around vaccine mandates.

As the 2020-21 school year came to an end, one percent of schools remained fully remote, 46 percent of schools utilized a hybrid approach and 53 percent were fully in-person (Ferren, 2021). While more than half of schools nationwide were fully in-person by the end of the 2020-21 school year, school continued to look very different for most students. In February of 2021, the CDC released guidelines for in-person learning that included five key prevention strategies for schools: “(i) universal and correct use of masks; (ii) physical distancing; (iii) handwashing and respiratory etiquette; (iv) cleaning and maintaining healthy facilities; (v)

contact tracing in combination with isolation and quarantine" (NCIRD, 2021, Prevention Strategies to Reduce Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in Schools section, para. 1).

The first prevention strategy stated that "masks should be worn at all times, by all people in school facilities" (NCIRD, 2021, Universal and Correct Use of Masks section, para. 1). While the recommendation did mention exceptions for certain people, the overall strategy was that masks should be required in all school settings. For the 2020-21 school year, 40 states recommended districts require or recommend masks for students and staff, four states called for requiring masks for staff only, and seven states did not provide a recommendation or cautioned against mask requirements in schools (Ferren, 2021). According to a survey conducted by the CDC in October 2021, 65% of middle & high school students reported their classmates consistently wore masks at school (Ferren, 2021). As the school year progressed, mask mandates would become a contentious debate throughout the country; some would argue masks were negatively impacting children, while others argued that masks were a necessary prevention tool (Whitehurst & Long, 2021). These debates would eventually lead to lawsuits throughout the country (Walsh, 2021).

The second prevention strategy recommended by the CDC promoted physical distancing through school policies and structural interventions (NCIRD, 2021). The guidelines for physical distancing stated that elementary students should remain three feet apart. Middle school and high school students should also remain three feet apart, unless in an area of high community transmission, then students should be grouped into cohorts or kept six feet apart. Additionally, adults should stay six feet apart and adults should keep six feet of distance between themselves and students. Everyone should stay six feet apart when masks could not be worn. Schools were encouraged to face students in the same direction, remove nonessential furniture to maximize the

distance between students, use cohorting, and limit contact between student cohorts (NCIRD, 2021).

The CDC also recommended hand washing and respiratory etiquette. Respiratory etiquette refers to individuals covering coughs and sneezes with a tissue when unmasked and immediately washing their hands. Additionally, the CDC recommended that schools should teach proper handwashing and reinforce behaviors that promote respiratory etiquette. Schools should provide ongoing health education units and lessons and provide adequate supplies for hand washing/sanitizing (NCIRD, 2021).

Schools were encouraged to make environmental changes such as improving ventilation and routinely cleaning high-touch surfaces like doorknobs and light switches (NCIRD, 2021). Finally, any individuals (students, teachers, and staff) with a positive test result needed to isolate. Schools were recommended to conduct contact tracing so that close contacts could quarantine (NCIRD, 2021).

While the CDC recommendations included five key prevention strategies for schools, it also reported that schools offering in-person instruction should prioritize the first two strategies: masks and physical distancing; however, implementation did not always align with these recommendations (NCIRD, 2021). The most common safety measures being promoted by schools included hand sanitizing, exclusion from school for sick students or staff, more intensive cleaning, and mask mandates (Ferren, 2021). The least common safety measures being used by schools were COVID testing, social distancing on buses, eating outside or in classrooms, and upgraded ventilation (Ferren, 2021). Additionally, many states recommended temperature checks and symptom screenings, despite not being part of the key strategies recommended by the CDC (Ferren, 2021; NCIRD, 2021).

Tensions surrounding school reopening and COVID protocols began in the fall of 2020 when schools across the country decided to begin the year virtually (Ujifusa, 2021a). Reopening schools would be an ongoing debate, one that was often heated, over the course of the 2020-21 school year. Teachers' unions, health professionals, elected officials, and parent advocacy groups found themselves at opposite ends of the debate with increasing tension that became toxic. Some teachers feared being exposed to the virus by students who would not wear masks correctly and/or consistently (Yan, 2021). There were also concerns about the implementation of other CDC recommendations; some teachers felt schools would be unable to maintain social distancing (Yan, 2021). Vaccine uncertainty added to reopening concerns; rollouts to teachers varied widely by state and the timeline of vaccine availability for young children was unclear (Meckler et al., 2021). Some families were under extreme financial stress with no affordable childcare available and needed schools to reopen so adult family members could return to work (Yan, 2021). There were also concerns about the academic, social, and emotional harm to children staying at home (Bole et al., 2021). "The tragedy is that all sides in this debate believe in doing the best for our kids, and yet, in a stressful situation where misinformation has been rampant, natural allies have turned on each other." (Bole et al., 2021, para. 8)

While many schools across the nation returned to in-person learning for the 2021-22 school year, educators found themselves in an increasingly unstable political climate. Perhaps the most heated debate was the one surrounding mask mandates, particularly at the start of the 2021-22 school year. The CDC's number one recommendation for schools was for all students and staff to wear masks; however, mask requirements in public schools varied widely (NCIRD, 2021). Some states required masks, other states banned mask mandates, and many states left it up to individual districts (Ferren, 2021).

Opinions over mask mandates in schools were polarized. Some argued that students were negatively impacted by wearing masks all day and that parents should have the individual right to choose whether to mask their children (Whitehurst & Long, 2021). Others argued that masks were a key prevention tool that did not pose health risks for most children (Whitehurst & Long, 2021). The issue became politicized: a poll from the Associated Press (AP) found that 6 in 10 Americans favored mask requirements in schools; however, when this was broken down by political party only 3 in 10 Republicans favored mask mandates versus 8 in 10 Democrats (Whitehurst & Long, 2021).

Activists on both sides filed lawsuits; in August 2021, at least 14 states had lawsuits filed regarding masks in schools (Walsh, 2021). Some were suing over mask requirements, such as in lawsuits in Missouri, Illinois, Michigan, Kentucky, and Montana (Walsh, 2021). In other states, such as Utah, Iowa, and South Carolina, parents were suing over legislative bans on mask mandates (Walsh, 2021). Parents were not the only ones suing; large districts in Florida, Texas, and Arizona were in court battling governors over legislative bans that prevented them from requiring masks for students and staff (Walsh, 2021). At the core of these lawsuits was a question of government authority. In Illinois, a group of parents and teachers filed a lawsuit claiming Governor J.B. Pritzker had overstepped his legal authority by requiring masks in schools (Associated Press, 2022). Sangamon County Circuit Judge Raylen Grischow sided with the plaintiffs and determined several of Pritzker's emergency orders were null and void. Judge Grischow issued a temporary restraining order on February 5, 2022, that prevented school districts from requiring masks (Associated Press, 2022). The state appealed the decision and eventually, the Illinois Supreme Court ruled in favor of the state, vacating the temporary restraining order on February 25, 2022 (Walsh, 2021). Governor Pritzker lifted the mask

mandate following the decision because of changing CDC recommendations (Walsh, 2021). However, the decision left the door open for future emergency orders in Illinois.

In addition to the question of a government's authority to issue mask mandates, parents of students with disabilities argued that a ban on mask mandates put their children at a greater risk. The American Civil Liberties Union filed a federal lawsuit in South Carolina; the lawsuit claimed that anti-mask regulations were putting students with disabilities at greater risk (Ma, 2021). The ACLU asserted that requiring medically fragile or disabled students to choose remote learning denied them equal opportunity (Ma, 2021). In Texas, parents of seven young children with disabilities filed a lawsuit claiming Governor Abbott's executive order barring all government entities from requiring face coverings violated the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, among others (Langford, 2021). The executive order meant that schools were not allowed to require masks for students or teachers; the plaintiffs argued that the executive order denied their children a quality education based on their disabilities by forcing them to choose virtual learning. The Fifth Circuit ruled in favor of the state, reinstating the Texas ban on school mask mandates; the court ruled that given the preventable measures available to students (social distancing, plexiglass, the option to wear a mask, vaccines) any injury arising from a ban on mask mandates is speculative or tentative (Langford, 2021).

Political polarization about COVID-19 mitigation efforts has impacted schools; a study by the Research and Development organization (RAND) found "74% of district leaders agreed or strongly agreed that political polarization about COVID-19 safety or vaccines is interfering with our ability to educate students" (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2022). The survey results suggest that a higher percentage of historically advantaged districts (majority-white, nonurban, and low-poverty) encountered political polarization about COVID-19 (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2022, p. 8).

Debates over COVID precautions were not the only cause of animosity and hostility in school communities. Districts nationwide experienced heated exchanges between community members surrounding "instruction that addresses racism, oppression, and gender identity;" critical race theory (CRT) became a buzzword at heated school board meetings (Schwartz & Pendharkar, 2022, para. 12). A study by the RAND organization found 43% of "district leaders agreed or strongly agreed that political polarization about critical race theory is interfering with our ability to educate students" (2022). In addition to critical race theory debates, a growing trend of "parents' rights" in education led to a multitude of state legislation banning topics or mandating more transparency of curriculum resources (Schwartz & Pendharkar, 2022).

The political climate became so heated that in 2021 the Justice Department announced plans to create a task force to monitor verbal and physical attacks/threats on school boards and educators. The announcement included plans to utilize the FBI to help track and respond to threats (Ujifusa, 2021c). This announcement followed a letter to President Biden by the National School Boards Association urging government assistance to deal with "crimes and acts of violence targeting K-12 officials" (Ujifusa, 2021b, para. 2). Opponents of the Justice Department's announcement expressed concern that the task force would serve to diminish the voices of concerned parents and violate First Amendment rights when parents feel inclined to speak up at School Board meetings and speak to educators (Ujifusa, 2021d).

The COVID-19 pandemic as a global crisis has had significant impacts on education (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2022), and this crisis has been further complicated by rising tensions around multiple aspects of teaching and schools in general. In Western societies, the post-crisis phase is often characterized by intense politicization, in which there is a general lack of concern for others, feelings of neglect by authorities, and debate around issues of accountability (Boin et

al., 2010; Winkworth, 2007). This phase of intense politicization has impacted schools and educators across the country (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2022).

RAND conducted a study of teachers in January and February of 2021 to examine the state of teacher well-being, job-related stressors, and teachers' intentions to leave their job (Steiner & Woo, 2021). According to the study's findings, three out of four teachers said that the 2020-21 school year had been frequently stressful and half of the participants said they felt burned out. One in five teachers and one in four teachers, respectively, said they were not handling the stress of their jobs very well and experiencing symptoms of depression. By teacher demographic or teaching context, there did not appear to be any difference in the frequency of job-related stress, feelings of burnout, or depressive symptoms. Compared to employed persons nationwide, teachers reported more frequent job-related stress and more depressive symptoms than the general public. These pressures have an impact on instructors' intentions to leave their current teaching positions; 23% of teachers said that they were likely to do so by the end of the 2020-21 school year. "Stressful working conditions, many of which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, appear likely to spur some teachers who might not otherwise have considered leaving to consider doing so this year" (Steiner & Woo, 2021, p. 16). For this reason, studies about teachers' experiences during the pandemic are important to better understand the stressors they have experienced and the implications for teacher burnout and resiliency. To better understand the impact of COVID-19 on teacher burnout and resiliency, we first need to understand the concepts of burnout and resilience.

Teacher Burnout and Resilience

Teachers have experienced burnout since long before the current pandemic. Burnout is defined as a process associated with three consecutive stages: emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced accomplishment (Howard & Johnson, 2004; Sokal et al., 2020). Teachers

experience burnout when they are “pushed to the brink of exhaustion and are entirely depleted” (Santoro, 2020, para. 4). Burnout is a specific type of job-related stress that is commonly found “among professionals who deal extensively with the needs of other people” (Howard & Johnson, 2004, p. 400). When teachers experience burnout, their capacity to function effectively is inhibited “because the body’s resources for resisting stress have become exhausted” (Davidson, 2009, p. 47).

Elias (2012) cites five factors most likely to cause teacher burnout: (1) inadequate preparation for handling student issues; (2) lack of autonomy; (3) difficult student behavior; (4) lack of support and interpersonal conflict; and (5) boredom. Davidson (2009) categorizes the top stressors for teachers as workload, student discipline, and issues stemming from No Child Left Behind legislation. Howard and Johnson (2004) also point to dealing with change, evaluations, role conflict, and poor working conditions as stressors contributing to teacher burnout.

While burnout is typically discussed as an individual issue, teacher burnout is often an organizational problem rooted in the culture of the school (Elias, 2012). In a study of 171 early career teachers in the Midwest, Kim, Youngs, and Frank (2017) found the average stress and burnout levels of teachers at the school to be the strongest predictor of burnout in the first four years of employment.

Santoro (2020) argues that the current plight of education is not an issue of teacher burnout, a scenario in which teachers are lacking in energy and internal resources, but rather demoralization. “Demoralization occurs when teachers cannot reap the moral rewards that they previously were able to access in their work. It happens when teachers are consistently thwarted in their ability to enact the values that brought them to the profession” (Santoro, 2020, para. 3). Teachers experiencing demoralization feel confident in the right course of action, but because of policies, mandates, and school practices they are not allowed to take the action. Demoralized

teachers remain committed to teaching and continue to perform well, but their value dissonance is the source of their dissatisfaction.

Research on teacher burnout is typically focused on psychological factors, whereas demoralization is caused by social factors (Tsang & Liu, 2016). In a study of 21 Hong Kong secondary teachers, Tsang and Liu found teacher demoralization to be related to teacher disempowerment (2016). Their study proposed two components of teacher disempowerment: technical and cognitive. Technical disempowerment refers to the lack of control teachers feel when they are excluded from decision-making processes. Teachers may feel incapable of taking the actions they feel would make the biggest difference in students' lives. Cognitive disempowerment occurs when teachers view policies, expectations, or tasks as non-instructional and feel they take away from their major goals in teaching. This can occur because of administrative practices, poor communication, and mistrust in leadership. Lynch (2018) argues that the key difference between demoralization and burnout lies in the remedy. Teachers who are experiencing burnout need to relieve their stress by reducing their workload, whereas teachers who are demoralized need to gain more control over their profession by engaging in activities that can change what their job looks like (Lynch, 2018).

Burnout or demoralization debate aside, schools across the country are experiencing teacher and staff shortages at alarming rates as the pandemic has exacerbated an already substantial problem. COVID-19 ushered in a drastically different school environment. In the 2020-21 school year, teachers experienced a plethora of changes; there were socially distanced classrooms, hybrid teaching, virtual teaching, new requirements for instruction, and new job expectations (Pressley, 2021). Teachers were required to learn new pedagogy for teaching online, master new learning platforms while helping parents learn how to use the technology at home, and create new instructional approaches to match the new learning environments

(Pressley, 2021). In addition to all the new requirements teachers had to meet when they returned to the classroom, teachers also had to grapple with health concerns and a new role as frontline workers in an ever-increasingly tense political climate; teachers ran the risk of experiencing additional anxieties and stressors (Pressley, 2021).

The RAND survey of teacher well-being found certain working conditions to be linked with higher levels of teacher distress (Steiner & Woo, 2021). Hybrid instruction (compared with fully remote) was linked to an increase in teacher burnout. Changes in the school instructional model (three or more changes in the school year) were linked with an increase in job stress, depressive symptoms, problems managing stress, and burnout. Lack of support from school administration, lack of training, difficulty repairing/replacing remote teaching equipment, and daily technical problems while teaching remotely were all linked with an increase in job stress, symptoms of depression, difficulty coping with stress, and burnout.

Teacher burnout is not a new phenomenon but given the current teaching climate, it is an increasingly pressing issue in education. In a nationally representative survey of nearly 900 teachers, principals, and district leaders conducted by the Education Week's Research Center, 60 percent of teachers surveyed reported experiencing job-related stress *frequently* or *always*; 41 percent reported that stress negatively impacts their job performance (Will, 2021). Not only are a large percentage of teachers reporting high levels of stress, but teachers are experiencing burnout early in the school year (Will, 2021).

Schools across the country are experiencing staff shortages; in the same nationally representative survey conducted by the Education Week's Research Center, 40 percent of district leaders and principals surveyed described their current staff shortages as *severe* or *very severe* (Lieberman, 2021). Teachers are not the only position schools are struggling to fill; schools are struggling to hire bus drivers, nutrition workers, and substitutes. According to Lieberman (2021),

substitute teachers were the role respondents most often said they are struggling to fill. The most common strategy in the short term for managing staff shortages is asking employees to take on additional responsibilities. As a result, teachers are giving up their planning period to help cover classes or take on additional students when substitutes are not available, often for little or no additional compensation (Lieberman, 2021).

Despite all the challenges, many teachers continue to stay in the classroom. Resilience is defined as the ability to cope and grow through adversity (Sokal et al., 2020). Howard & Johnson (2004) define resilience as successfully adapting despite challenging circumstances. According to Brunetti (2006), teacher resilience is "a quality that enables teachers to maintain their commitment to teaching and their teaching practices despite challenging conditions and recurring setbacks" (p. 813).

Teachers' capacities for resilience are influenced by teacher identities and promotive, or protective, factors (Gu & Day, 2007; Sammons et al., 2007). In a qualitative study of ten educators working in disadvantaged schools in Australia, Howard & Johnson (2004) found protective factors and processes that contributed to teachers' resilience included "a sense of agency, a strong support group (including a competent and caring leadership team), pride in achievements and competence in areas of personal importance" (p. 415). A teacher's ability to select appropriate coping mechanisms can enhance his/her resilience (Bobek, 2002).

Beltman et al. (2011) found common professional attributes among resilient teachers. Resilient teachers seek out professional development, stay focused on the students, and have a "do whatever it takes" mindset (Beltman et al., 2011; Patterson et al., 2004). Resilient teachers have significant supportive relationships – professional and/or personal (Beltman et al., 2011). Additionally, Tait (2008) states that teachers "need resources, time, professional development opportunities, materials, caring collegial relationships, high expectations on the part of school

leaders, and opportunities for shared decision-making and planning" (p.5 9). When these are provided, teachers can better cope with high stress working conditions (Tait, 2008).

Leading in Times of Crisis

Teachers are not the only ones dealing with unprecedented challenges and stressors. School administrators often bore the brunt of conflicts over controversial decisions dealing with COVID-19 protocols, including mask mandates, quarantines, and vaccines (Ujifusa, 2021a). Administrators are also the ones making difficult decisions about allocating resources amidst shortages (Ujifusa, 2021a). A nationally representative study of 1,686 secondary principals' well-being by the RAND Corporation reported the top three stressors for participants: (1) supporting the well-being of teachers and the social and emotional learning of students; (2) managing pandemic-related conditions; (3) administrative duties (Woo & Steiner, 2022). Additionally, "principals expressed that they had to manage confusing, unclear, or changing guidance from district leadership while balancing multiple administrative responsibilities and communicating to parents amid ever-changing pandemic conditions" (p. 7). The stressors are impacting principal well-being. Four out of five secondary principals reported experiencing frequent job-related stress (Woo & Steiner, 2022). Seventy-two percent of principals reported that burnout associated with job-related stress is a moderate or major concern (Kaufman et al., 2021).

Principals are also dealing with an intense political climate, hostile exchanges with parents, and declining community trust and support (DeMatthews, 2021; Gramlich, 2022; Superville, 2022). In Arizona, three men attempted to arrest a principal with zip ties because of a dispute over COVID-19 rules (DeMatthews, 2021). A high school principal in Texas was placed on administrative leave and subsequently nonrenewed by the school board following community complaints "alleging the 'implementation of critical race theory' and 'extreme views on race'"

(DeMatthews, 2021, para. 11). A 2021 study conducted by the Pew Research Center found only 52% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents say they have "a great deal or fair amount of confidence in K-12 public school principals to act in the public's best interests" (Gramlich, 2022, para. 2). This is a decrease from the 79% of Republicans who reported having a great deal or fair amount of confidence in principals in a survey conducted in April 2020 (Gramlich, 2022). Democrats and Democrat-leaning independents have also shown a decrease in confidence in school principals; 76% of Democrats say they have "a great deal or fair amount of confidence in principals" (para. 4), a drop from 87% in April 2020. The growing sense of distrust is not limited to school principals; 57% of Republicans said "K-12 public schools were having a negative effect on the way things were going in the country" (Gramlich, 2022, para. 6). Conversely, 77% of Democrats said schools were having a *positive* effect. The same survey found a decline in trust in a variety of societal institutions, particularly among Republicans (Gramlich, 2022; Superville, 2022).

Several scholars have found that one of the top three stressors reported by principals was supporting teacher well-being; research shows that a strong support group is linked to resilience and teacher burnout is often seen as an organizational problem rooted in the culture of the school (Elias, 2012; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Woo & Steiner, 2022). However, in a nationally representative survey by the Education Week Research Center, 42% of teachers reported their administrators had not made any efforts to help relieve their stress; about 20% reported their administrators tried but also stressed the efforts did not help (Will, 2021). Teachers reported additional planning time, reduced class sizes, reduction of required tasks, or fewer meetings would help relieve stress. However, instead, many districts offered programming that encouraged self-care, which only 11% of teachers considered helpful (Will, 2021).

Elementary School Challenges During COVID-19

While all schools have faced unprecedented challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, elementary schools have faced unique challenges due to the young children they serve. Emerging research suggests that early childhood educators had health concerns related to working during the pandemic and faced additional challenges with online instruction and COVID protocols. Childcare centers and schools across the country prioritized the youngest learners for in-person learning in part because of the challenges children faced learning online and also because of childcare needs for parents (Shapiro & Taylor, 2020). As a result, many early childhood teachers found themselves in a new role of providing services as essential workers and faced a fear of a serious contagious illness (Crawford et al., 2021).

In a national survey of 215 early childhood educators, Pettit (2020) reported that fear of becoming sick as a result of exposure at work was a common theme for participants. In addition to personal health concerns, educators also feared bringing home the virus to their families. Crawford et al. (2021) surveyed 2,382 early childhood educators in Texas and found 33% of survey respondents were concerned about their families' physical well-being and safety. These concerns were compounded by the fact that children 5- to 11 years old were not even eligible for a vaccine until November 2, 2021, prolonging the time educators worked in an increased-risk environment (Prothero, 2021).

In addition to health and safety concerns, early childhood educators also faced unique challenges in educating young students online. As Robinson et al. (2022) stated, "remote learning was particularly challenging in elementary schools for various reasons – some children lacked sufficient internet or computer access and struggled with video chat fatigue" (para. 2). In a nationally representative survey of 2,862 general education teachers, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) found teachers of students in kindergarten through second grade

were more likely to have students who had trouble using technology to participate in learning, compared to teachers in other grades (U.S. GAO, 2022). In some instances, early childhood educators were responsible for both face-to-face and virtual instruction, a task that teachers felt prevented them from fully supporting their students (Crawford et al., 2021).

When young students did return to in-person learning, childcare directors and school districts were faced with the challenge of maintaining quality instruction and interactions while navigating COVID protocols, such as masks and social distancing. In Pettit's (2020) survey of early childhood educators, teachers expressed concern about how to facilitate play-based learning while also keeping children distanced from one another. Respondents in the study conducted by Crawford et al. (2021) reported that new health protocols had changed their job responsibilities and increased their workload.

The COVID-19 pandemic as a crisis has impacted schools across the country, with elementary schools facing unique challenges. Teachers were and are reporting high levels of stress and burnout. Schools are experiencing staffing shortages and a heated political climate is impacting their ability to educate students (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2022). As an emerging phenomenon, there is little research telling the stories of elementary school educators on the frontline during the COVID-19 crisis. There is also little research exploring how school leaders' decisions have impacted teacher experiences during the crisis.

Purpose

Given the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on educator stress and burnout, the purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of elementary educators (teachers and campus leaders) who worked (and in many cases, continue to work) during a global pandemic during the 2019-20, 2020-21, and 2021-22 school years, and to examine how leadership practices affected

teachers' experiences and perceptions of their work during this complex time. Accordingly, the study was guided by three broad questions:

1. How do teachers and leaders characterize their work and related challenges during the period from March 2020 through the summer of 2022?
2. What factors influenced elementary teachers' professional experiences and perceptions of their work during the 2019-20 through 2021-22 school years?
3. What factors influenced elementary school leaders' professional experiences and perceptions of their work during the 2019-20 through 2021-22 school years? What facilitated or constrained them in supporting/working with their teachers as they wanted?

In the next chapter, I explore these issues by first presenting an overview of the research around burnout, resilience, and crisis leadership. Then, in chapter three, I outline the methods used in the study.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Teaching is considered a high-stress profession and at a higher risk for burnout because of the emotional challenges of working intensely with other people (Davidson, 2009; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Huberman, 1993; Kyriacou, 2001; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Maslach et al., 2001). While some estimates suggest that nearly half of new teachers will leave teaching in the first five years, those who remain teachers stay despite the challenges (Kim et al., 2021; Madigan & Kim, 2021). Resilient teachers can achieve school goals, even in the face of challenging conditions (Patterson et al., 2004). School leadership practices can serve as protective factors for teachers by creating a climate of support. To better understand the impact of COVID-19 on teacher burnout and resiliency, we first need to understand the concepts of burnout, resilience, and crisis leadership. This chapter provides context for the study by exploring the literature on burnout, resilience, and leading in times of crisis.

Burnout

Burnout is not a new phenomenon or concept; Freudenberger (1974) began writing about the concept of burnout in the 1970s. Freudenberger (1974) stated that staff members who have excessive demands on their energy, strength, or resources may burn out, or "fail, wear out, or become exhausted" (p. 159). While burnout is not a new phenomenon, the impacts of COVID-19 may have increased levels of burnout for teachers. In a study of 359 teachers across the United States, Pressley (2021) found COVID anxiety to be a significant predictor of teacher burnout; COVID anxiety was measured by a five-question survey that asked participants to rate how often they experienced stress and anxiety due to COVID-19. This section will explore modern definitions of burnout, the prevalence of burnout in the teaching profession, and the causes and consequences of teacher burnout.

Conceptualizing Burnout

Stress is a negative feeling, or emotional state, resulting from work that may involve anger, tension, frustration, or depression (Howard & Johnson, 2004). Demerouti et al. (2001) define stress as a "disruption of the equilibrium of the cognitive-emotional-environmental system by external factors" (p. 501). Stress at work results from a mismatch between the demands and an individual's capacity to meet those demands (Kyriacou, 2001). When these workplace stressors become chronic, they can lead to burnout (Van Droogenbroek et al., 2021; Howard & Johnson, 2004). Saloviita and Pakarinen (2001) state the transition from stress to burnout gradually develops when work becomes unpleasant, unfulfilling, and unrewarding.

Definitions of burnout vary in the literature. Maslach & Leiter (2016) define burnout as a "psychological syndrome emerging as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job" (p. 103). Davidson (2009) distinguishes burnout as "job-related stress that inhibits the person's capacity to function effectively because the body's resources for resisting stress have become exhausted" (p. 47). Huberman (1993) defines burnout as "a state of exhaustion, physical, affective, and cognitive altogether, that strikes individuals involved for a long time in situations that exact a heavy emotional toll" (p. 51).

While definitions of burnout vary, there are three agreed-upon components of burnout: (a) emotional exhaustion; (b) depersonalization; and (c) reduced personal accomplishment (Van Droogenbroek et al., 2021; Huberman, 1993; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Maslach et al., 2001; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

Emotional exhaustion is also referred to as affective exhaustion (Huberman, 1993) and is the central aspect of burnout (Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021). This symptom of burnout is characterized by feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted (Madigan & Kim, 2021). Teachers experiencing emotional exhaustion may feel fatigued, overextended, and

drained of emotional energy (Van Droogenbroek et al., 2021). When stress reaches the point of emotional exhaustion, individuals may feel depleted of their emotional and physical resources (Maslach et al., 2001).

The second component of burnout is *depersonalization*. Depersonalization is characterized by feelings of indifference and impersonal attitudes toward other people (Van Droogenbroek et al., 2021). Depersonalization is a feeling of cynicism and detachment from work (Maslach et al., 2001). Teachers experiencing burnout may develop negative or indifferent attitudes toward students or colleagues (Madigan & Kim, 2021; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

The final component of burnout is *reduced personal accomplishment*, also referred to as reduced efficacy (Madigan & Kim, 2021). Reduced efficacy is characterized by feelings of incompetence at work and negative views regarding work achievements (Van Droogenbroek et al., 2021; Maslach et al., 2001). Individuals experiencing burnout may feel that they are no longer competent and/or successful at their work regardless of their accomplishments (Madigan & Kim, 2021; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

Burnout in the Teaching Profession

While burnout can occur in any profession, teachers are particularly at risk of job stress and burnout (Howard & Johnson, 2004; Maslach et al., 2001). The teaching profession, along with other human service professions, is more at risk for burnout because of the emotional challenges of working intensely with other people (Davidson, 2009; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Huberman, 1993; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Maslach et al., 2001). Teaching is considered a high-stress profession, with about 25% percent of teachers regarding the job as “very or extremely stressful” (Kyriacou, 2001). Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2017) define teacher burnout as an erosion of engagement that results from long-term occupational stress. Madigan and Kim (2021) differentiate between teachers who have grown dissatisfied with the profession and teachers

experiencing burnout; dissatisfied teachers no longer like their job, whereas burnt-out teachers no longer feel capable of performing the job adequately.

Causes of Teacher Stress

Huberman (1993) states that "burnout often takes place at the intersect between private life and classroom life" (p. 55). For teachers, one cause of stress may be individual factors, also referred to as individual fragility (Huberman, 1993). Demerouti et al. (2001) propose the Job Demands-Resources model (JD-R), which states that the development of burnout follows two processes: (a) demanding aspects of work lead to exhaustion and (b) a lack of resources makes it challenging to meet job demands which lead to disengagement. According to the model, job stress occurs when the demands have exceeded an individual's resources (Demerouti et al., 2001; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021). This section will examine teacher stressors in three main categories: (a) individual fragility, (b) job resources, and (c) job demands.

Individual Fragility. Individual fragility encompasses individual factors that may make someone more susceptible to stress and burnout (Huberman, 1993). These individual factors include status issues, difficulty asking for help, and an inability to cope with change (Beltman et al., 2011; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Kyriacou, 2001).

Efficacy, or a teacher's confidence in their ability, both individually and collectively, to influence student performance, has also been found to impact teacher stress and burnout (Beltman et al., 2011; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Kyriacou, 2001; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021). In their 2021 quantitative study of 4,567 Finnish primary school teachers, Saloviita and Pakarinen found a positive relationship between teachers' self-efficacy and student learning; conversely, lower self-efficacy is associated with higher burnout and stress.

Saloviita and Pakarinen (2021) studied demographic variables concerning teacher burnout and found associations between gender and age with emotional exhaustion. Female

teachers report lower levels of personal accomplishment, while male teachers express higher levels of depersonalization; additionally, female teachers are more often exhausted than males. While older teachers are often more exhausted than younger teachers, younger teachers sometimes report higher levels of emotional exhaustion than their experienced counterparts (Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021).

Finally, value dissonance is another individual fragility factor for teacher burnout. Value dissonance occurs when teachers do not feel they share the prevailing norms, values, and practices at the school where they teach (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). A teacher's relationship with their school may suffer as a result of this perceived contradiction between personal beliefs and practices being used, and this may give the teacher a sense of not belonging (Beltman et al., 2011; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

Job Resources. Job resources are defined as "physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that do any of the following: (a) be functional in achieving work goals, (b) reduce job demands at the associated physiological and psychological costs, (c) stimulate personal growth and development" (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 501). Burnout occurs when job demands exceed an individual's resources; when resources are lacking individuals cannot cope with the negative influences of the demands (Demerouti et al., 2001; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021). Teacher burnout is related to the quality of the social interactions occurring within a school community (Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021). A lack of social support from colleagues and administrators may increase teacher stress (Beltman et al., 2011; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Huberman, 1993; Kyriacou, 2001; Maslach et al., 2001; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2001). Additionally, relationships with students and parents can impact teacher stress; positive relationships with students are associated with lower emotional exhaustion, higher work enthusiasm, and increased job satisfaction (Beltman et al., 2011; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2001).

Another social support resource that impacts teacher stress is the presence of, and relationship with, a mentor (Beltman et al., 2011).

Role ambiguity, or the lack of adequate information to do the job well, can lead to teacher burnout (Howard & Johnson, 2004; Huberman, 1993; Kyriacou, 2001; Maslach et al., 2001). A lack of quality professional development, curriculum resources, material resources, and feedback all impact teacher stress and teacher efficacy (Beltman et al., 2011; Huberman, 1993; Maslach et al., 2001; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021).

At the school contextual level, a lack of participation in decision-making adds to teacher stress (Huberman, 1993; Maslach et al., 2001; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021). Additional professional work challenges that impact teacher stress includes evaluations, both formal from administrators and informal from colleagues, lack of recognition, disorganized leadership staff, and a low salary (Beltman et al., 2011; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Huberman, 1993; Kyriacou, 2001).

Job Demands. According to Demerouti et al. (2001), job demands are the "physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs" (p. 501). Schools are complex environments and consequently, job demands encompass both individual and school-level aspects. Job demands specific to teaching include time pressure and work overload (Beltman et al., 2011; Davidson, 2009; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Kyriacou, 2001; Maslach et al., 2001; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021). Increased demands on teachers have created a work situation with insufficient time for rest and recovery; work overload is associated with emotional exhaustion (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Kim, Oxley, and Asbury (2021) found that while the workload has been a chronic problem for teachers, COVID-19 resulted in an increase in workload for some teachers during 2020. Additionally, role conflict – or the conflicting demands

that must be met – increases teacher stress (Howard & Johnson, 2004; Huberman, 1993; Kyriacou, 2001; Maslach et al., 2001).

At the classroom level, there are a multitude of variables/demands that can negatively impact teacher stress. Classroom management and/or discipline and student behavior are significant factors related to teacher burnout (Beltman et al., 2011; Davidson, 2009; Friedman, 1995; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Huberman, 1993; Kyriacou, 2001). Managing student behavior requires a lot of time, effort, and energy for teachers; even anticipating disruptive behavior may leave a teacher feeling uneasy and on high alert all the time (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). When teachers are unable to regulate student behavior, they may experience a feeling of defeat and lack of authority, which may trigger a major stress reaction (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Teaching students who lack motivation may be interpreted as a failure on the teacher's part to motivate students, which can lead to reduced self-efficacy for teaching and can impact teacher burnout (Howard & Johnson, 2004; Kyriacou, 2001; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

Friedman's (1995) study examined the relationship between three student behavior patterns and teacher burnout; the three student behavior patterns examined were disrespect, sociability, and attentiveness. Friedman found that, generally, student disrespect was the behavior pattern that best predicted burnout in teachers (1995). Friedman's study also suggests teacher gender may determine which behavior patterns contribute to teacher burnout; male teachers' burnout was significantly affected solely by student attentiveness, while female teachers' burnout was significantly affected solely by disrespect.

In addition to student behavior, class size and student support needs may impact teacher stress levels (Beltman et al., 2011; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021). Saloviita and Pakarinen (2021) found that "increased student heterogeneity in the classroom may … have negative consequences for teachers" (p. 3). However, these consequences can be mitigated through additional inclusion

supports for teachers (Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021).

Teaching demands extend beyond the walls of the classroom. External regulations, such as demands related to legislation involving standardized testing and accountability, can impact teacher stress (Beltman et al., 2011; Davidson, 2009). Negative perceptions of the teaching profession in the media can also harm teachers' emotional well-being and lead to teachers feeling undervalued by society (Kim et al., 2021).

Consequences of Teacher Stress

Teacher burnout occurs when the demands exceed the available resources (Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021). In teaching there sometimes exists a discrepancy between investment and reward; as Huberman (1993) stated, "persons who continue to devote themselves on a grand scale to a relatively thankless task or in any case that provides little recognition in return in the end break" (p. 52). Teacher burnout has negative consequences at the individual teacher, student, organizational, and societal levels (Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021). This section will explore the negative consequences of teacher stress and burnout at various levels.

When teachers are experiencing high levels of stress and burnout, they may experience impaired physical and mental health; exhaustion is predictive of stress-related health outcomes (Van Droogenbroek et al., 2021; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Maslach et al., 2001; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2001). Stressed teachers may be more easily irritated, more rapidly exhausted, and experience feelings of being drained (Huberman, 1993; Madigan & Kim, 2021). They may have reduced self-confidence and self-esteem, reduced motivation, lowered satisfaction, and be less attentive to their work (Van Droogenbroek et al., 2021; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Huberman, 1993; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Maslach et al., 2001; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021). Stressed teachers may feel detached and begin to withdraw; depersonalization can increase interpersonal conflict and damage personal relationships (Howard & Johnson, 2004;

Huberman, 1993; Madigan & Kim, 2021).

Stressed teachers are likely to be less effective in key areas of their jobs, which can negatively impact students (Howard & Johnson, 2004). When teachers have depleted resources and drained emotions, they may be less effective in lesson organization, classroom management, and teaching performance (Van Droogenbroek et al., 2021; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021). Saloviita and Pakarinen (2021) found that teacher burnout has been shown to have a considerable detrimental impact on both student achievement and burnout. Stressed teachers may be more cynical and critical toward students and less responsive (Howard & Johnson, 2004; Huberman, 1993). Depersonalization, a component of burnout, is likely to increase interpersonal conflict with students and teachers may rely on withdrawal and avoidant coping mechanisms (Madigan & Kim, 2021).

At the organizational level, depersonalization can also increase interpersonal conflict between members of the staff; teachers may withdraw to minimize conflict (Madigan & Kim, 2021; Maslach et al., 2001). Teacher stress is also linked with high absenteeism (Madigan & Kim, 2021; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021). Finally, teacher burnout can lead to premature retirement and resignation (Howard & Johnson, 2004; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021).

According to some estimates, nearly half of newly hired teachers are leaving the profession within five years (Kim et al., 2021; Madigan & Kim, 2021). However, recent studies have found this estimate may be exaggerated or inaccurate. Gray and Taie (2015) conducted a longitudinal study following 1,990 first-year public school pre-kindergarten through 12th-grade teachers across the United States and found that after five years, 17% of new teachers had left the teaching profession.

While studies may be inconclusive on the percentage of teachers leaving the field, a 2021 study by Madigan and Kim focused on teachers' reported intentions to quit the profession. Their

study found teacher burnout to be linked to the extent to which teachers are likely to quit. All three components of burnout (exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced accomplishment) were implicated in teacher intentions to quit; emotional exhaustion contributed to the majority of variance in the prediction of intentions to quit (Madigan & Kim, 2021). Additionally, the correlation between burnout and intentions to quit appears to be getting stronger over time (Madigan & Kim, 2021).

Resilience

Madigan and Kim (2021) state that policymakers and school leaders must be "aware of potential sources of burnout and how to help teachers who experience it" (p. 10). Rodman et al. (2020), state "there are distinct differences between continuously recharging for survival and authentically recovering for self-care. Until schools fully attend to adults' social-emotional needs – parallel to those of students – educators will continue to engage in superficial recharge activities, and turnover will persist" (p. 6). This section examines resilience theory, resilience in educators, and implications of resilience research for school leaders.

Conceptualizing Resilience

Masten (2011) defines resilience as "the capacity of a dynamic system to withstand or recover from significant challenges that threaten its stability, viability, or development" (p. 494). Luthar et al. (2000) define resilience as a "dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (p. 543). There are two sets of criteria required to infer resilience: positive adaptation and adversity (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Masten, 2001; Masten & Tellegen, 2012, Toland & Carrigan, 2011). Positive, or successful, adaptation occurs despite obstacles, challenging circumstances, or environmental stressors (Beltman et al., 2011; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Oswald et al., 2003; Toland & Carrigan, 2011).

Resilience requires the presence of a risk factor; there must be exposure to a significant

threat or severe adversity for resilience to be inferred (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Masten, 2001). Masten (2001) defines a threat as "current or past hazards judged to have the potential to derail normative development" (p. 228). A positive outcome or positive adjustment alone is not enough to infer resilience, there must be a demonstrable risk (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Masten, 2001).

The second component of resilience, positive adaptation, is also defined as the capacity to overcome difficulties and the ability to maintain well-being during times of stress (Beltman et al., 2011; Brunetti, 2006; Oswald et al., 2003; Tait 2008). Resilience is not a personality characteristic, but the outcome of dynamic processes that enable individuals to not just manage adversity, but to bounce back or recover quickly and efficiently, to persevere, and to thrive (Beltman et al., 2011; Brunetti, 2006; Oswald et al., 2003; Sammons et al., 2007; Toland & Carrigan, 2011).

There are some misconceptions regarding resilience. According to Fergus and Zimmerman (2005), "resilience is sometimes confused with positive adjustment, coping, or competence" (p. 401); positive adjustment is an outcome of resilience and competence is an asset that can be a vital part of a resilient process (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Resilience is not a static trait or innate quality, but rather a construct that is relative, developmental, and dynamic; resilience is defined by the context, the population, the risk, the promotive factor, and the outcome (Ferguson & Zimmerman, 2005; Gu & Day, 2007). Furthermore, someone may be resilient in the face of one type of risk, but incapable of overcoming risks in a different context (Ferguson & Zimmerman, 2005).

A relatively small set of global factors are consistently associated with resilience; these factors represent fundamental adaptive systems that promote and protect human development (Masten 2001; Masten & Tellegen, 2012). A factor may be considered a risk exposure or a

promotive factor, depending on the nature of the factor and the degree of exposure to it (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Promotive factors may either be assets or resources; these factors will be explored further in the following section (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005).

Promotive Factors

Promotive factors buffer the negative effects of risk factors or stressors (Bobek, 2002). Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) differentiate promotive factors as *assets* or *resources*; *assets* are positive factors that reside within the individual, while *resources* are external positive factors. Sumsion (2003) adds a third category for factors associated with resilience: *person-environment interactional processes*, or the contributions by individuals to create the supportive communities that subsequently serve as an external resource for that individual.

Assets, or the individual positive factors that promote resilience, can be traced back to other fundamental adaptive systems, such as mastery motivation, cognitive systems associated with problem-solving and executive function, and religious or spiritual systems (Masten & Tellegen, 2012). Specifically, some of the individual assets that promote resilience include cognitive and self-regulation skills, motivation, and coping strategies (Beltman et al., 2011; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Masten, 2001; Sumsion, 2003). Additional personal attributes that can act as resilience assets are an internal locus of control, determination, interpersonal awareness, and problem-solving skills (Bobek, 2002; Gu & Day, 2007; Sumsion, 2003).

Bobek (2002) identified a sense of personal responsibility, social skills, a sense of competence, expectations, goals, confidence, a sense of humor, and a sense of accomplishment as personal characteristics that are important in the development of resilience. Self-efficacy, or confidence in oneself, is a characteristic of a resilient person (Beltman, 2011; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Masten, 2001; Sumsion, 2003; Tait, 2008). Tait (2008) underscores the importance of self-efficacy in resilience by stating, “whereas highly resilient individuals are

reactive to stressful situations, highly efficacious people are proactive" (p. 59).

While these individual assets are critical promoting factors for resilience, resilience is a multidimensional, socially constructed concept (Gu & Day, 2007). Resources, or external promotive factors, emphasize the social-environmental influences (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Rooted in attachment systems, resilience theory posits that reciprocal, mutually supportive relationships, such as supportive colleagues, connections to competent and caring individuals, effective support systems, positive family experiences, or significant relationships, are important in the development of resilience (Beltman et al., 2011; Bobek, 2002; Masten, 2001; Masten & Tellegen, 2012; Sumsion, 2003).

Gu and Day (2007) state that "the capacity to be resilient in different negative circumstances, whether these be connected to personal or professional factors, can be enhanced or inhibited by the nature of the settings in which we work, the people with whom we work and the strength of our beliefs or aspirations" (p. 1305). The following sections will explore the literature on resilience in teachers and the implications of resilience theory for school leaders.

Resilience in Teachers

Teacher resilience is a result of interactions between teachers and their environments over time (Beltman et al., 201). Brunetti (2006) defines teacher resilience as "a quality that enables teachers to maintain their commitment to teaching and their teaching practices despite challenging conditions and recurring setbacks" (p. 813). Patterson et al. (2004) state that resilient teachers can achieve school goals, even in the face of adverse conditions. Bobek (2002) defines teacher resilience as "the ability to adjust to varied situations and increase one's competence in the face of adverse conditions" (p. 202). Sumsion (2003) defines teacher resilience as "the ability to continue to find deep and sustaining personal and professional satisfaction in one's work as an early childhood educator despite the presence of multiple adverse factors and circumstances that

have led many to leave the field" (p. 143). It is crucial to remember that resilience is a dynamic concept; a teacher could exhibit resilience in one situation or during one stage of their career or life, but not in another (Gu & Day, 2007).

Gu and Day (2007) cite three reasons for the importance of resilience in teaching: (a) as role models, teachers need to demonstrate resilient qualities if they are to expect students to be resilient; (b) a shift in focus from teacher burnout to resilience provides a promising approach for understanding teacher motivation and commitment in an "age of diversity and sustainability" (p. 1302); and (c) resilience is tied to a strong sense of self-efficacy and motivation, which promotes student achievement. Teacher resilience is a critical element in both student achievement and teacher retention (Bobek, 2002). Students who have committed and resilient teachers are likely to have higher achievement than students of teachers who are not committed or are burnt out (Sammons et al., 2007).

An inference of resilience is dependent on the presence of positive adaptation and exposure to adversity (Masten, 2001). Adverse situations are the catalyst for the creation of resilience; the development of resilience is a process that occurs over time (Bobek, 2002). Teachers' capacities to be resilient are influenced by key influencing factors, including teacher identities and promotive factors (personal, professional, and situated) (Gu & Day, 2007; Sammons et al., 2007).

A teacher's resilience is enhanced when he or she can assess adverse situations and select appropriate coping mechanisms (Bobek, 2002). Some studies have looked at the coping mechanisms teachers select when attempting to cope with stress and burnout related to teaching (Howard & Johnson, 2004; Huberman, 2993; Kyriacou, 2001). Howard and Johnson (2004) state that "palliative techniques do not deal with the source of the stress but are rather aimed at reducing the impact of the stressor" (p. 401). These techniques include mental strategies, such as

changing perspectives, and physical strategies, such as trying to relax after work or having a healthy home life (Howard & Johnson, 2004; Kyriacou, 2001). Direct action techniques are attempts to eliminate the source of the stress (Howard & Johnson, 2004; Kyriacou, 2001). The first step is gaining a clear idea of the source of the stress and then taking some form of action, such as seeking support from colleagues/ principals, developing new knowledge, skills, or practices, reorganizing priorities, and increasing competence (Howard & Johnson, 2004; Kyriacou, 2001). Additionally, teachers attempting to cope with burnout may take a leave of absence (Huberman, 1993).

Coping skills comprise one of the individual protective factors of resilient teachers; other factors include a strong intrinsic motivation for teaching, tenacity, a positive attitude, flexibility, and a willingness to take risks (Beltman et al., 2011). Self-efficacy, which involves a sense of competence, pride, and confidence, increases with experience and appears to be the most easily impacted in the early years of teaching experience (Beltman et al., 2011). Additional individual protective factors of resilient teachers include a high level of interpersonal skills, qualifications, and teaching skills (Beltman et al., 2011).

Patterson et al. (2004) found commonalities among the strategies used by resilient teachers working in complex urban schools. Additionally, Beltman et al. (2011) found common teaching skills and professional attributes among resilient teachers. Resilient teachers seek out professional development, they are professionally proactive (Beltman et al., 2011; Patterson et al., 2004). Resilient teachers make decisions based on a set of personal values, they are reflective, and have professional aspirations (Beltman et al., 2011; Patterson et al., 2004). These teachers stay focused on the students, are skilled in a range of instructional practices, are creative and open to exploring new teaching ideas, and have a “do whatever it takes” mindset (Beltman et al., 2011; Patterson et al., 2004).

Resilience is not a static personality characteristic, but rather a dynamic process that includes contextual protective factors (Tait, 2008; Toland & Carrigan, 2011). Resilient teachers have significant relationships that support their work emotionally and intellectually (Beltman et al., 2011; Patterson et al., 2004). These supportive relationships can include school and administration support, mentor support, support of peers and colleagues, and support of family and friends (Beltman et al., 2011; Patterson et al., 204; Tait, 2008). Furthermore, Tait (2008) found that teachers need resources, time, professional development materials, high expectations from school administrators, and chances for collaborative decision-making to be protected against the impact of risk factors.

Beltman et al. (2011) examined the relationship between risk and protective factors and found that the presence or absence of positive experiences had a stronger impact on teacher efficacy than negative experiences. This finding has significant implications for school leaders: removing negative experiences is not sufficient to increase teachers' commitment and effectiveness, leaders need to also focus on providing positive experiences as they are far more influential (Beltman et al., 2011).

Implications for School Leaders of Teacher Resilience Research

Patterson et al. (2004) addressed the need for a paradigm shift:

> Educational leaders have searched for the antidote for teacher burnout by focusing on a variety of organizational and instructional factors such as career ladders, and schools within schools, curriculum initiatives, flexible scheduling and team teaching. Although any of these factors may be good for the school as a whole, they may also contribute to individual teacher burnout. In fact, a study by Dworkin confirmed what teachers already knew: each new wave of reform exacerbates teacher burnout for some teachers. (p. 4)

Rather than focusing solely on curriculum-related, teaching, and role matters, schools need to ensure professional development is relevant to the health needs of teachers, and efforts to support or enhance teacher quality should also focus on building, sustaining, and retaining teacher commitment and resilience (Sammons et al., 2007).

At the individual level, schools can offer professional development programs designed to provide teachers with the skills to identify early signs of burnout and teach coping strategies (Madigan & Kim, 2021). Additionally, helping teachers gain competence in the subjects they teach can help bolster self-efficacy, which is critical for promoting resilience (Bobek, 2002). Recognizing teacher success can also add to a teacher's sense of accomplishment (Bobek, 2002). Schools should also provide ways for teachers to experience advancement (Bobek, 2002).

At the contextual level, schools can create a climate of personal and professional support by involving teachers in decision-making, having teachers participate in meaningful roles in matters of curriculum and instruction, and encouraging shared responsibility and participation (Bobek, 2002; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Patterson et al., 2004). Mentor/mentee relationships, strong administrative support, high expectations for success, and positive relationships between parents and teachers can also promote resilience (Bobek, 2002; Patterson et al., 2004). In a nationwide survey of 335 teachers, Marshall et al. (2022) found a positive relationship between teacher autonomy and a teacher's intention to remain at their school. They reported that "school leaders should find ways to give teachers additional space to do their professional work" (Marshall et al., 2022, p. 16). Finding ways to promote resiliency amongst staff is critical for helping teachers withstand or recover from the significant challenges of working in schools during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Challenges of Leading During Crises

There are many different types of crises that can impact a community or country - natural disasters, wars, and pandemics are a few examples. Smith and Riley (2012) define a crisis as a low-probability, high-impact event that requires immediate action by the organization (p. 58). Crises can seriously impact an organization's performance and can result in the breakdown of an existing framework, generating negative outcomes (Boin et al., 2010; Smith & Riley, 2012). There is ambiguity in the causes, effects, and means of resolutions for crises; however, there is a common belief that crises are urgent situations requiring decisive action (Smith & Riley, 20120).

The literature also refers to these events as disasters. Mutch (2015) defines disasters as the "consequences of events triggered by natural hazards or human interventions that overwhelm the ability of local response services to manage or contain the impacts" (p. 187). These large-scale events are sudden, unexpected, and cause a major disruption to the functioning of society (Mutch, 2014; Mutch, 2015; Winkworth, 2007). In 1992, the United Nations recognized that for an event to be a disaster, it must overwhelm the response services of a community (Winkworth, 2007). Thus, a disaster is inherently defined by its relationship to the community and represents the collective stress occurring at the community level (Winkworth, 2007). Disasters cause widespread damage, loss, harm, and distress in a multitude of ways (Mutch, 2014; Mutch 2015; Winkworth, 2007).

In this chapter, I will refer to these events as *crises*. While crises vary in causes, effects, and means of resolution, there are five features common to most crises (Smith & Riley, 2012). First, crises involve a wide range of stakeholders. Second, they are characterized by time pressures that require immediate or urgent action. Third, there is usually minimal warning to the organization and so (fourth) crises create a significant threat to the organization's goals. Fifth and finally, there is a high degree of ambiguity among the causes and effects of a crisis.

Jimerson et al. (2005) suggest a crisis event has five phases: (1) pre-impact; (2) impact; (3) recoil; (4) post-impact; (5) recovery and reconstruction. Pre-impact is the time leading up to a crisis, the impact is during the crisis, and recoil is the time immediately following the event. Post-impact takes place during the days and weeks following the event, while recovery and reconstruction are the months and years following.

Pepper et al. (2010) categorize crises into four groupings: (a) external-unpredictable; (b) internal-unpredictable; (c) internal-predictable; (d) external-predictable. A crisis can originate from inside a school's immediate community or externally; the school's community includes students, families, teachers, and community groups dedicated to the school, such as a parent-teacher association. Predictable crises have early warning signs that allow a leader to prepare or attempt some mitigation efforts. *External-unpredictable* crises have no warning indicators and originate from outside the community, these include crises like terrorist attacks or natural disasters. *Internal-unpredictable* crises are also lacking in warning indicators but originate from inside a school, such as student violence, student threats, or a sudden demographic transition. *Internal-predictable* crises originate from within a school and have early warning signs, these include crises like faculty turnover, major facility problems, or leadership retirement. Finally, *external-predictable* crises have early warning signs and originate from outside the local school community, such as massive budget cuts, demographic zoning shifts, accountability pressures/changes, or an immigrant influx.

Smith and Riley (2012) propose a different typology for school-based crises; they suggest five types of crises: (a) short-term; (b) cathartic; (c) long-term; (d) one-off; and (e) infectious. *Short-term crises* are sudden in both arrival and conclusion, while *cathartic crises* gradually build up to a critical point, but are swiftly resolved (Brion, 2021; Smith & Riley 2012). In schools, a short-term crisis may be the sudden resignation of a leader. A cathartic crisis may

include the implementation of No Child Left Behind or Common Core standards (Price, 2015). *A long-term crisis* develops slowly and can continue at a critical point for a long time without a clear resolution, such as the progression of a "failing school" (Smith & Riley, 2012). *One-off crises* are unique events that are unlikely to recur, such as the sudden death of a student, a school shooting, or a bomb threat (Smith & Riley, 2012*). Infectious crises* appear to have a quick resolution, but they leave behind significant issues that can develop into crises of their own (Brion, 2021; Smith & Riley, 2012). COVID-19 would be considered an infectious crisis because of the lingering economic, social, psychological, emotional, and global damaging effects (Brion, 2021).

In the school context, Smith and Riley (2012) define a crisis as "any urgent situation that requires the school leader to take fast and decisive action" (p. 58). A crisis is different from the normal recurring challenges but is a situation that disrupts the education process (Brion, 2021; Smith & Riley, 2012). Pepper et al. (2010) propose a three-part unified theory of crisis within education: (1) a school crisis threatens a school's core values or foundational practices; (2) while a crisis is obvious in its manifestation, it is the result of complex or unclear circumstances; (3) a school crisis requires urgent decision making (p. 6-8).

Smith and Riley (2012) contend that a crisis inevitably occurs in all schools. Pepper et al. (2010) state "one of the few commonalities in crisis research is that organizational systems built almost entirely around humans (and particularly humans lacking a common unifying vision or purpose) create an environment ripe for crisis" (p. 4). School crises are especially important as they include the "children that the society is responsible for protecting" (Brion, 2021, p. 33).

Although there is little research on disaster recovery specific to schools, the literature does suggest that traumas, both large and small, can leave a substantial impact on both schools and their surrounding communities (Mutch, 2015, p. 188). Researchers have studied the impacts

of disasters on individuals, communities, and the social environment; the difficulties and distress encountered by individuals during the recovery and rebuilding phase are often equal to or greater than those experienced during the actual event (Winkworth, 2007). There is a magnitude of individual effects, including adverse mental health outcomes, all of which can have ripple effects on the community (Winkworth, 2007).

In the immediate aftermath of a crisis, communities often experience an increase in mutual assistance and solidarity. However, this unity is temporary; the post-crisis phase in Western societies is often characterized by intense politicization (Boin et al., 2010; Winkworth, 2007). During these later phases, there is a general lack of concern for others, feelings of neglect by authorities, and drama around issues of accountability (Boin et al., 2010; Winkworth, 2007). In this sense, a crisis creates opportunities for individuals to challenge the status quo (Boin et al., 2010).

Crisis Management

Mayer et al. (2008) outline a three-phased strategy for crisis management: prevent, respond, and recover. In this section, I will explore the different phases, offer a critique of the linear model, and discuss recovery implications for schools.

The first phase of crisis management is *prevention*; while it is impossible to prevent many crises, with proper planning organizations can minimize loss and lessen impact (Mayer, et al., 2008). Jimerson et al. (2005) outline the steps an organization can take to prepare for a crisis, including, among others, establishing a task force or team, developing a directory of resources, establishing a communication system, and developing an information dissemination system. Smith and Riley (2012) suggest that schools systematically conduct a crisis audit by asking the following four key questions:

(1) What things, if they went wrong, would create major problems for the school? (2)

> What is the probability of each of those things occurring? (3) What impact would each crisis have on the school? What and who would suffer? (4) What factors might prevent each crisis from occurring? (p. 62)

Additionally, scenario planning allows schools to develop various contingency plans, creating a culture of preparedness (Smith & Riley, 2012). While crisis audits and scenario planning will not cover all crises, it is easier to adapt an existing contingency plan than develop a new one (Smith & Riley, 2012).

Preparing for a crisis can extend beyond a crisis audit or emergency plan. Pepper et al. (2010) contend that the best predictor of whether an organization will successfully overcome a crisis is the strength of the organization. Honest conversations regarding the school mission, distributive leadership, and outreach projects with the community are ways school leaders can strengthen the resiliency of their organizations to prepare for unpredictable crises (Pepper et al., 201).

During the second phase of crisis management, organizations use their resources to *respond to the crisis and attempt to minimize damage* (Mayer et al., 2008). Smith and Riley (2012) recommend five steps for responding to a crisis: (1) get the facts; (2) implement the relevant contingency plan; (3) be decisive; (4) show concern; and (5) communicate. If there is no existing relevant contingency plan, the organization will need to quickly adapt one to meet the current crisis. Leaders need to act quickly, which projects a necessary sense of optimism and a sense of control. Organizations, particularly schools, need to express genuine concern for the welfare of others when responding to a crisis; as Smith and Riley (2012) state, "crises are times when the values of the school and of its leaders are put on show" (p. 63). Finally, clear, open, and timely communication helps limit confusion, rumors, and misinformation. Jimerson et al. (2005) suggest that organizations base their crisis intervention response on Maslow's Hierarchy

of Human Needs; crisis intervention should involve a restoration of safety and security, ventilation and validation, and prediction and preparation. To return to healthy growth after trauma or crisis, the physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual needs of the individuals and the community must be met (Jimerson et al., 2005).

The third phase of crisis management is *recovery*. Winkworth (2007) defines recovery in two broad ways: as a desired outcome and as a process leading to the desired outcome. Recovery as a process involves actions by individuals and communities to help themselves and others and as a set of interventions on the part of the government or organizations. Recovery as a desired outcome can be restorative or transformative; restorative refers to returning to a previous state of well-being in which individuals experience closure and the community returns to the same level as before the crisis. However, recovery is increasingly being depicted as a gradual process in which feelings of closure are rare; rather people slowly reengage with a world that has been forever transformed (Winkworth, 2007).

Smith and Riley (2012) offer a critique for schools adopting the linear three-phase crisis management strategy suggested by Mayer et al. (2008); their critique is based on three major concerns. First, a linear model approaches a crisis as a remote event that is separate from the educational strategy of the school. However, school crises can impact the teaching and learning environment; Smith and Riley suggest that responding to a school crisis requires systematic thinking that incorporates the school's educational strategy. According to Pepper et al. (2010), "school crises do not occur in isolation but are constantly entangled with external forces so prevalent in public education" (p. 14). These forces include barriers to learning, impediments to team effectiveness, the complexity of the policy environment, and stressors in the external community; these forces should be considered in a school's crisis response (Pepper et al., 2010).

The second concern with the linear model involves the planning phase; while it is

important to have contingency plans, the increasingly unpredictable nature of crises requires other ways of thinking and leading. Finally, the linear model suggests a clear end and omits a phase for reflection as a learning process.

Smith and Riley (2012) recommend adding a review-reflect-learn phase to the crisis management model. During this phase, schools or organizations reflect on the crisis and use the experience to plan for the future. Leaders can ask and seek answers to questions around each phase of the crisis management process, these answers can help them create contingency plans in the event of a similar crisis occurring in the future (Smith & Riley, 2012).

In recovering from a crisis, schools face unique challenges. While schools may feel the need to put the crisis behind them as quickly as possible and move on, Mutch (2014) describes school recovery as an ongoing process. As Smith and Riley (2012) state, leading the recovery of a school is not a simple task:

> Leading the recovery of a school community after a crisis, therefore, involves a delicate balancing act that requires sensitivity to the needs of those impacted by the crisis, the need to return as quickly as possible to standard operating routines in the eyes of staff, students, parents and the community, and the need to assimilate the operational impact of the crisis. (p. 64)

Schools will require strategies and resources to support the social, emotional, and psychological recovery of students and staff as schools return to teaching and learning (Mutch, 2014). After a major crisis, schools can be a central part of a child's return to routine and normalcy (Winkworth, 2007).

Fothergill and Peek (2015) conducted a seven-year study following children impacted by the Hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans, Louisiana. The results of their study included recommendations for school disaster preparedness, response, and recovery efforts for children

and youth. Fothergill and Peek (2015) stated, “the school sphere is fundamental to children’s recovery” (p. 271). Their recommendations for schools included, among others, emotional support for students, access to licensed counselors, training of all staff, and the establishment of predictable routines within classrooms and schools as quickly as possible.

In the return to normal, schools also need to support teachers’ well-being; Weißenfels et al. (2021) found that following a crisis, “symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder are significantly higher in teacher samples than in the general population” (p. 3). This may be because teachers are processing their stress, while also supporting and responding to their students’ emotional needs (Weißenfels et al., 2021). Fothergill and Peek’s (2015) recommendations also included immediate and long-term financial, professional, and emotional support for teachers.

Crisis Leadership

Crisis management and crisis leadership are two related aspects of dealing with and responding to a crisis; crisis management is operational and involves the activities occurring during and after a crisis, while crisis leadership involves maintaining a vision of what the organization can be (Mutch, 2015). This section will explore definitions for crisis leadership, attributes for effective crisis leaders, and present a framework for crisis leadership.

Crisis leadership is different from leadership under normal circumstances; during a crisis, systems may fail, infrastructure may be compromised, and systemic problems may become apparent (Mutch, 2015). According to Boin et al. (2010), “effective crisis leadership entails recognizing emerging threats, initiating efforts to mitigate them and deal with their consequences and, once the acute crisis period has passed, re-establishing a sense of normalcy” (p. 706). Leadership in times of crisis involves dealing with events and emotions in ways that will minimize harm (Brion, 2021). Smith and Riley (2012), suggest that responding to a crisis is “a

mix of experience, time and applied common sense" (p. 64).

Crises are ambiguous in nature; the changing contexts and causes of crises make it difficult to have a consistent crisis leadership theory (Smith & Riley, 2012). While different crises require different responses, they will generally require flexibility and a new set of leadership competencies (Smith & Riley, 2012). Smith and Riley (2012) distinguish between effective school leadership during normal times and times of crisis:

> Successful school leaders are seen to be motivated and motivation visionaries – skilled communicators who listen, reflect, learn and empower. In the context of a crisis, however, school leadership must also be about providing certainty, engendering hope, engaging a rallying point for effective and efficient effort (both during and after the crisis), and ensuring open and credible communication to and for all affected members of the school community (p.57).

Despite the ambiguity in crises, there are key attributes that effective crisis educational leaders should possess. O'Brien and Robertson (2009) offer authenticity, agility, resilience, foresight, self-mastery, intuition, and creativity as key attributes for crisis leadership. Brion (2021) asserts that effective crisis educational leaders possess excellent communication skills, the ability to make quick decisions, creative thinking, empathy, flexibility, the ability to synthesize information, strong intuition, optimism, and tenacity. Similarly, Smith and Riley (2012) state that critical attributes of crisis leadership include coping with ambiguity, thinking laterally, a willingness to question events, responding flexibly and quickly, tenacity to persevere, and a willingness to take risks.

Smith and Riley (2012) created a conceptual framework for crisis leadership that consists of nine key attributes: (a) communication skills; (b) procedural intelligence; (c) intuition; (d) creativity/lateral thinking; (e) flexibility; (f) synthesizing skills; (g) empathy and respect; (h)

optimism/tenacity; (i) decisive decision making. Each of these key attributes will be briefly discussed in the context of crisis leadership.

Communication is critical for effectively responding to/managing a crisis. This attribute is essential for ensuring all stakeholders involved in the crisis receive "clear, concise, relevant, accurate and timely information" (Smith & Riley, 2012, p. 68). By effectively communicating with all stakeholders in the community, school leaders can limit rumors and misinformation while providing direction, certainty, and optimism. School leaders must interact openly with the media to avoid speculation.

Leadership intelligence includes procedural, intuitive, and creative intelligence. Each of these forms of leadership intelligence is included in Smith and Riley's framework as a key attribute. *Procedural intelligence* involves drawing from known principles of past crises; crisis leaders can effectively implement existing contingency plans (Smith & Riley, 2012).

Intuitive intelligence is the capacity to deal with crises that have considerable areas of uncertainty. Effective leaders need to be prepared to make decisions based largely on their intuition during times of crisis while taking into consideration the available facts, and experiences from the past (Smith & Riley, 2012).

Creative intelligence is the ability to deal with entirely new crisis events. Smith and Riley (2012) state, "as our global and local environments become more complex, chaotic and destabilized, and as change becomes more rapid, pervasive and fundamental, crisis leadership will increasingly need to rely on creative intelligence" (p. 67). Leaders with creative intelligence are comfortable in these destabilized environments and can act beyond prescribed procedures and practices.

In addition to the three types of leadership intelligence, effective crisis leaders are *flexible*. They can "make quick and decisive changes in behavior and thinking in response to a

rapidly changing environment" (Smith & Riley, 2012, p. 68). During a crisis, information may be scarce, and rumors may be prevalent (Smith & Riley, 2012). Leaders need to be flexible as new facts become available and they must adjust accordingly.

For the next two attributes, Smith and Riley (2012) draw on Gardner's (2006) five minds for the future that characterize effective leaders. Gardner (2006) argues that effective educational leadership for the future is dependent on ways of thinking rather than ways of acting. *Synthesizing*, one of Smith and Riley's key attributes is one mind for the future. Synthesizing is defined as "the ability to collect, collate, analyse, understand and evaluate large volumes of complex information" (Smith & Riley, 2012, p. 67). *Empathy and respect*, another key attribute from Smith and Riley's framework, is derived from Gardner's respectful mind. Effective crisis leaders must have the "ability to welcome differences among human beings in constructive and mutually beneficial ways" (Smith & Riley, 2012, p. 67).

Smith and Riley (2012) also include *tenacity and optimism* as key attributes of crisis leadership. During a crisis, school leaders must "work against forces, experience and circumstances of inertia" (Smith & Riley, 2012, p. 66). Additionally, crisis leaders must remain optimistic; leaders and organizations can view crises as an opportunity for improvement in some form (Smith & Riley, 2012).

Finally, effective crisis leaders must have the ability to *make clear and critical decisions*. During a crisis, leaders may be faced with significant difficulties in decision-making due to the lack of factual knowledge of the situation; leaders must be able to acquire quality information and make a choice promptly (Smith & Riley, 2012).

Crises are urgent situations requiring decisive action; school crises are different from normal recurring challenges and disrupt the educational process. Crises can be categorized as internal or external and predictable or unpredictable; they can be short-term, cathartic, long-term,

one-off, or infectious (Pepper et al., 2010; Smith & Riley, 2012). Crisis management involves the activities of a leader or organization in three main phases: before, during, and after a crisis (Mayer et al., 2008; Mutch, 2015). Crisis leadership, on the other hand, involves maintaining a vision for the organization (Mutch, 2015). Smith and Riley's (2012) framework summarizes nine key attributes for crisis leadership: (a) communication skills; (b) procedural intelligence; (c) intuition; (d) creativity/lateral thinking; (e) flexibility; (f) synthesizing skills; (g) empathy and respect; (h) optimism/tenacity; and (i) decisive decision making. The COVID-19 pandemic was a global crisis that forced all school leaders into the role of crisis leaders.

A Conceptual Framework for Examining COVID-19 as an Educational Crisis

In 2020, COVID-19 thrust all schools into a crisis as the world grappled with the coronavirus pandemic. In defining the pandemic as a crisis, COVID-19 would be external, unpredictable, infectious, and long-term. The pandemic was external to the schools and not anticipated by school leaders; COVID-19 is classified as long-term and infectious because it has continued without any clear resolution, while also leaving behind significant other issues to address in schools (Brion, 2021).

Fothergill and Peek (2015) state "disasters are not equal opportunity events. Children and youth, like adults, are positioned differently based on their race, social class, age, and gender before disasters strike, and these events subsequently influence their lives in varied and complex ways" (p. 194). While millions of individuals have been globally impacted by COVID-19, communities of color and those living in poverty have been disproportionally affected. Brion (2021) explains the impact of these inequities in schools:

> In schools, these inequities were seen when institutions were not able to equitably serve students who did not have access to a mobile device, a computer, or had trouble securing a WIFI connection. In addition, schools found it challenging to fully serve students with

different abilities and English-language learners (p. 32-3).

In times of crisis, a disaster interacts with existing vulnerabilities to make situations worse for marginalized individuals. Following the Hurricane Katrina crisis, Fothergill and Peek (2015) found "those who are already living at the margins are even more susceptible to experiencing extreme cumulative vulnerability after a disaster" (p. 197).

The challenges associated with COVID-19 as an educational crisis has required strong crisis leadership by school leaders to minimize teacher burnout and help foster teacher resilience. To frame the present study, I draw on three frameworks to inform my examination of how leadership practices affected teachers' experiences and perceptions of their work during COVID-19. The first framework is the crisis leadership conceptual framework developed by Mutch (2015). This framework provides a lens through which to view the crisis responses of school leaders following disasters. The second framework is centered on burnout theory and the job demands-resources model developed by Demerouti et al. (2001). The use of the job demands-resources model provides a lens for understanding the development of educator burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic. A third framework, the compensatory model proposed by Toland and Carrigan (2011), is used to examine individual attributes and contextual variables that impact resilience. In this study, I use components of all three to create a framework that examines the burnout implications for teachers in the context of COVID-19 and explores how school leaders' decisions have impacted teacher burnout and teacher resilience.

Component 1: The Crisis Leadership Conceptual Framework

Mutch (2015) developed a framework to conceptualize the factors influencing leaders' actions in a crisis context; the three factors in this model are dispositional, relational, and situational (see Table 1). "Dispositional factors include personal qualities, prior experiences, values, beliefs, skills, expertise, and conceptions of leadership" (Mutch, 2015, p. 192).

Successful crisis leaders build strong relationships, develop a sense of community, engender loyalty, and foster collaboration. Situational factors "include assessing the situation as it unfolds, understanding the context, being aware of different responses, making timely decisions, adapting to changing needs, making use of resources (both material and personnel), responding flexibly, thinking creatively, and constantly re-appraising the options" (Mutch, 2014, p. 192).

Table 1.

Three Sets of Factors Influencing Leaders in Crisis Context

Factors	Explanation	Examples from some of the five key sources
Dispositional	What leaders bring to the event from their background, personal qualities, experiences, values, beliefs, personality traits, skills, areas of expertise and conceptions of leadership	Porche [39] listed the characteristics of emergent crisis leaders during Hurricane Katrina as: trusted, respected, decisive, calm, visible, accessible, mission focused, visionary, autonomous, self-less, committed, confident, positive, strong, knowledgeable and experienced.
Relational	The ways in which leaders offer a unifying vision and develop a sense of community within the organisation, engendering loyalty, enabling empowerment, building strong and trusting relationships and fostering collaboration	Tarrant states: "In a wisely chosen support team, there will be effective interpersonal relationships where there is mutual trust, respect, and effective communication between the principal and the team. To enable prudent decision making in a crisis, a leader will encourage his/her support team to bring relevant perspectives to the trauma situation, and at times will entrust team members to attend to certain matters on his/her behalf" ([45], pp.75–76).
Situational	How leaders assess the situation as it unfolds, understanding the context, being aware of different responses (including cultural sensitivities), making timely decisions, adapting to changing needs, making use of resources (both material and personnel), providing direction, responding flexibly, thinking creatively and constantly re-appraising the options	Greenberg discusses his first reactions to 9/11: "I needed to get to my office and start dealing with what this atrocity meant for MMC. Were people getting out of the buildings? Had we lost people? Which facilities were affected? Which clients were affected? What could we do? Where should we start? My phone was out. I had a TV moved in to get news… By ten o'clock, I had gathered a group of managers in a nearby conference room, and we were beginning to figure out what needed to be done" ([20], p.59).

Note. From Mutch, C. (2015). Leadership in times of crisis: Dispositional, relational and contextual factors influencing school principals' actions. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction, 14*, 186-194.

Mutch's (2015) framework was developed from a review of relevant crisis leadership literature. The three factors encompass the key attributes of effective crisis leadership proposed by Smith and Riley (2012), O'Brien and Robertson (2009), and Brion (2021). Organizing the framework into three broad factors provides a useful lens for studying school leaders' actions during times of crisis. In this study, the crisis leadership framework will be used to analyze leaders' actions and/or inactions concerning teachers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

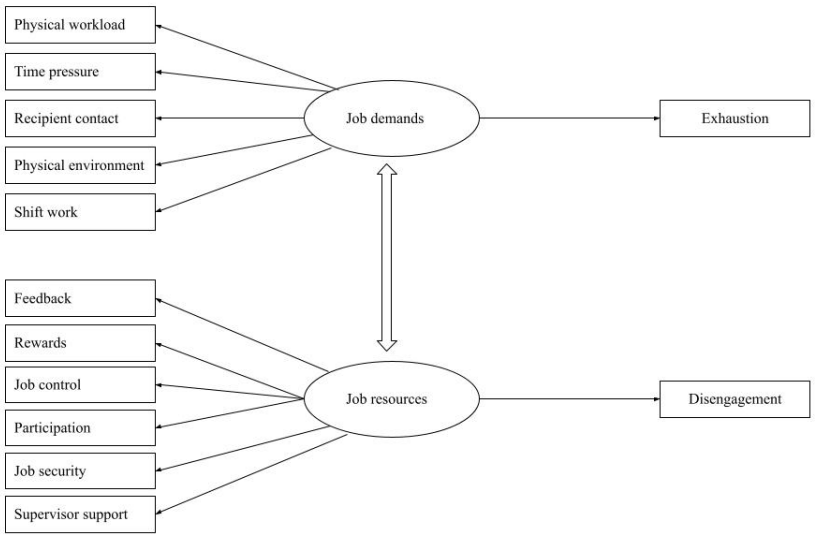
Component 2: The Job Demands-Resources Model

Davidson (2009) defines burnout as "a distinctive kind of job-related stress that inhibits the person's capacity to function effectively because the body's resources for resisting stress have become exhausted" (p. 47). Burnout is characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Van Droogenbroek et al., 2021; Huberman, 1993; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Maslach et al., 2001; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

Demerouti et al. (2001) created the job demands-resources model to explain the development of burnout. According to the model, burnout follows two developmental processes (see Figure 1): (a) demanding aspects of work lead to exhaustion and (b) a lack of resources complicates meeting job demands which leads to disengagement.

Figure 1.

The Job Demands-Resources Model of Burnout



Note. From Demerouti, E., Nachreiner, F., Baker, A. B., & Schaufeli, W. B. (2001). The job demands-resources model of burnout. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 86*(3), 499-512.

Job demands are the aspects of a job that require sustained physical or mental effort. In the Job Demands-Resources model, job demands include physical workload, time pressure, recipient contact, physical environment, and shift work. Job demands specific to teaching also include role conflict, classroom management and/or discipline, and external regulations (Beltman et al., 2011; Davidson, 2009; Friedman, 1995; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Huberman, 1993; Kyriacou, 2001; Maslach et al., 2001). Job demands are primarily related to the exhaustion component of burnout.

Demerouti et al. (2001) define job resources as "physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that do any of the following: (a) be functional in achieving work goals, (b) reduce job demands at the associated physiological and psychological costs, (c) stimulate personal growth and development" (p. 501). Job resources include feedback, rewards, job control, participation, job security, and supervisor support. Additionally, in the school context social support, professional development, curriculum resources, and material resources impact teacher stress and efficacy (Beltman et al., 2011; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Huberman, 1993; Kyriacou, 2001; Maslach et al., 2001; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2001). According to the job demands-resources model, a lack of sufficient resources is related to the disengagement component of burnout. In this study, I will use the job demands-resources model to understand the stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic for educators and their implications for teacher burnout.

Component 3: The Compensatory Model of Resilience

Resilience is defined as a "dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (Luthar et al., 2000). The two dimensions of the bioecological model of development correspond to the biological characteristics of an individual and the environmental factors surrounding the individual. In each dimension, risk factors limit

development, whereas protective factors promote development. At any one time, the risk and protective factors are presumptively in balance, however, this balance may shift over time. The compensatory model proposed by Toland and Carrigan (2011) suggests that:

> risk factors and protective factors combine additively and severe stress in the system can be counteracted by personal qualities or sources of support in the environment. Resilience can thus be thought of in terms of the outcome of an interaction between the balance of protective/risk factors at the individual … level and the balance of protective/risk factors at the level of the environment. (p. 98)

Individual assets that serve as protective factors for teachers include coping skills, intrinsic motivation for teaching, tenacity, a positive attitude, flexibility, risk-taking, self-efficacy, interpersonal skills, qualifications, and teaching skills (Beltman et al., 2011). Sufficient job resources can serve as environmental protective factors. Knowing that severe stress can be counteracted by personal attributes or sources of support, this study will consider the protective factors that enabled educators to remain in the field during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Working Towards a New Conceptual Framework

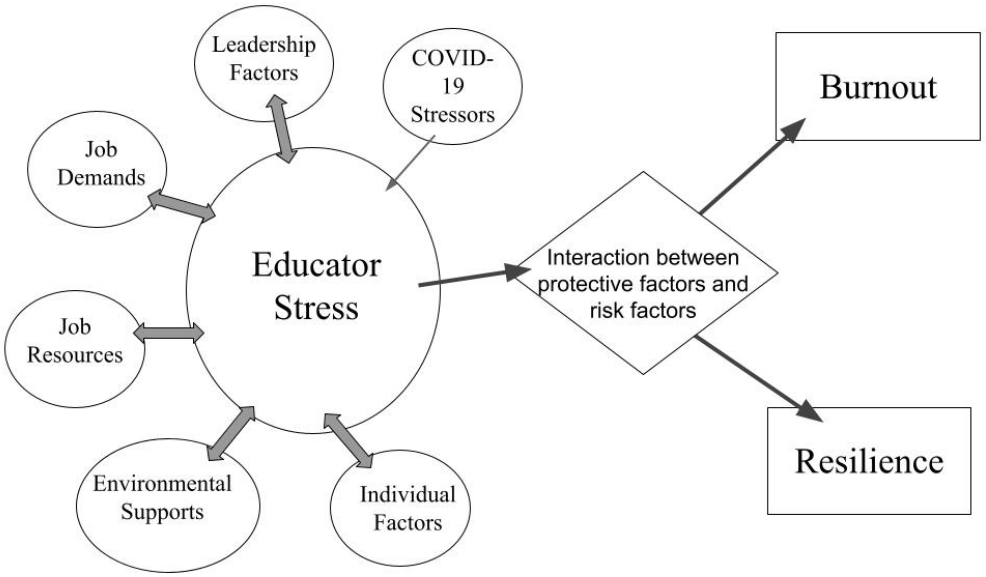
In this study, burnout and resiliency theories will be used to analyze how teachers characterize their work and related challenges during a global pandemic. Additionally, a crisis leadership framework will be used to examine how leaders responded to the challenges of leading a school during a crisis. Combining the theories to create a conceptual framework (see Figure 2), the study will explore the implications for teacher burnout and the impact school leaders' practices had on promoting teacher resilience.

I propose a new conceptual framework (see figure 2) that takes into consideration a variety of factors that can add to or mitigate teacher stress and the implications for teacher burnout and resilience. All the factors with dual-sided arrows pointing to/from educator stress are

factors that are known to add to or relieve stress. Leadership factors will be viewed through the lens of Mutch's (2015) crisis leadership framework and will include both the actions and inactions of school and district leaders. Demerouti et al.'s (2001) job demands-resources model will be used to examine the demanding aspects and the presence, or lack thereof, of job resources for educators during COVID-19. The compensatory model of resilience proposed by Toland and Carrigan (2011) suggests that severe stress can be counteracted by personal qualities (individual factors) and environmental supports. COVID-19 stressors have also been included in my proposed conceptual framework; this conceptual framework works under the assumption that COVID-19 has presented unique stressors and challenges for educators. COVID-19 stressors include distancing protocols, health and safety requirements (such as masks), physical changes to the classroom, and changes to the school schedule or routines. The COVID-19 protocols drastically changed how classrooms operated in elementary schools. These stressors are represented in the proposed framework with a single-sided arrow leading to educator stress; this proposed framework works under the assumption that COVID-19 stressors did not relieve educator stress. Finally, the proposed conceptual framework demonstrates that the outcome of an interaction between the balance of protective factors and risk factors can lead to burnout or resilience for educators (Toland & Carrigan, 2011).

Figure 2.

Conceptual Framework: Educator Experiences During COVID-19



Summary

Research indicates that teachers experience high levels of burnout, resulting in negative impacts on student achievement, high levels of absenteeism, and ultimately teacher attrition. When job demands exceed resources, burnout can occur. Conversely, the compensatory model theorizes that protective factors can counteract severe stress. While some studies are beginning to explore the impact of COVID-19 and teacher demands, stress, and burnout, there is a need to further understand how the pandemic has impacted teacher burnout. Additionally, while there is existing literature on the key attributes of crisis leadership, there is a gap in how leaders have responded to the COVID-19 crisis in schools. Specifically, there needs to be an understanding of how school leaders' practices served as risk or protective factors for teachers in the wake of COVID-19.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of elementary educators who worked (and in many cases, continue to work) during a global pandemic during the 2019-20, 2020-21, and 2021-22 school years, and to examine how leadership practices affected teachers' experiences and perceptions of their work during this complex time. This study analyzed teachers' accounts through the lens of burnout and resilience theories. Additionally, the study examined leadership practices using a crisis leadership framework. The study was guided by three overarching research questions:

1. How do teachers and leaders characterize their work and related challenges during the period from March 2020 through the summer of 2022?
2. What factors influenced elementary teachers' professional experiences and perceptions of their work during the 2019-20 through 2021-22 school years?
3. What factors influenced elementary school leaders' professional experiences and perceptions of their work during the 2019-20 through 2021-22 school years? What facilitated or constrained them in supporting/working with their teachers as they wanted?

In this chapter, I describe the research design and the study context. Then I outline the methods that were used in the study, including the following components: study participants, data collection, and data analysis. I will also discuss research bias and assumptions, trustworthiness and credibility, and limitations of the study.

Design of Study

This study was designed as a phenomenological qualitative study utilizing an interpretive approach. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that a phenomenological study "describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (p. 75). Merriam (2009) defines phenomenology as "a study of a people's conscious experience of their

life-world" (p. 25). Unlike other types of studies, phenomenology "focuses on an individual's first-hand experiences… it emphasizes explaining the meaning of things through an individual's perspectives and self-experiences" (Selvi, 2008, p. 39). The phenomenon in this study refers to the lived experiences of teachers and school leaders during a global pandemic.

Throughout this study, I aimed to describe, understand, and interpret the experiences of teachers and school leaders during the COVID-19 global crisis. Therefore, I utilized an interpretive approach; Merriam (2009) states that an interpretive approach "assumes that reality is socially constructed; that is there is no single, observable reality; rather there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event" (p. 8).

The rationale for this design is rooted in the understanding that a qualitative design can capture the perspectives of a study's participants (Yin, 2011). Qualitative research, by nature, is focused on the processes, meanings, and understandings of the participants. Additionally, in qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument throughout data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009). As the primary instrument of this study, I collected data through interviews and analyzed those data using codes. Inductive in nature, qualitative research relies on a variety of sources of evidence to build concepts and theories (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2011). The interviews were used to collect data from teachers and school leaders to understand the lived experiences of the participants during the global pandemic.

Study Context

This study focused on elementary school teachers and principals across the United States. I chose to include teachers and principals across the United States to capture perspectives from educators who experienced varying levels of COVID mitigation efforts due to working in various contexts. All participants were working at elementary schools; this allowed me to look at the experiences of educators working with the youngest learners. While all schools faced

unprecedented challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, elementary schools faced unique challenges due to the young children they serve. Emerging research suggests that early childhood educators experienced heightened health concerns and faced additional challenges with online instruction and health protocols. Childcare centers and schools across the country prioritized their youngest learners for in-person learning (Shapiro & Taylor, 2020). As a result, many elementary teachers found themselves in a new role of essential workers (Crawford et al., 2021). Additionally, elementary students were the last to become eligible for COVID-19 vaccines, which created a longer time frame for teachers to work in an increased-risk environment; the vaccine was not available for children aged five to eleven until November 2, 2021 (Prothero, 2021).

Participants

The participants in the study consisted of six teachers and five principals working in the United States who had direct experience with the phenomenon being studied. These participants were purposely selected to gain insight into teachers' and school leaders' varied experiences of teaching or leading during a pandemic (Yin, 2011). Purposeful sampling involves determining the selection criteria that will be used when selecting participants (Merriam, 2009). Table 2 outlines the criteria that were used for this study.

Table 2.

Participant Criteria

Participant Groups	Criteria for Participants		
Administrators	Elementary school principal	Held current position since at least fall of 2019	Each administrator participant will come from a different school district
Teachers	Classroom teacher or specialist teacher at the elementary school level.	Held current position since at least fall of 2019	Each teacher participant will come from a different school district

For a participant to be included he/she must have been working as an elementary school teacher or principal in the United States at the time of this study. Participants needed a minimum of three years of experience in their current setting to ensure that they experienced their current role throughout the COVID-19 crisis. Additionally, participants were intentionally recruited to represent different school districts to gain the broadest understanding of perspectives, as opposed to one campus, district, or state.

I used multiple recruitment methods for this study. The first method of recruitment was to reach out to known contacts that fit the study criteria by using their publicly available school email addresses. Participants were contacted via email regarding the study, given details regarding the study, and asked to complete a brief demographic survey if they were interested in participating. I used a Qualtrics survey to collect basic contact information along with verifying the selection criteria for the study. The second recruitment method utilized social media. I posted in several Facebook educator groups to recruit participants who met the study criteria. Again, participants who were interested completed the short demographic Qualtrics survey. Finally, network sampling was used as known contacts shared the recruitment flyer with their individual

networks. Network sampling refers to asking participants who else the researcher should interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, some contacts who did not meet the study criteria shared the recruitment flyer with others in their network.

Participant Demographics

There were six teacher participants. The teacher participants came from four different states and represented a variety of school contexts, including Title I schools, middle- and upper-class public schools, and a high-income private school. All teacher participants are female. Table 3 outlines the basic demographic information for each teacher participant.

Table 3.

Teacher Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Grade level	State	School context	Years of Experience
Teacher 1	Kindergarten	Texas	Middle-class	26
Teacher 2	5th Grade	Massachusetts	Title I	26
Teacher 3	4th Grade	New York	Title I	30
Teacher 4	Kindergarten	New York	High-income	21
Teacher 5	Kindergarten	Texas	Private, High-income	5
Teacher 6	4th Grade	Wisconsin	Title I	18

There were five principal participants. The principal participants came from three different states and represented schools of a variety of sizes and income levels. All schools served students in elementary grade levels. All principal participants held the role of principal at their school and are female. Table 4 outlines the basic demographic information for each

principal participant. For principal participants, the years of experience reported below reflect their years working in formal administration; each of the five participants had at least 20 years of experience working in education.

Table 4.

Principal Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	State	School size	School context	Years of Experience
Principal 1	Texas	530	PK-5 Public, high-income	12
Principal 2	Texas	450	PK-5 Public, Title I	12
Principal 3	Massachusetts	120	PK-6 Public, middle-class	4
Principal 4	Texas	200	1-4 Private, high-income	4
Principal 5	New York	330	3-6 Public, Title I	20

Data Collection

The data collection took place over the summer of 2022 and included three phases: (1) pilot interviews; (2) initial interviews with each participant; (3) follow-up interviews with each participant. The second and third phases ran concurrently with follow-up interviews taking place 1-2 weeks following the initial interviews.

The primary method of data collection involved two in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with each participant. Interviews are purposeful conversations intended to learn something specific that cannot be observed (Merriam, 2009). Interviews range in type from

highly structured to unstructured. Highly structured interviews have a predetermined set and order of questions and are typically used to obtain demographic data (Merriam, 2009). Unstructured interviews consist of open-ended questions and the interview flows more like a conversation (Merriam, 2009). The interviews in this study were semi-structured interviews; semi-structured interviews consist of a mix of more and less structured interview questions that are used flexibly (Merriam, 2009, p. 89; see Appendix A for teacher protocol and Appendix B for principal protocol). Each interview took place over Zoom. Initial interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes; follow-up interviews lasted approximately 20 to 45 minutes (see Appendix C for teacher protocol and Appendix D for principal protocol).

The initial interview protocol was adapted from McAdams' (2007) Life Story Interview [LSI]. The LSI is a protocol used for collecting personal stories. The protocol includes three key scenes (a high point, a low point, and a turning point) that can be used in studies seeking to understand narrative data (Adler et al., 2007). Embedded within each prompt of the protocol are several key elements: "a specific, bounded scene, a request for detail and elaboration, and a request for reflection or meaning-making about the scene" (Adler et al., 2007, p. 522).

The follow-up interview summarized the key scenes discussed in the first interview, allowing participants the chance to confirm, change, or add to their initial responses. Participants were then asked follow-up questions regarding the specific challenges they faced during the pandemic. Each phase will be discussed further in the subsequent sections.

Phase One: Pilot Interviews

Pilot interviews were conducted during the first phase of data collection. The pilot interviews helped test and refine the data collection instruments and took place prior to beginning data collection (Yin, 2011). The pilot interviews included three participants. The first pilot interview provided the opportunity to get general feedback on the questions. Some minor

changes were made to the interview protocols to improve clarity. The second pilot interview was with a volunteer recruited from a Facebook group and gave me the opportunity to practice interviewing someone who was not an acquaintance. The third and final pilot interview was used to improve interview methods, such as giving more wait time and asking more probing questions. Additionally, the third pilot interview was used to test out the technology. During this phase, I also began writing memos to reflect on any issues that arose and how they related to larger issues of the study (Merriam, 2009).

Phase Two: Teacher & Administrator Initial Interviews

The second phase of the study began the formal data collection with interviews of teachers and administrators. Individuals expressed interest in participating in the study by completing a simple Qualtrics survey. The survey asked for preferred contact information and verified that the individual met selection criteria for the study. I then followed up with any individuals who met study criteria via email. The email included the study information, the consent form, and the questions that would be asked during the initial interviews. If, after reviewing the information, individuals were still willing to participate they were invited to schedule an interview using the Doodle scheduling website.

Prior to the interview, participants were sent an email with instructions for reviewing and electronically signing the consent form. This reminder email also included the interview questions in the event participants wanted to journal or prepare before the interview. The interviews were all conducted virtually over Zoom. This online platform allowed participants from across the country to participate, while still being able to observe the participant's facial expressions or body language throughout the interviews.

At the beginning of each interview, I reviewed consenting information, described the study, answered any questions, and ensured that participants had electronically signed the

consent form. After confirming consent, the interview began. Each interview was audio-recorded and lasted approximately 45-60 minutes.

The interviews were semi-structured, which allowed each participant to respond in unique ways (Merriam, 2009). An interview protocol was used to guide the interviews and to ensure that each participant was provided with the opportunity to comment on the same questions (see Appendix A for the teacher protocol and Appendix B for the principal protocol). The semi-structured interview was adapted from McAdams' (2007) Life Story Interview. The interview protocol begins by collecting demographic/contextual information. In addition to collecting demographic and contextual information, this section also helped each participant become more comfortable with the interview setting before moving into the life story portion.

The life story portion asked participants to describe their experience as a story with chapters, and then to describe a high point, low point, and turning point of their experience during the pandemic. Additionally, the participants were asked about challenges faced during the last three years of teaching. Principal participants were also asked about any supports or challenges that facilitated or constrained them in supporting their teachers during the pandemic. During the interviews, I took field notes and noted any personal feelings or assumptions.

Immediately after each interview, I wrote a researcher memo to summarize my initial thoughts and make note of anything I wanted to follow up on in the second interview. The interviews were automatically transcribed using Zoom. I then read through each transcript to edit formatting, scrub the data of any personal identifiers, and familiarize myself with the data. After finalizing the transcript, I completed an analytic memo summarizing the interview and reflecting on emerging themes (see Appendix E for analytic memo template).

Phase Three: Teacher & Administrator Follow-Up Interviews

The third phase of the study consisted of follow-up interviews with each participant. These interviews took place one-to-two weeks after the initial interviews. This phase occurred concurrently with the second phase until all participants had been interviewed twice. After the initial interviews, participants were emailed a link to schedule a second interview through the Doodle website. This email also included the protocol for the second interview and an invitation for participants to find photographs that represented any of the key scenes they discussed in the initial interview.

The second interview used a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix C for the teacher protocol and Appendix D for the principal protocol). These interviews also took place over Zoom and were audio recorded. The second interview lasted approximately 20 to 45 minutes. All participants completed both interviews. During these interviews, I took field notes to document any personal feelings.

During the second interview, participants were given the opportunity to hear a summary of the key scenes from the initial interview. They were asked if there was anything they would like to add or change to what was shared. This served as a form of member checking, which will be discussed more in a later section. Additionally, participants were asked to share the biggest factors that added to their stress and the biggest factors that helped them overcome the stress and challenges of working in schools throughout the pandemic.

Teacher participants were asked how their campus and district leaders helped them stay motivated in their job and what they wished their leaders would do or refrain from doing to help them cope with the stressors. Principal participants were asked about they helped staff stay motivated and what they wished they could do or refrain from doing to help their staff cope with stress.

Participants were also asked to share any photographs that represented the key scenes discussed in the initial interviews. Only a few participants shared images, and these were used to springboard conversations and provide more detail to the stories they told. During the third phase, I continued to write reflective memos on emerging themes and commonalities, while also beginning to compare the data.

Data Analysis

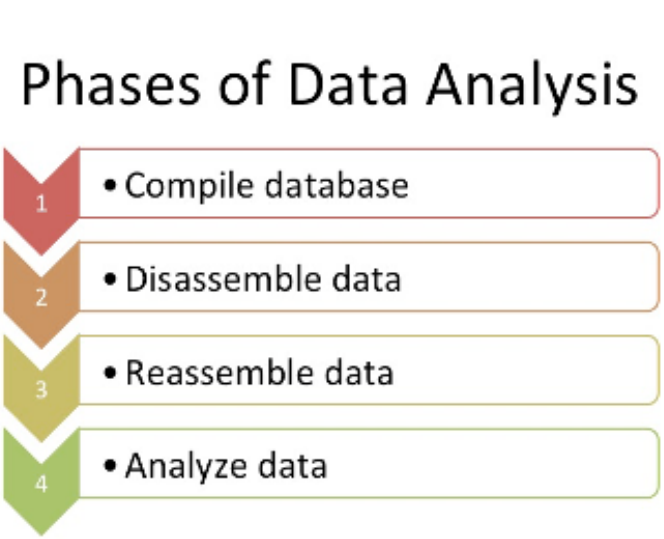
The data set for this study consisted of all field notes, researcher memos, interview transcriptions, and audio recordings. The computer software Dedoose was used to compile the data into an electronic database. The processes of collecting and analyzing the data was non-linear and occurred simultaneously throughout the study (Merriam, 2009).

This study employed an overall inductive and comparative analysis strategy. Qualitative research is inductive in nature; the researchers collect data that builds "concepts, hypotheses, or theories" (Merriam, 2009, p. 15). The two-cycle coding process involves comparing data segments to determine similarities and differences, which aids in the development of categories (Merriam, 2009).

For this study there were four phases of data analysis (Figure 4); these phases were recursive and ongoing.

Figure 3.

Phases of Data Analysis



The first phase of data analysis was to compile a database using Dedoose. Each piece of data was saved as an electronic file. This included field notes, researcher memos, interview transcriptions, and audio recordings. During the interviews, I kept field notes summarizing important information and noting any personal feelings or assumptions. After the interviews had been transcribed, I completed analytic researcher memos (see Appendix E for the analytic memo template used in this study). These memos consisted of descriptive summaries, key quotes, and researcher reflections. Within the memos, I reflected on how participants' experiences related to the literature along with any personal insights, emerging themes, or connections with other interviews. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, Dedoose, was used to organize the electronic data into a database. This phase was completed throughout the process of data collection.

After data had been compiled into the growing database, I began coding the data using first cycle codes. First cycle coding methods were used to initially assign codes to data chunks and were conducted by hand. These codes were then used to aid in second cycle coding later in the analysis process (Miles et al., 2014). I began by creating a predetermined start list of codes based on the conceptual framework that guided this study, a process Saldaña (2021) calls "Provisional Coding" (p. 216). (See Appendix E for Provisional Code list). Some of these codes were modified, combined, or abandoned in later phases of data analysis. Additionally, descriptive coding, affective coding, and in vivo coding were used to initially assign codes to the data chunks. Descriptive codes summarize the basic topic of qualitative data; affective coding is intended to explore the more subjective experiences of encounters with participants and can include coding emotions and values (Miles et al., 2014). In vivo coding is a code that "refers to a word or short phrase from the actual language" used by participants (Saldaña, 2021, p. 137). First cycle coding occurred throughout the data collection process.

During the third phase of data analysis, I assigned descriptive codes in Dedoose based on the research questions. I grouped the participants' responses by interview question and compared the initial codes. I used the emerging similarities and differences to group the data into categories (Merriam, 2009). This phase also occurred simultaneously with data collection. By coding and comparing the data throughout the collection process, I was able to explore any emerging themes or concepts in subsequent interviews. This also allowed me to reflect on emerging concepts in my analytic memos.

After the data had been grouped into categories using the two-cycle coding process, the categories were analyzed for patterns that could be applied to the study's guiding questions. Additionally, other phenomena that emerged were analyzed to determine if they had a connection to the research topic or if they offered opportunities for additional research.

Researcher Positionality

Merriam (2009) recommends that qualitative researchers employ the strategy of "reflexivity" (p. 219), or explain their individual biases, dispositions, and assumptions that relate to the research being conducted. This process of clarification gives the readers a better understanding of how the researcher may have arrived at certain conclusions.

As a current classroom teacher in a public school, I recognize that my own experiences of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic have led to the development of my own opinions regarding the experiences and leadership practices of other educators during this crisis. During the pandemic, I taught fully remote classes from home and campus, in-person learners with and without a variety of mitigation efforts (social distancing, masks, protective shields, cohorting), and a blended class of in-person and remote learners simultaneously. In addition to my experiences teaching during the pandemic, I am also a mom to two young children. One of my children was born prematurely during the pandemic and required a heightened level of COVID precautions.

Additionally, I am a student in an educational leadership program and recently completed my principal certification. This gives me varied perspectives on the implications of leadership practices and the challenges school leaders face daily. I recognize that my experiences and perspectives have led to some preconceived notions about the challenges of teaching during COVID-19.

Throughout the study, I employed multiple strategies to mitigate my biases and position myself, and relay accurate and trustworthy interpretations of participants' experiences. Member checks involve soliciting feedback on the emerging findings of a study from the study's participants (Merriam, 2009, p. 217). In the follow-up interviews, participants were asked to review a summary of key takeaways from their initial interview and confirm that the

interpretation of their comments accurately captured their perspectives. This process helped mitigate bias by checking that the participants' statements were not misunderstood and that my biases did not skew interpretations of the interview data.

In addition to using member checks and reflexivity, I also created an audit trail. The audit trail method for qualitative studies requires the researcher to describe in detail the process of data collection, coding, and the rationale for decisions made throughout the study (Merriam, 2009, p. 223). By employing this strategy, independent readers of the study will be able to authenticate the findings.

The study was based on the following assumptions:

1. There is dissonance in how educators experienced and perceived the COVID-19 crisis in education.
2. The COVID-19 pandemic has created a crisis in education that is impacting teachers and school leaders; exploratory studies will be beneficial in understanding more about this impact.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Multiple methods were used to ensure trustworthiness and credibility within this qualitative study. First, I used multiple data sources until I reached saturation and started hearing the same things, also known as crystallization (Ellingson, 2009). Second, the use of direct quotations from participants and thick, rich descriptions highlighted their experiences and perceptions and helped to support the analysis of data. Third, member checks were used to ensure trustworthiness. Participants were given a summary of key findings and asked to verify the plausibility of the interpretations (Merriam, 2009, p. 229). Finally, the audit trail method was employed. This method involved keeping a detailed record of research memos describing the processes of data collection, data analysis, and decision-making. The intention of the audit trail

method was to convincingly show readers how the end results of the study were achieved (Merriam, 2009, p. 223).

Limitations

Qualitative research aims at accuracy and transferability, not generalization (Merriam, 2009). While this study design intentionally explored the perspectives and experiences of elementary school educators across the United States, their experiences are not indicative of others. The findings in this study are not generalizable to all teachers or administrators, but given the contexts of readers, findings may transfer to or inform other educators' experiences. Additionally, due to the recency and ongoing nature of COVID-19, there is little existing literature on how the pandemic is impacting educators.

Summary

This study was designed as a phenomenological qualitative study utilizing an interpretive approach to describe, understand, and interpret the experiences of teachers and school leaders during the COVID-19 global crisis. Using interviews with teachers and principals across the United States, I explored the lived experiences of elementary educators and examined how leadership practices affected teachers' experiences and perceptions of their work during the pandemic.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of elementary educators who worked during a global pandemic during the 2019-20, 2020-21, and 2021-22 school years, and to examine how leadership practices affected teachers' experiences and perceptions of their work during this complex time. This study was guided by three questions:

1. How do teachers and leaders characterize their work and related challenges during the period from March 2020 through the summer of 2022?
2. What factors influenced elementary teachers' professional experiences and perceptions of their work?
3. What factors influenced elementary school leaders' professional experiences and perceptions of their work? What facilitated or constrained them in supporting/working with their teachers as they wanted?

The study findings described in this section were drawn from qualitative methods through interviews conducted with elementary school teachers and elementary school principals. Each participant was interviewed twice. The first interview used a protocol adapted from the Life Story Interview protocol developed by McAdams (2007). The second interview reviewed the key scenes shared by participants, allowing them to confirm, clarify or change anything, and then followed up on specific challenges faced by participants during the pandemic.

Key Scenes in the Educator Life Story

During the first interview, participants were asked to share what school looked like for them in the spring of 2020, the 2020-21 school year, and the 2021-22 school year, specifically regarding the instructional models and COVID protocols in place. Participants were also asked to imagine their life as an educator during the COVID-19 pandemic as if it were a book or novel.

They were asked to describe what the main chapters in their story might be and to provide an overall plot summary of their story. Finally, participants were asked to describe a high point, a low point, and a turning point in their stories. Taken together, these sections of the protocol give a glimpse into the lived experiences of the participants during the pandemic.

Shape of Schooling

As participants described what school looked like during the different phases of the pandemic and shared their chapter titles for their stories, they provided an overview of the shape of schooling during the pandemic. This section will examine the participants' experiences during the different phases of the pandemic.

Teachers

Teachers' stories were mainly divided into the following phases: spring 2020, summer 2020, 2020-21, and 2021-22. Within each phase, their experiences were grouped into common themes.

Spring 2020. All of the teacher participants began their stories by discussing the initial shutdown in the spring of 2020. During this time period, teachers experienced shock and felt unprepared for the challenges that came from teaching online. Additionally, teachers spoke about the challenges of figuring out technology and the emotional hardship of packing up the classroom at the end of the school year.

Shock. Teachers described a sense of shock when schools initially shut down in March 2020. Teacher 1 shared that before the shutdown her school had held an Open House where her students were able to share the classroom with their parents; "It was all very hands-on, touchy-feely, and then suddenly you know we get this phone call, and the world turns upside down." Teachers were grappling with the sudden shutdown of schools while also learning how they would be providing instruction to students from home. Teacher 6 stated, "When we first started,

we didn't know what was going on. And it was a territory that I know I have never been in. I've never taught online, and I didn't know what to do exactly." Teachers described the initial closure as a period of "survival" and wondered how this was even happening. Four of the six teachers interviewed discussed experiencing shock at the sudden closure of schools during this time period.

Unprepared/Lack of Resources. When the pandemic suddenly closed schools, school personnel scrambled to transition teaching into an online environment. When schools shut down, some were in a better position than others to continue instruction. For example, teachers whose students had school devices and were already using online learning platforms were more prepared for online instruction than teachers in schools lacking resources.

Teacher 6 described this process at her school:

> They had a pickup date, so the kids could come pick up devices. I believe the principal and the social worker because not all parents have cars, went out and delivered some. But we got to a point they all had computers. It took about two to three weeks, So I mean a lot of us were sitting here like *what are we doing?* What are we supposed to do? You know, (be)cause kids, they didn't have devices. It was totally unprepared.

Teacher 4 described the lack of organization as her school district moved to an online learning program:

> We were made aware, on very short notice – everything was short notice because I don't think anyone knew what was happening – we were made aware that we were not going to be returning yet and … we were going to be providing some kind of online instruction. It was very vague and very unorganized… there was really no consensus in the beginning of how we were going to do this…it was just kind of like teachers had to figure it out on their own.

Some schools had technology in place, but students were not used to using it. Teacher 1, a kindergarten teacher, had iPads for students but they were not used a lot before schools shut down. “We did some work with technology, but not a tremendous amount. We used it for projects, and we used it occasionally for different programs, but really as a whole, we didn’t do a tremendous amount on technology.” Her students had no experience with using an online learning platform.

While most teachers transitioned to a completely online form of instruction for the remainder of the Spring of 2020, Teacher 3’s school did not. Her school district made packets for parents to pick up and she tried to send out online resources to supplement the packets. However, her students did not have devices and there was no consistency in how teachers communicated with students. “Every teacher was using different communication [with] parents. So, for me, I was using remind.com which is really just a texting thing. So that’s how I communicated with my kids… from March to June.” Additionally, her school’s union prohibited videos. “I’m pretty tech savvy and I would have just pulled my kids up on video if I could or on their own computers, but we weren’t allowed based on our Union. So, it was hard. It was just remind.com.” She shared that her school district has a strong union. The union prohibited videos in the Spring of 2020 in response to teachers’ concerns regarding video instruction with students.

Four of the six teachers interviewed discussed feeling unprepared for teaching remotely. Teachers 3 and 6, whom both taught at low-income schools, did not have the technology needed to support online instruction. While Teachers 1 and 4 had the physical resources, they felt unprepared for how to use the technology with students and what instruction should look like for their students.

Figuring out Technology. For the teachers who did transition to online instruction during the Spring of 2020, once the technology was up and rolling there was still a learning curve for

how to make it work for their students. For the kindergarten teachers, a big part of their story was helping young children and their parents navigate the technology. As Teacher 1 explained, “we had to suddenly start by teaching the parents how to just access some of the technology before we could even start to teach the kids what to do with it.” This was made more difficult for teachers whose students were using personal devices. Teacher 4’s school did not provide devices for students to use during the spring of 2020. However, her students all had personal devices at home they were able to use. Teacher 4 explained, “some children connected on iPads, some on laptops, some on desktops. The use of different devices also created more problems because the software isn’t applicable in the same manner on different devices.” When trying to teach kindergarteners how to complete an online activity, it was especially difficult when the activity looked different depending on the device being used. Teacher 4 explained that Microsoft 365, the software used by her school, functioned differently on tablets and desktops which created another layer of difficulty when teaching online.

Most of the teachers reached a point where they were providing some type of daily/weekly instruction for students virtually. Teacher 5 stated, “what it grew to be was we would have at least a zoom a day… then we would put [instructional videos] out every day.” Once the initial shock wore off, teachers received more guidance and clarity from their districts and were able to focus more on providing instruction virtually. Teacher 4 stated:

> As time progressed and we realized that we were not going to be returning to school, then the district started to become more organized as far as telling us how often we had to actually meet with our students on Microsoft 365. And then they started to give us some more guidance as far as [to] how we should set up our day, so to speak.

While teachers had more guidance and structure for using the technology to provide instruction, there were still additional concerns and challenges. For Teacher 1, a big concern was how to

keep instruction developmentally appropriate for her kindergarten students. “A lot of it was how do I preserve that kindergarten world in a world that wasn’t at all kindergarten like… still trying to keep that hands-on experience.” For Teacher 2, she had a “zoom room” set up where students could get on when they needed help with their assignments. “I had one kid who would come every single day because he just needed to be able to have that face-to-face communication. He really didn’t need any help, he just wanted to talk.” For some of her students, the technology provided an opportunity to connect, and she was able to use the “zoom room” to support her students’ social-emotional needs during this challenging time.

Packing up Classrooms. As the school year progressed, schools across the country began making the announcement that students would not return to in-person learning that school year. Teachers 1 and 2 both shared about the emotional challenge of packing up their classroom at the end of the school year without the students. Teacher 1 shared:

> When we got the phone call [saying] “We’re closed, this is it, you need to go in, you need to pack up the room and we’re not going back this year.” That was hard… When we left the classroom, we were [at] this happy high point of the year… The walls in the halls were filled with student work, the classroom was filled with student work, and it froze that moment in time.”

Teacher 1 shared that the end of the year in kindergarten is usually a time filled with reflection. She typically loves seeing students look back through work from the beginning of the year and getting to celebrate their growth. Now, she was packing up their work alone. Her school only allowed them in one at a time and they had a short window of time to get everything packed up. The hallways were dark, empty, and quiet. This was the first time she had been allowed back into her classroom since the school initially closed in March. “You’re coming into a room where we would sing and relax, and we played and explored and read and learned, and now it was

silence…and a classroom was never meant to be silent." She felt that the school year had "no emotional closure" as a result of this experience.

Teacher 2 also discussed the emotional challenge of packing up the classroom at the end of the school year. She described this chapter of her story as "trash bags and tears" and considered it one of the lowest points of her experience:

> They told us we had to go in and pack up all of their belongings. It didn't matter what it was if it was in their desk or in their locker, we had to put it in trash bags. I hated it. I cried through the entire thing. And I went out and bought ribbon because I just hated leaving these trash bags outside. So, I decorated them with ribbon and stickers and stuff like that because it was just, it was just devastating to see all their stuff…To go back in on that day when we actually did it, like my date was the same, there was stuff on the door that was the same. It was like time had stopped. It was the weirdest feeling.

This moment represented how depersonalized online teaching felt for Teacher 2 and the lengths she went through to provide a personal touch to a seemingly cold process. For both Teacher 1 and Teacher 2, packing up the empty classroom took an emotional toll and was representative of the emotional challenges they experienced during that spring.

Summer 2020. As the 2019-2020 school year came to an end, the summer provided some teachers an opportunity to recharge and recover from a stressful spring. However, four of the six teachers discussed the summer as an integral part of their story and as a period of uncertainty and intense training.

Uncertainty. There was a sense of uncertainty for teachers during the summer of 2020 as they waited to find out what the upcoming school year would entail. As Teacher 5 described, "things were just up and down. Nothing was nailed down… They were still trying to navigate everything and so everything kept changing up until I felt like the first day of school." Teacher 3

stated, “we didn’t even know if we were going back or not going back or what the heck was going to go on, we didn’t know until the end of August.” Typically, many teachers spend time over the summer preparing for the upcoming school year. During the summer of 2020, the uncertainty meant teachers did not know if they should be preparing for online or in-person teaching. Teachers had no way to fully prepare for the upcoming school year when decisions were still being made regarding school re-opening plans and COVID protocols. This caused teachers a great deal of stress.

Training. For some teachers, this time was also filled with training in anticipation of more online instruction. Teacher 1 described a sense of overwhelm by the amount of training. She stated that “we went into the summer, and I think we all thought summer *take a big breath,*” but instead, the summer was filled with training. “It just felt like that entire summer…you never got your head above water. I mean you were just bombarded every day.” Not only was the amount of training overwhelming, but she also experienced value dissonance regarding the instructional expectations. Her school was pivoting to an all-digital model, so even if students were in-person, everything they would be doing would be online. She shared, “this isn’t what kindergarten is supposed to look like.” She spent the entire summer trying to figure out how to take what needed to happen for COVID and put it together with what she knew was best for students.

Teacher 2 was part of a team of teachers that would train her entire district on different types of technology when they returned to school in the fall. Her district had agreed to provide teachers with 10 days of training before students started school. So, during the summer Teacher 2 was sent to a training to learn the information she would be sharing with her colleagues. In response to the training she attended, she reflected, “We really gleaned nothing. We knew more

than the trainer knew." She spent the summer learning new technology and preparing resources to share with her colleagues when they returned in the fall.

2020-21. When teachers and students returned to school in the fall of 2020, schools looked different across the country, but participants' stories still held commonalities. For teachers, this phase of the pandemic was marked by hybrid teaching, COVID protocols, and continual changes, or what participants described as "the year of first days."

Hybrid Teaching. When school began in the fall of 2020, many schools around the country began virtually. For Teacher 3, staff returned in September, but students did not come back until October while the district waited for devices to arrive for students. They rolled out an online learning platform, but teachers were not trained:

> We had to learn; we had no training. I mean we had one video class from our IT department. It was insane… I think we cried every day. We didn't have kids yet at that point, and I think we as our team, I think we literally cried, or somebody had breakdowns every single day.

Teacher 3 also expressed frustration that there had not been more preparation during the summer. Instead, her school was rolling out the technology and introducing new instructional models at the start of the school year.

For four of the six teachers interviewed, their schools transitioned to some variation of a hybrid model. For teachers, this meant they were teaching online and in-person students simultaneously or had a schedule in which some students were at home, and some were in person depending on the day. Teacher 2 and Teacher 3's schools implemented a HyFlex hybrid model. Teacher 2 described what that looked like at her school:

> The gist of it was that we had three cohorts of kids. So, one cohort was completely remote all the time, one cohort came in Monday and Wednesday, the other one came in

> Tuesday and Thursday, and Friday everybody was home. So, we had to teach the kids in our classroom and to the kids on Zoom at the same time. So, there were no video lessons for the kids that were at home, we were teaching everything at the same time. And there was this giant rotation of these green bags. They bought these green reusable grocery bags and we had to label them with each kid's name. Then it was a constant shuffle of leaving bags on Friday for the kids that were going to be home Monday and Wednesday and making sure they had what they [needed]. Then I [had] to leave another set of bags out for the Tuesday [and] Thursday kids and the third set of bags for the kids at home the entire week.

Teaching in-person and remote students simultaneously provided a lot of technological challenges and classroom management challenges for teachers. Teacher 3 talked about these challenges: "The technology wasn't great. They couldn't hear me a lot of the time…And you know … an elementary school day is just not structured for that type of a situation." Teacher 6 described the classroom management challenges as a shark attack; when she was working with one group of students she had "to be quick, you know (be)cause I got my other kids sitting here watching."

As teachers started to figure out the technology, there was a sense of success. Teacher 3 stated, "I felt really good with [the platform]. I had it going, my kids seem to be getting it." Teacher 2 created an elaborate system using multiple devices and a Bluetooth microphone ball so that all students could hear and participate. "That finally made us feel like we were somewhat normal. Because it wasn't like 'hang on, you have to unmute' to say whatever you're thinking. We were all just kind of talking in the room, like normal." These feelings of success with technology and complex instructional models provided teachers with a sense of professional growth.

COVID Protocols. For students who attended school in person, schooling looked very different. COVID protocols made up a big part of teachers' stories for the 2020-2021 school year as they were responsible for enforcing protocols and trying to figure out how to make instruction work in a completely different environment. Five of the six teachers talked about mask requirements, social distancing, and the lack of shared materials during the 2020-2021 school year.

Teachers described their classrooms as looking drastically different. All extra furniture was removed so students could be socially distanced. Prior to the pandemic, Teacher 2 had a couch and a lot of "flexible seating" options, meaning different places around the room students could sit and work so they were not always at their desks. They also had tables that students shared. The couch and other seating options were moved into storage and the tables were swapped out with old desks that had been in a warehouse. The desks were spread out and Teacher 2 put gorilla tape on the floor to help her students social distance. Each student had a taped-out box they had to stay in for social distancing. Teacher 2 used her own money to purchase beach chairs, beach towels, and lap desks for all her students so they could still have the option to sit somewhere other than at their desks while also maintaining social distancing protocols. Teacher 4, a kindergarten teacher, discussed the physical changes to her classroom:

> Typically, we had round tables in kindergarten, and then when we came back … we had individual desks with individual chairs and the desks had clear plastic partitions around them. We could not use cubbies. Typically, in kindergarten, we would use cubbies to store backpacks, lunch boxes, [and] coats. We were not allowed to have any sort of communal space, so everything had to be stored next to the child's desks. So, the district purchased a million of these plastic containers… so every child's desk had one of those containers next to it. So, four-year-olds and five-year-olds would be navigating that

> space. So, it made for … definitely a different space. They could not share any supplies and typically in kindergarten there would be shared supplies. Typically, we would have a caddy in the center of the round table, and you can put glue, crayons, [and] things like that. Everyone still has their own supply box, but that would be supplemental supplies. We could not do anything like that. Also, play spaces had to be removed. So, I [had] a kitchen in my classroom that was removed. I [had] a doll house, … a racetrack, … sand table, water table. [Those things had to be] put away.

Teacher 5's school used crates to store all of the students' individual materials including whiteboards, manipulatives, workbooks, and supply boxes. In addition to ensuring students were not sharing supplies, this also made it easier if a student had to stay home to quarantine. They would leave the crate outside for parents to pick up so their child would have the materials they needed for learning at home.

For kindergarten, the lack of shared materials provided an instructional challenge. Learning centers are a big part of the kindergarten classroom. Typical kindergarten learning centers include blocks, books, art activities, discovery centers, math activities, puzzles, or games. Teachers talked about the lengths they went through to continue providing hands-on experiences for students. Teacher 1 stated, "if you were going to do an activity and you wanted it to be hands-on suddenly it's making 20 individual activities." She put together kits of individual manipulatives for each student. This included all the learning tools for math and activities for games they would need. When it was time to switch out the materials, she would take them all home and run them through the dishwasher to sterilize the materials. She spent her own money on the kits. "The expense was the huge thing. We didn't have any of that. Anything you wanted, you had to buy on your own."

In a typical year, teachers would have enough materials for small groups of students. For example, if students were doing a learning center investigating magnets, the teacher might have a center with a few magnets and a variety of materials to explore. Only four or five students would be at that center at a time. During the 2020-2021 school year, if the teacher wanted to replicate that activity, she needed enough magnets and materials for each individual student. Teacher 5 stated, "everything would be boxed in individual trays and boxes and after you used those materials, I would spread everything out and spray it all down at the end of the day and again the next day." Not only did some teachers have the financial burden of purchasing the extra materials, but there was also a great deal of time spent creating the individual kits or trays and sanitizing all the materials.

Year of First Days. Changing instructional models throughout the year also provided challenges for teachers and students. Three of the six teachers interviewed discussed these challenges. Teacher 3 talked about the challenges of bringing students back in the middle of the school year:

> I think we would have been better off staying online or like what we were doing because what happened was, we realized that kids weren't getting it. And it created lots of other problems, being in the classroom and still having those kids at home.

When students returned to in-person learning in the middle of the year, it changed the social dynamics of the classroom and sometimes created new behavioral challenges for teachers. Additionally, teachers discovered that many of their students who had been at home had significant learning gaps. As Teacher 3 discussed, she realized her students who were at home were not learning as well as she initially thought. Then she was faced with the task of trying to get those students caught up while continuing instruction and also teaching in-person and remote learners simultaneously.

Teacher 2's school had three models that year. Her students started fully remote, then shifted to a hybrid model with different cohorts of students, and finally brought everyone back to school five days a week:

> That was like the third rollout of what school was going to look like, so the third way of introducing to them, this is how it's going to be, this is what you have to do. I felt like we had three first days in that school year.

Teacher 1's school started the year all online and each quarter more students returned to in-person learning. "Each time you made a shift, we had another first day of school. It was just the year of first days and pivoting and changing and adjusting, trying, adjusting, and re-trying just over and over and over and over." Each time the instructional model changed, teachers had to spend time setting expectations for students and often rethinking how they were presenting the material. Teaching online, teaching in-person and remote learners simultaneously, and teaching in-person with COVID protocols all required different approaches, instructional styles, and types of materials. Often these shifts happened without providing any additional planning time or training for teachers; they were expected to seamlessly make these instructional shifts.

The 2020-21 school year required teachers to learn new technology and instructional models, teach in a setting unlike anything they had experienced before, and continually pivot and adjust as the pandemic evolved. Many teachers ended the year both exhausted and optimistic for the upcoming school year and a return to normalcy.

2021-22. However, the 2021-2022 school year continued to provide challenges for teachers. While some teachers did experience some sense of normalcy, the year was also filled with unexpected challenges. Teachers spent the year addressing learning loss and student behaviors, while still facing uncertainty and changing expectations related to COVID.

Normalcy. Normalcy was a theme that came up as teachers talked about the 2021-22 school year. Five of the six teachers interviewed discussed the idea of normalcy during the 2021-22 school year. For some teachers, this was a feeling that school was back to what they were used to as protocols went away or eased up. Teacher 3 shared that when the mask mandate was lifted in her school, she felt like she was able to better connect with her students. "Now I can reach you, I can see you, I can see your facial expressions… we are back, meaning this is regular school now." Teacher 6 described the year as "smooth sailing. Back to what I'm used to, and life is so much better."

However, for other teachers, there was an expectation of having a normal school year when things were *not* normal. As Teacher 1 described it, "back to normal when nothing is normal." While COVID protocols were easing up, there continued to be a sense of uncertainty as things were constantly changing for teachers and students. Teacher 1 explained further, "we can't even define what normal is anymore because we had changed so many different times and there was no such thing as normal." She felt her school district expected things to return to a pre-pandemic façade of normalcy, despite the lingering impacts. Her school had removed all protocols and wanted schooling to appear normal to the community.

Still, others expressed a desire to return to normal, but the continual changes prevented things from ever feeling normal. Teacher 5 explained "once you thought you got the hang of something it would change again, and then it would change. Then once we'd think we were going back to normal, it would change. And we're still pivoting." COVID protocols were still in place in many schools across the country, but they were continually evolving as guidance changed.

Unexpected Challenges. Four of the six teachers were caught off guard by the challenges in the 2021-22 school year. One challenge for teachers was dealing with the learning loss from the previous year. Teacher 3 shared:

> I had to deal with kids from the prior year who had teachers… who didn't really teach them with technology, [and] who didn't really do what I was doing with my kids the year before. So, I had to deal with that part and realized that they…were missing like a whole year of school… They still couldn't read. Their writing was non-existent. It was bad.

Teacher 3 expressed concern over how long it would take to get her students caught up and the lack of resources available to help teachers.

Student behaviors also provided challenges for students. Teacher 4 felt that some of the challenges were due to the constant changes. "We had a lot of change throughout this whole year. It was like every time you turned around something was different. And I think, looking back on it, I think that contributed to a very non-cohesive school experience this year." Teachers also felt that some students were experiencing social-emotional trauma and struggling to adjust to in-person schooling after being home for so long.

Over the three years of the pandemic, teachers experienced a multitude of challenges. The stories they shared give a glimpse into their lived experiences of working during a global pandemic.

Principals

Principal participants were asked the same questions as teachers regarding the shaping of schooling. Their stories can also be divided into four main phases: spring 2020, summer 2020, 2020-21, and 2021-22. As with the teachers, the principals' experiences coalesced around particular themes within each main phase.

Spring 2020. During the spring of 2020, principals were tasked with leading their staff through unprecedented times as schools shifted to online learning. Principals struggled with leading during uncertain times as the pandemic evolved. The shift to online learning also required their staff and families to navigate new technology. For the spring of 2020, principals' experiences coalesced around themes of uncertainty and technology.

Uncertainty. In mid-March, schools across the country shut down. As Principal 3 remembered, "We came to school on Friday the 13th being regular school and then over the weekend flipped our model to full remote, like so many other school systems did around the country." Initially, schools were not sure how long they would stay closed, which confused administrators and their staff.

Principal 5 described the spring of 2020 as "confusion because they kept extending [the closure]. We're going to be closed one more day, one more week, and then finally made the decision for the rest of the year, which was super helpful. We just needed to know." Principal 1 described the feeling as "unknown… we had no idea what was going to happen or what was going on." For Principal 4, there was an overwhelming sense of shock. "That whole time was just drinking from a firehose. Every time I turned around, something shocking was happening."

As events were unfolding, schools were expected to completely transform how they were educating students. Principal 3 shared:

> I would call that weekend and the week that followed it *turning on a dime*. Because we essentially took everything that we know about how we teach children, and we changed it all overnight. And said, "So, we still want high-quality instruction, just like in the classroom, however, you can't have your kids with you and make that work." And so, there was a lot of scrambling to learn different platforms.

In elementary school, many students and teachers were completely unfamiliar with online learning and principals had to help their teachers shift to new instructional styles.

Principal 1 remembered the daily communication with district leaders as the pandemic unfolded. “Every single day I would get on a Webex with all the principal group and my boss, and she would talk us through the next steps, every single day.” School districts were continually making decisions on what instruction should look like, how to provide accommodations for special education students, and how to navigate grades and attendance with remote instruction. Decisions and guidance were being trickled down from the top and principals were tasked with disseminating the information to their already-overwhelmed teachers.

Technology. Technology also provided quite a few challenges for school leaders. Four of the five principals interviewed discussed technology as a key part of the spring of 2020. Not only did they have to help roll out the technology to families, but they also had to support staff as they learned technology that was new for everyone. Principal 1 described the feeling as *helpless*:

> I have never felt so helpless in my life because I’m getting these calls from teachers like *My Webex isn’t working. What do I do?* I’m getting emails from parents, *I can’t get on a website, what do I do?* And here I am sitting in my office at home. It was just a horrible, very helpless feeling. And then not knowing what’s going to happen, was also just the worst thing ever.

Principal 4 found it difficult to support teachers in a new environment. “How am I going to hold these teachers’ hands through a teaching mode that they have never experienced? There was no training on that front end.”

One challenge for principals was the varying level of teacher comfort with technology and the number of new technology platforms teachers were having to learn. As Principal 2 stated, “we were all at different levels of technology and we quickly had to learn how to not only

navigate technology for ourselves but navigate and teach technology to our students and our parents." Principal 3 shared:

> I had some folks who are super tech-savvy and other folks who get panicky when they have to open up an email. So, we're trying to support teachers in figuring things out, which was tricky because there wasn't really a whole lot of time to devote to getting teachers instruction on how to use things. It was just sort of like, "this is what we're going to use and if you can figure it out on your own that would be great."

Everything was being rolled out so quickly that principals did not have enough time to adequately train teachers on how to use any of the technology.

Conversely, Principal 5's school had been one-to-one with Chromebooks for a while leading up to the spring of 2020 which allowed them to transition to an online learning program easier than other districts. "Kids all had devices; they were familiar. So that helped tremendously because then we could really kind of keep going right away." Her teachers had an easier time transitioning to online learning because they were not also having to navigate new devices or a new learning platform.

Summer 2020. The summer of 2020 brought more uncertainty as schools waited on guidance from the state and the CDC to determine reopening plans for the fall. School leaders also found themselves caught in the middle of heated debates in their communities regarding reopening plans.

Uncertainty. Principal 1 described the summer of 2020 as "really hard. It was just hard and then trying to plan for that next year was really hard because we had no idea what it was going to be like." For Principal 5, the summer consisted of "planning and revising and revising." They would work to create reopening plans and then protocols would change. Principal 5 stated, "it was just the planning and the changing and the changing and changing until opening day."

Schools had to wait for guidance from districts, which often came from local health departments or the state. These decisions didn't come until late in the summer or, in some cases, mere days before school was supposed to begin. Principal 3 stated:

> A big part of the summer problem was that we waited for guidance and then it didn't come. Like school is coming, we have to figure this out so that was also a lot of writing a reentry plan. We'd spend lots and lots of time on very detail-oriented plans … and then the rules would change. So, we scrapped the reentry plan and started all over again.

Typically, principals spend a significant amount of time during the summer preparing for the upcoming school year. They put students into classes, create schedules, and determine staff learning goals for the year, among other tasks. During the summer of 2020, principals did not know if they needed to prepare for virtual teaching, hybrid teaching, in-person teaching, or some combination of all three. This made it virtually impossible for them to complete their typical tasks and they were left waiting for guidance or having to continually adjust their plans.

Divisiveness in Community. The summer also brought with it a growing sense of divisiveness in the community. Principal 3 referred to it as "the summer of discontent." As communities debated issues like virtual versus in-person learning and mask mandates, school leaders found themselves in the middle of political debates. Principal 3 explained:

> All of a sudden, I have a strong group of folks who are claiming that this isn't a real thing. And mad at me because I'm going along with it as if I'm the one making the rules. And wanting their children to be non-compliant about certain things like wearing masks. That was really disheartening.

For Principal 1, the summer of 2020 was also filled with divisiveness in her community. She stated:

> That's when all the politics began. That was a nightmare because you're hearing all the people who say you need to start back, we're starting back. And then we're getting emails from the CDC and from everyone else who's saying do not start back. And so that was ugly…it's like we couldn't win. I know it wasn't aimed at principals necessarily, but you couldn't help but feel that way. [At this point in her response, Principal 1 began softly crying as she spoke]. You know people that you thought supported you, have your back, were writing things on Facebook and social media and just saying… really horrible things.

There was a lot of fighting within her community surrounding the decision to reopen schools. Community members in favor of in-person learning were making statements that educators should get another job if they were not in favor of in-person learning. She found it hard not to take these comments personally.

While school leaders were not the ones making major decisions around reopening or mask mandates, they often felt attacked by community members. Principal 3 believed this had to do with access. "They had access to me to share their feelings, where they didn't have access as readily to the Governor or the Commissioner of Education." This theme of divisiveness in the community would continue throughout the stories of the principals and will be discussed more in subsequent sections.

2020-2021. For the 2020 to 2021 school year, the principals' stories focused on the instructional models and COVID protocols that were taking place and the emotional weight they felt of leading a school during these uncertain times.

Instructional Models. While the instructional models looked different at different schools, all the principals discussed the challenges of balancing in-person learners with online learners. For four of the principals' schools, parents had a choice as to whether they wanted their

children to return to school or continue remote learning. Two of the principals' schools had a hybrid model where students were only in-person part of the week, and everyone was at home on other days. For all the principals' schools, these models shifted throughout the year with more students returning to in-person learning as the year progressed. This change provided additional challenges from a leadership perspective and for their staff.

Several of the principals discussed the logistics of determining student placement as parents were able to choose between remote, in-person, and/or hybrid models. Many schools tried to avoid scenarios in which a teacher was simultaneously teaching online and in-person learners. Principal 2 explained how that worked at her school:

> What we tried to do was a model where there was one virtual teacher in every grade level and it really worked out for the most part, but on some campuses, they didn't have enough. So, it was a little crazy because we sometimes had students from other campuses that attended our grade levels if there weren't enough to make a class. So that was a little bit tricky for parents.

Principal 1 discussed the challenges of students returning to in-person and the challenges of students having to go remote when they were COVID-positive or quarantined:

> After January the kids could come back and that was when it got hard…You still had them in and out, the kids that were sick would have to be gone for 10 days, and so it was really ugly. It was just this horrible mess of kids coming in and then the teacher had to give them work. We tried to say okay you go to [teacher]'s online class for five days, and then that online teacher might have 30 kids in a class, and it was just really ugly. That was really hard. I feel like we hobbled through that.

Some principals discussed the behavioral challenges that came with students returning to in-person learning. Principal 5 explained that at her school hybrid students could return to full in-

person learning in April of 2021. “So, we had to combine… cohorts, which was not great in some classrooms. Having the smaller groups and separating certain students was wonderful.” Principal 2 echoed this sentiment:

> They started coming back on campus every six weeks, they had an option to come back on campus or just stay virtual depending on their situation at home. That was a challenge in itself because it changed our numbers for our virtual teachers, and it changed the dynamics of the classrooms every six weeks. We didn’t know what we were going to get every six weeks. It was like a brand new first day of school.

Navigating the changing instructional models provided a logistical challenge for principals throughout the 2020-2021 school year.

COVID Protocols. In addition to the instructional models, principals were responsible for setting and monitoring COVID protocols for in-person learners. This required a lot of work outside the normal scope of a principal’s job and was a challenge discussed by all five principals interviewed. Principal 1 stated, “the desks were separated six feet apart, we had to go in and literally put tape measures around, measure it to make sure they’re 6 feet apart.” Principal 5 discussed the sheer number of protocols, “it was protocols everywhere. It was just stickers everywhere, signs everywhere, reminders, sanitizer everywhere, spots like dots on the cafeteria tables to where they could sit.” Principal 3 stated:

> I remember the night before school started, my son and I were here till 1:00 in the morning marking off six-foot distances in the hallway so that when kids were standing in line, they had a frame of reference. And also, to give them a visual to get used to what six feet look like. And we had cones set up outside so that on the first day of classes, kids would stand out there. So, it was a lot of work.

Principals were overwhelmed by the time it took to set up and monitor COVID protocols and felt that this time took away from the more important work of instructional leadership.

Emotional Weight. Two of the principals discussed the emotional weight they carried regarding the health and safety of their students and staff when returning to in-person learning. Principal 5 described the first day that students returned to the building as "emotional". She stated:

> It was a little emotional. I didn't even think it was going to be. I'm standing up there for arrival and it was half, less than half our kids coming in. It was so quiet. They had their masks, and it was just like *oh my gosh, what are we doing? This is awful*.

Principal 3 described the first day of school as "the worst day of my career". She explained:

> I've never felt so stressed out and upset during my career that something was going to go wrong. I walked around with this feeling that, if I didn't put the right things in place someone could die as a result of that…I wake up every morning thinking today is the day when I haven't done enough, and someone dies as a result of my lack of planning or my lack of attention to detail.

Clearly, the emotional weight Principal 3 carried was immense. Her statements show just how difficult this time was for her. Principals would continue to share about the emotional weight they carried as the pandemic continued. Initially, much of the emotional burden was a result of fearing for the health and safety of students and staff. As the challenges of the pandemic continued, this burden would also entail the emotional toll of taking on teachers' stress. Regardless of the source of the emotional weight, it negatively impacted principals' well-being. As the 2020-21 school year ended, principals' stories shifted to the 2021-22 school year and the continued challenges they faced.

2021-22. Similar to the teachers' experiences, principals were caught off guard by the challenges they faced during the 2021-22 school year. Principals discussed the idea of normalcy through varying experiences and also grappled with the social-emotional challenges students were facing.

Normalcy. There was an expectation, often unspoken, that the 2021-22 school year would bring back a sense of normalcy. For some schools and regions around the country, things even looked more normal with the removal of certain protocols. As Principal 1 stated, "we were kind of all planning on it being back to normal." Her school had no official protocols in place that school year. Students and staff could choose to wear masks, but nothing was required. The lack of COVID protocols made everything more difficult when people started getting sick:

> Immediately after the first three days, then people started getting sick and so we had it really, really, really rough. Honestly, the first three weeks of our school, [COVID] went through two different grade levels, the entire team almost. And so, we started the year with some subs and that was really, really, really, really hard.

She went on to explain that part of what made it so difficult was the lack of protocols in place. "I think the reason why it was so hard was the year before that we had protocols. We had things in place, and we knew what to do." Initially, they did not have a plan in place for what to do when students were sick. The district's protocols had expired at the end of the previous school year.

Some schools and regions continued to have protocols in place, but they were phased out throughout the school year. As principal 5 explained, "this year was kind of a transformation." Principal 3 described it as "a transition… gradually loosening things up over time."

For Principal 4, the removal of COVID protocols and a return to more normal schooling felt like "a light at the end of the tunnel. I feel like we're moving into a direction where things

are going to be good. And we're doing things differently, you know we are still being careful in certain ways, but I feel like the worst is behind us at this point."

Social Emotional Challenges. However, for four of the participants, the year proved to be more challenging than expected. As Principal 1 described, "this year would be the hardest year of my entire life." Principal 5 described the 2021-22 school year as "the social-emotional crisis." She went on to explain that "the kids were really struggling because they'd had a year of no interactions… and then the adults were balancing things at home." She felt the emotional weight of some of those challenges as people were continually coming by her office to let her know what was going on in their personal lives or students were being sent to the office for various behavioral reasons. "And with our students, it's just a lot of behaviors. And so many students with comments or actual actions of hurting themselves… it's scary, you know, the number of kids who had to be seen immediately by mental health." Principal 2 described it as "off the chart anxiety…since we've come back."

Principal 3 talked about the challenges of having students working together again after so long working alone. "After two years of us saying stop sharing, don't touch each other's things, we're like well now you need to share. Sharing is important, sharing is caring. So, they've had to pivot along with us, and the behaviors were interesting." This was especially challenging in the younger grades when students had yet to experience a "normal" school year.

Overall, both teacher and principal participants experienced shock and uncertainty, challenges with technology, and grappled with implementing COVID protocols amidst changing instructional models. Additionally, both participant groups faced unexpected challenges during the 2021-22 school year.

The High Points

After describing the overall plot summary of their COVID-19 educator story, participants were asked to describe several key scenes. The first key scene they were asked to describe was a high point; the high point scene was described as the high point of their entire experience during the pandemic or an especially happy, joyous, exciting, or wonderful moment in the story.

Teachers

For the teacher participants, the high points were encapsulated by three themes: unity, professional growth, and relationships with students.

Unity. For two participants, the high point was coming together through difficult times. Teacher 1 experienced a high point at the beginning of the pandemic during the Spring 2020 lockdown; "people were baking bread and making cookies and collecting masks and working together for the whole… Seeing how we found ways to still stay connected to still work together when we couldn't be together." This feeling of unity was important for Teacher 1 because it was a contrast to the divisiveness she felt later on during her experience. She compared the early days of the pandemic to the initial aftermath of the September 11th tragedy. "It reminded me a lot of after 9/11 – we saw the best of the world come out and the parents were very forgiving and very respectful and appreciative." She felt that everyone was working together for the common good, including colleagues and community members.

For Teacher 2, unity was found in her relationships with her colleagues. They were able to lean on one another during difficult times. "It was like the lifeline I think for all of us … we all became friends more than coworkers, so I think that's the best part." During the initial shutdown in the spring of 2020, the staff would have social Zoom meetings where they would play games. They also created a group chat where they would share ideas and funny jokes. As a result, she

felt she could go to anyone at school when she needed something. This close relationship with her colleagues provided her with significant support during difficult times.

Professional Growth. Teachers were forced to learn a lot of new technology throughout the pandemic and for two teachers, a high point was the professional growth they experienced as a result. Teacher 3 described it as a moment of realizing "I can manipulate everything, and I know that I can do this." As Teacher 4 stated, "when we started, I didn't even know what to do with Microsoft Teams and now I was able to present professional development to the entire staff."

Relationships with Students. For three others, the high point(s) focused on their relationships with students. For Teacher 5, her class size was reduced for the 2020-21 school year and as a result, she felt like her class became very close. They also spent all day together, unable to mix with other classes, so they formed strong relationships.

For Teacher 3 and Teacher 6, a singular high point in their story was seeing students in person after teaching them online. Teacher 3 stated, "when the kids that I had who were fully remote last year all year when I got to see them in person. That for me was my high point. And I got to hug them." Teacher 6 told the story of meeting one of her students in person for the first time:

> He came up to me and was like I am so glad to finally meet you in person… I'm like "Wow you guys do care." I didn't think they cared or were listening to me. You know, they had their cameras off. I didn't even know if they were there half the time… The hugs and all that [were] a high point too. I needed those hugs.

She always considers her class to be like a family and she found it hard to build those connections when her students were online. Having that interaction with her student helped her

see realize that she had still built those relationships with her students, even if it did not always feel like that was the case.

Principals

For the principal participants, the high points were also characterized by unity and a sense of accomplishment.

Unity. Principal 1 felt that COVID taught her to appreciate the time together. She said, "honestly there weren't many high points in the whole thing, but overall, you can look back and say it absolutely makes you appreciate the togetherness." Principal 2's high point was learning that they would be able to return to campus in the fall of 2020. "We were just excited to be able to be back in the hallways of our school… and we made a pact with each other that no matter what we're going to have to do, it was going to be good." Principal 3 was amazed at seeing how her staff was able to come together to work through the challenges. "Everybody came together and did things that you wouldn't normally have to do just to make it through."

Accomplishment. For Principal 4 and Principal 5, the high point was a sense of accomplishment amid the pandemic when they realized that things were working, and everything was going to be okay. For Principal 5, that moment came in September of 2020 when her staff was able to make it through the first full week of school. "My staff was amazing; they were being flexible and making it work. And it was like okay, this maybe won't be as horrible [as anticipated]."

For Principal 4, the sense of accomplishment came because of an interaction with a family that had chosen the remote learning option for the 2020-21 school year. The family had been critical of the school programming during the initial spring shutdown in 2020 but sent positive communication to the principal and her boss about how well the online program was going in the fall of 2020. "There was a lot of negative at that time, so it was a very positive

experience to find that there's a family who feels like we're doing it well." Those words of encouragement helped give her a sense of accomplishment that the hard work she had poured into their online program was paying off.

The Low Points

The second key scene participants were asked to describe was a low point. The low point was described as an especially negative experience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Teachers

For teacher participants, the low points coalesced into three main themes: divisiveness, frustrations with leadership, and COVID-specific challenges.

Divisiveness. For two of the teachers, their low point of the pandemic was encompassed by divisiveness in the community regarding mask mandates. Both teachers are kindergarten teachers. For Teacher 1, her low point occurred at "Meet the Teacher" in the fall of 2021. At her school, masks were optional that school year. During "Meet the Teacher", a family was privately discussing their decision to have their child wear a mask due to a high-risk family member. Another parent overheard from across the room and shouted out "Don't you dare make my child wear a mask!" Teacher 1 reflected on the incident:

> In kindergarten, we're trying to come together and build this family, and when you have such extreme emotions and such differing opinions that have been so vocal and so heated. I don't know where you go from here, how do you bring two polar extremes together?

Teacher 5 had her students wear masks whenever they were using shared materials, which was in line with her school's mask requirements for kindergarten. She shared pictures with families throughout the year. When she shared a picture of her students doing centers while wearing masks, she had a parent get upset that their child was wearing a mask:

> I was just trying to please everybody and do what I thought was right, but also follow the protocols. You just got so many opinions on what is best and what is best practices and trying to appease everybody. That was really, really hard for me to have that mom so mad when I'm just doing what I think is best and trying to keep the kids safe.

Both teachers grappled with opposing viewpoints that placed them in the middle of a political fight that they wanted nothing to do with. They both expressed an inability to please everybody.

Frustrations with Leadership. For two teachers, their low points came in the form of negative observations/evaluations from their school leaders. In both scenarios, the teachers felt that their leadership could have been more understanding. Teacher 4's kindergarten class had an abnormal amount of behavior challenges that year. She discussed the behavioral needs of her students:

> We were coming out of the second year of the pandemic before this year started [and] there were quite a few of my students who did not have typical preschool experiences. Maybe they never attended preschool in person, they attended on the computer, which is not nearly the same thing. So, a lot of the behaviors that they struggled with would be things that most children who were three or four years old would struggle with.

During her evaluation, Teacher 4's administrator was especially critical of her classroom management. As Teacher 4 explained, "You're being observed based on what the expectation was when things were sort of more normal, and now they were not." She felt her administrator was not understanding of the behavioral challenges that came because of the pandemic.

Teacher 6's evaluation took place in the fall of 2020 when she was teaching online. Her administrator observed her online classroom and critiqued her student engagement. "You know, not enough kids had their cameras on, and they were supposed to have the cameras on. It was a lot of negative… I just thought it wasn't a good time to even do evaluations." Teacher 6 felt it

was unfair to be evaluated using an instructional model that her administrator had no experience using.

COVID-specific Challenges. Two teachers' low points had to do with COVID-specific challenges. Teacher 2's low point was a moment when the work overload of the hybrid model became too much. Her school's hybrid model had three cohorts of students and each teacher was responsible for preparing bags with all the materials students would need at home for the week. She described her breaking point one week while preparing the bags:

> I was on the floor in my classroom trying to fill these stupid bags and just tired, it was so exhausting. And somebody walked by, one of the reading teachers came by my door, she saw me. So, she came in and she was like, "*Are you okay?"* I was like "*yep, I'm fine*." And right as I said it, I burst into tears because I was so tired and so overwhelmed and so like, "*I just can't do this anymore."*

Teacher 3's low point also related to specific COVID challenges but involved her inability to help her students during the spring 2020 shutdown. During the initial shutdown, her only means of communication with her students' families were *remind.com*. Through *remind.com*, she shared online resources/activities for students to complete in addition to the packets the district was preparing. One of her students was trying hard to complete his assignments and his aunt was trying to help while his parents were sick. In her conversations with the aunt, Teacher 3 learned that the student's family all lived in one room, and everybody was sick.

> She was trying to help him as best she could. I mean I wanted to go over to the house to help if I could. To me, that was the low point because I realized probably half my kids were like that, more than half and I wasn't reaching them… I was scared, and there was nothing I could do.

Teacher 3 taught at a low-income school and many of her students were living in poverty. She realized at that moment how bad things were for so many people. She recognized how lucky she was to have an income, space, and resources and realized how many of her students were struggling. She felt helpless at that moment.

Principals

For principal participants, their low points reflected the emotional weight of leadership during COVID and the divisiveness they had to navigate through the pandemic.

Emotional Weight. For two principals, the emotional weight that came with the health concerns of the pandemic were the low points of their stories. Principal 1 shared a story of a medically fragile student who started school in the fall of 2021. The parents requested a teacher who would be cautious about COVID and was vaccinated. "They're trusting you with their baby and if this child gets sick with COVID it can be really dangerous. And they're like *we're trusting you…* I do not know who is vaccinated and not vaccinated… So, I put them where I thought was best." Later in the school year, the teacher tested positive for COVID. "That's a big weight on the shoulders of everyone. Then you start to think how many other situations are like this?"

For Principal 3, the low point occurred the day before the first day of school in the fall of 2020 when a staff member had to quarantine. Not only did this create a staffing issue for the first day of in-person instruction, but that staff member had also been around a medically fragile student earlier that day. "That was the low point, and it was sort of, we did all this planning, and I had all these theoretical situations that could happen, but now school [has] not even started and I've got a situation in front of me." Both principals feared that a child would get sick and they carried the emotional weight of protecting the children in their schools.

Divisiveness. Divisiveness within the community was a recurring theme in the principals' stories and encompassed the low points of two of the principals. Principal 4's low point came

because of ongoing conflict with a family who had chosen remote learning for the 2020-21 school year.

> This family literally beat me down on a weekly basis. I'm talking emails that were pages long, every week. Complaining about the teacher, complaining about the program. I mean it was to the point that I would log onto the class with the teacher just to prevent the parent from berating the teacher during the class online.

For Principal 5, her low point was also the result of a conflict with a parent, specifically regarding the mask mandate. At her school, a parent sent her child to school without a mask. When the principal asked the child to put a mask on, he called his mom who ended up picking him up from school. "So, she comes up and she's filming me. Because I was refusing her child an education. And I'm like "*No, he's welcome to come in, we'd love to have him… we just have to have a mask. We're still being told that by the state*." The parent later posted the video to social media. "It was just that moment, [I wondered] '*Why am I doing this?* "

The Turning Points

The third key scene participants were asked to describe was a turning point in their story. This was defined as an event that marked an important change in themselves or their educator story during the pandemic. Some participants selected moments that represented positive shifts, while others shared moments that represented negative shifts in their stories.

Teachers

Five of the teachers spoke about positive turning points in regard to their own professional growth. For one teacher, her turning point was a negative shift in public perception, particularly within her community.

Professional Growth. For five of the teacher participants, their turning points were characterized by professional growth during the pandemic. Technology was a big part of

teachers' stories and for two of the participants, figuring out the technology was a turning point in their stories. Teacher 2 explained that mastering the technology during the hybrid model allowed her to "feel like we were teaching again." Teacher 3 stated, "I could start to teach rather than survive."

Other teachers felt that the 2020-21 school year helped them grow in their classroom management abilities and increased their confidence. For Teacher 5, this was a result of the smaller class size and being the only adult in the room. As a kindergarten teacher, she had always had a teacher's aide, but during the 2020-21 school year she was the only adult in the classroom. She felt that experience helped her to be more confident in her abilities. Teacher 6 felt that the hybrid model improved her classroom management, and she got better at being able to facilitate multiple things happening at the same time. "When the kids came back, I [could] do three or four things at a time."

Teacher 4's turning point came from her acceptance into a Ph.D. program. As part of her program, she was taking on new roles and responsibilities, including facilitating professional development on her campus. She shared, "There was a lot of negativity in the classroom, but then there were these great rewards professionally." While five of the participants identified positive turning points, not everyone conveyed a positive turning point.

Divisiveness. For Teacher 1, her turning point was a moment of divisiveness in the community that she felt symbolized a shift from teachers being viewed as heroes to enemies. Every year, parents at her school are asked to send in money for parties. In December of 2021, parents were not allowed on campus due to district COVID policies but were asked to send in money to help pay for supplies for the holiday party. The parents refused to send in the money in protest of not being allowed on campus. "We suddenly were the enemy, and I don't know when I became the enemy, I thought we were all in this together for kids and now suddenly I'm the

enemy. I'm just trying to look out for the welfare of everybody." Teacher 1 was the only participant to discuss divisiveness in the community as a turning point. However, throughout the interviews, three of the six teacher participants discussed the challenges related to a growing sense of divisiveness in their communities throughout the pandemic.

Principals

For the principals, the turning points did not fit into similar themes. However, they could be interpreted as either positive turning points or negative turning points; positive turning points were moments in which principals either experienced a positive shift in their perspective or when things began to improve.

Positive Turning Points. Principal 1's turning point involved her school community. During the fall of 2021, there was a lot of divisiveness within her community. Before the holidays, parents were very upset because they were not allowed to attend the holiday party. "That got really ugly, really ugly, lots of meetings with PTA and things like that. So that was a little bit worrisome, we're leaving the holiday break and people are mad." In January, the school had a schoolwide reading program that included community involvement. Parents were able to attend an event at the school. "It kind of got people off thinking about all the other things and negative things, but let's look at what we are doing, what we can do together."

Principal 2's turning point was the shift from functioning as a COVID monitor to again being able to function as an instructional leader during the 2021-22 school year. During the previous school year (2020-21), she felt that she and her assistant principal were not able to be instructional leaders. "The COVID protocols just wore us out… we weren't instructional leaders, we weren't having fun, because we were monitors and we were babysitters, and we were really just monitoring COVID protocols so much." Her administrative team made a conscious decision to return to instructional leaders during the 2021-22 school year. "We were so determined to be

in classrooms last year and to make a difference; to be the instructional leaders that we're meant to be, and we were."

For Principal 3, from March 13, 2020, to June 2022, she did not take any vacation time. During the 2020-21 school year, she worked 12-to-16-hour days, seven days a week. She leads a small school, so there is no one else to help with a lot of the tasks. "It was kind of all on me." "So, no vacation, long days, long weeks, and I started feeling truly worn out." When the 2021-22 school year let out, she took time off. For the first week, she was lost, pacing around her house, and feeling like she needed to be working:

> It took me a full week to just be okay with being on vacation… So, I think the turning point was that I finally feel like I'm in a place where I can take care of myself, which is going to make me a better administrator for taking care of other people.

When she was struggling to relax at the beginning of her vacation, she reached out to her boss who encouraged her to rest and take the time off. That support helped her feel okay with taking the time off.

The turning point for Principal 4 came during the 2020-21 school year when she was experiencing doubts about managing in-person and online instructional programs. As a principal at an independent school, she would meet with other division heads to share ideas and collaborate. During one of these meetings, she shared about the online programming at her school. The other leaders were impressed with her program. "It was so affirming [because] I felt like I was doing nothing right ever, that other people felt like what we were doing was right." This moment was pivotal in helping her persevere through a challenging time. "That was a point where I realized okay, I can do this. This is as hard as it's going to get if we can just keep trucking through. Other people are seeing value in what we're doing."

Negative Turning Point. Conversely, Principal 5's turning point was a negative shift in perspective. Her turning point was a result of the 2021-22 school year. "I've been in education now 31 years and this was the worst ever." This year was a turning point because it made her decide to retire next school year as soon as she is eligible. "I feel young, I still love, I did love my job… I gotta get out. This is not, this is not what it should be." She stated that she would have left at the end of the school year if she would have been eligible for retirement:

> It was just keeping up with all the social-emotional needs of myself, the kids, and the adults in the building. It really boiled down to people's social-emotional needs and being able to balance it all … because I'm the type of person [who] takes it on … [and] then I get stressed out.

She feels like she can no longer carry the weight of caring for her staff and her students. She had always envisioned herself staying well past retirement age, but the emotional burden she carried over the last year left her feeling burnt out. She made the decision to retire at the end of the 2022-23 school year, the first year she will be eligible for benefits.

Taken together, the key scenes and participants' descriptions of school provide an overview of their lived experiences during the pandemic. The next section will explore some of the specific factors that influenced teachers' experiences.

Challenges and Factors that Influenced Teachers' Experiences

During both interviews, teachers were asked about the challenges they faced and the various factors that influenced their professional experiences and perceptions of their work during the pandemic. This will be addressed through three main sections: challenges, resiliency factors, and leadership support and/or lack thereof.

Challenges

Teachers faced a multitude of challenges throughout the pandemic. Many of these challenges have been discussed in previous sections. Teachers were also asked to identify the greatest challenge they experienced while working during a pandemic. The challenges discussed by teachers fit into four main themes: uncertainty, health concerns, student concerns, and divisiveness within the community.

Uncertainty

Uncertainty provided a challenge for teachers and was mentioned by four of the six teachers interviewed. One aspect of uncertainty was the number of things that were changing, or the new components being introduced. Teacher 1 stated, "everything we were getting bombarded with from central admin, from curriculum and instruction, all the technology, all of the changes to things." Teachers were required to master a lot of new technology and transition existing lessons over to new digital formats. This also created some uncertainty as to how to make online learning developmentally appropriate for young learners. Teacher 1 stated, "That was a hard point, a challenging point, to make everything that should be interactive…watching on a screen's not the same thing."

Additionally, there was a sense of uncertainty regarding the future and what school would look like as the pandemic went on. Teacher 3 stated, "never knowing what the day was going to bring because every day was changing." As Teacher 5 explained, "it was the unknown for me and…the constant protocol changing, not just CDC but within the school." Teacher 4 described it as, "nobody knew what they were doing. You would start doing it one way and then everything would change again."

For Teacher 4, a kindergarten teacher, uncertainty regarding expectations from the administration added to her stress. At her school, they have separate, dedicated blocks of time for

reading, math, social studies, and science instruction. “So, we still had to do all those things. But we weren’t sure if we had to do them or not.” Due to COVID protocols, they had so many additional transitions that took up instructional time, such as handwashing breaks and cleaning desks. They were still told to have science and social studies in their lesson plans, but the unspoken understanding was to focus on math and reading. However, nobody would ever come out and say it was okay if they did not teach science or social studies every day. So, the teachers were unclear on how they were supposed to accomplish everything.

Health Concerns

Another challenge for teachers was balancing their health concerns and the concerns of others, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic. Teacher 3 explained, “worrying about my own health and my family’s health, I think that was a big part of it in the beginning.” She reflected on the beginning of the pandemic and the teachers’ return to in-person instruction:

> In the beginning, remember how we really didn’t know what COVID was and how scared we were because we didn’t know what it really was, and almost resentful that we had to be in that situation. You know of not knowing and feeling like we could catch whatever it was and possibly of death in that whole thing. And our school wasn’t following protocols very well… there were *no* protocols being followed. It was every man for himself. And I was remembering how scary that was at that time.

Teacher 5 discussed her health concerns “will I get sick? Will I get my kids sick? Am I making the right decisions, am I making the best choices for my family, for school? I felt a lot of anxiety.” Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 also talked about their fears of bringing COVID home to their older parents.

In addition to the concern for their health or the health of their families, there was also a sense of responsibility for staying healthy so the students would be able to remain in person and not need a substitute teacher. As Teacher 5 explained:

> There are no subs. These families need their kids to be in school. And if I'm sick and I need to quarantine… if it's my fault and I send all these kids home and then these parents have to deal with their kids being home for two weeks. I carried around that sense of responsibility and that was really hard.

These concerns continued throughout the 2021-22 school year as substitute teachers were not readily available.

Student Concerns

Four teachers discussed student concerns as challenges or factors that contributed to their stress during the pandemic. Students' achievement, or lack thereof, provided a challenge for teachers. For Teacher 6, she was concerned "if the kids were learning or not… and then the parents worrying about the kids not learning and not participating." Teacher 4 discussed the challenge of "balancing the instructional demands with the developmental needs of the children, particularly when those needs are exacerbated because of other circumstances."

Student behavior also created a challenge, particularly as students returned to a more "normal" school setting. As Teacher 2 stated, "it's like they didn't know how to be in a classroom without the COVID procedures… it's like they forgot how to play, they forgot how to cooperate, they forgot how to be nice to one another." Teacher 4, a kindergarten teacher, felt like some of the behavior challenges were due to her students missing out on typical preschool experiences. "A lot of the behaviors that they struggled with would be things that most children who were three- or four-years-old would struggle with."

Along with student behavior, teachers felt that the social-emotional needs of their students provided additional challenges, particularly when district support was lacking. Teacher 2 had quite a few students who were dealing with significant trauma. She shared about a student who had to be hospitalized and several other students who routinely met with the school counselors. She talked about the perception that she struggled to obtain resources for those students: "[I felt] like they weren't getting the support that they needed. And the louder I fought for it, the more trouble I got into, and I don't care. They needed what they needed."

Teacher 6 discussed the challenge of connecting with her students during online instruction and how much harder it was to give them the "motherly hugs that they so needed and wanted." She always views the classroom as a family. "They're so used to us, you know we're doctors, lawyers, everything to these kids. That hug is beneficial."

Divisiveness in Community

Teacher 1 described the 2021-22 school year as a year of division, particularly amongst her community. She grappled with opposing viewpoints that place her in the middle of a political fight that she wants nothing to do with. She shared:

> I don't want to be attacked every day. I'm tired of being the bad guy. I work too hard to always be the bad guy. [I] want to be heard. [I] want somebody to understand that piece of it. We're just trying to help your kids. I just want to be a teacher. I don't want to be involved in your politics.

At the beginning of the pandemic, she felt that teachers were viewed as heroes, and she felt respected and supported. However, that changed over the course of the pandemic, and she suddenly felt that teachers had become the enemy or the bad guys.

Two other teachers interviewed also discussed the divisiveness within the community and shared the idea that they were stuck in the middle of a political fight. Teacher 2 stated, "we went

from being these amazing people, teachers are amazing to '*What are these teachers? Who do they think they are?*'" Teacher 5 talked about the challenge of juggling so many different opinions within the community: "We never knew who was going to feel strongly about something versus something else." The divisiveness that took place in communities across the country negatively impacted teachers' experiences and was a source of stress for teachers interviewed in this study.

Resiliency Factors

Teachers shared the various resiliency factors that helped them persevere during the challenges of the pandemic. Three main resiliency factors emerged as prominent among study participants' stories: supportive relationships, self-care/personal attributes, and sense of purpose.

Supportive Relationships

Supportive relationships with family and colleagues were a significant factor in overcoming the stress and challenges of the pandemic. As Teacher 3 stated, "Other people really helped us through this." Teacher 5 talked about the importance of relationships with others who were going through the same thing; "Having somebody talk me off the ledge, having a sounding board of people that were doing exactly what I was doing." Teacher 4 discussed the importance of working together as a grade-level team, "You realized we needed to band together, or we were just going to sink."

Support from leadership was a factor for some teachers. Teacher 2 felt that her principal's support was an important factor in being able to cope with stress during the pandemic. "She would basically help with anything that she could. She also just listened and so you could go in with a complaint or you could go in with a question and she would try to find the answer." Teacher 5's administrator also provided support. "[I could] go to admin, and this is what we're

dealing with, and have them either take it on and take it off of my shoulders or help me figure out how to deal with the stressors."

Self-care/Personal Attributes

Some teachers relied on personal coping strategies such as finding time for self-care or focusing on the positive. Teacher 4 found that running in the mornings helped her persevere through challenging days. "I would tell myself if I can get my miles in the morning, I can deal with anything. I found that to be a very good form of building tolerance for me." Teacher 6 found ways to take time for herself: "taking time for yourself too was something that needed to be done."

Teacher 4 found that breaking up the day into smaller chunks helped her get through a challenging school year. This was a strategy she had learned from personal hardships before the pandemic. "In my head, I would tell myself *it's almost lunchtime, the end of the day's almost here*. It's horrible to say, but you have to find psychological ways to get through things when they're hard."

Sense of Purpose

Some teachers focused on their sense of purpose in their careers. Teacher 1 explained "I think my 'why' I do it is so deeply rooted that it takes a lot to shake that. I'm doing it for the kids." Teacher 6 focused on the achievement of her students, "reaffirming that I was doing it and that the kids were learning. That was a big factor that helped cheer you up out of that slump." Teacher 2 talked about focusing on the joys she felt in the classroom:

> I still live for that aha moment when the kids finally get something. There is still joy there… my goal this year is to just focus on what's happening in my room and try not to let all the outside stuff become such an issue."

Teacher 4, a kindergarten teacher, tried to focus on the importance of kindergarten. “One of the important things, and even in all the craziness of last year, is still remembering that these are little people. And this is their first experience with school, and it is so important that it's enjoyable.”

Leadership Support/Lack Thereof

Teacher participants were asked about the ways their school leadership helped support and motivate them during the pandemic and the things they wished their leaders did or did not do to support or motivate them. These factors will be discussed in three main categories: what helped, what hurt, and what teachers wished for from leadership.

What Helped

Teachers appreciated when their leaders showed up and were physically present in their classrooms and around the school. As Teacher 1 expressed, “when they show up and they come, and they see what the kids are doing.” Teacher 5 appreciated the way her principal always had her back, “always being in your corner, going to bat for you.”

Teachers also felt that recognition and acknowledgment from leaders were helpful: “I think there was a lot of just recognizing the positives that everybody was doing and that kept everybody’s spirits up,” Teacher 2 shared. Her principal kept a shout-out board in the staff room to recognize the positive things that were happening. Teacher 5’s principal was “everybody’s hype girl” and her positivity helped teachers stay uplifted.

Supportive relationships with colleagues and leaders were important coping factors for teachers and some teachers felt that their leaders did a good job of fostering those relationships. Teacher 2’s principal instituted a standing, weekly Zoom room during lockdown for staff to get together virtually.

What Hurt

Some teachers did not feel that their leadership did anything to support them or help them feel motivated during the pandemic. As Teacher 3 stated, “I think some teachers had more motivation than others to do better. I think it was all intrinsic motivation.” Teacher 4 shared the same sentiment about her principal, “I think she thought that she was [supportive], but I don’t really feel like there was any kind of additional support.”

A lack of acknowledgment contributed to some teachers’ stress and led to teachers feeling “invisible”. Teacher 1 shared, “I feel invisible. I feel totally and completely invisible. I’m very much an introvert. I don’t want to be the center of attention; I also don’t want to be invisible.” Teachers were working in conditions that no one had experienced before; in the words of Teacher 4, “It would have been really nice for them to just acknowledge that we were doing our best in situations that had never been gone through before.”

A lack of follow-through from campus and district leaders was another factor that negatively impacted teachers’ experiences. Teacher 1 shared that she invited her principal to watch lessons, but the principal did not follow through. Teacher 2 experienced the same thing with district leaders during their complicated hybrid model.

There was also an expectation that things return to normal when school still felt anything but normal for teachers and their students. “We need to make decisions around where [the kids] are, not where they should be if the pandemic never happened,” Teacher 2 stated. Teacher 4 felt that campus leadership could have been more realistic about the challenges of teaching during the pandemic and this lack of understanding undercut her principal’s attempts at motivating the staff:

> I feel like she would say things of that sort, but then be like "*Okay, now give me your plan book"* or "*Okay, I'm coming in for a walkthrough*." I know some of those things she couldn't change, but some of it, she could have sort of looked the other way.

Teachers expressed a desire for administrators to recognize how challenging things were and how teachers were doing their best during difficult times.

What Teachers Wished For

Teacher participants were asked what they wished their leaders did or would refrain from doing in order to better support them. Teachers wanted more resources to address the social and emotional challenges their students were experiencing, particularly in the 2021-22 school year. Teacher 2 expressed, "I wish that there was actual support." Teacher 3 shared about getting a student who was struggling behaviorally into a new mentor program in her district. He was then kicked out of the program for inappropriate behavior. "He was kicked out of this program because of his behaviors, the same behaviors that he's in there for." She wished her district provided more counselors and that the counselors received more training in how to address the needs of the students.

Teachers also wanted more district resources, support, and training around the technology they were expected to use along with help training the parents on how to use the technology. Teacher 3 felt that the district leadership could have done more to take things off teachers' plates. "Nobody ever asked the teachers, what do you need?" noted Teacher 3. "What would make it better?"

Challenges, coping factors, and school leadership all played influential roles in teachers' experiences. The next section will explore the challenges and various factors that influenced principals' experiences.

Challenges and Factors that Influenced Principals' Experiences

During both interviews, principal participants were asked about the challenges they faced and the various factors that influenced their professional experiences and perceptions of their work during the pandemic. Participants were asked about how they supported their teachers and any challenges or factors that constrained them regarding supporting their teachers. This will be addressed through three main sections: challenges, resiliency factors, and supporting teachers.

Challenges

During the pandemic, principals faced unprecedented challenges and expressed that the difficulties they encountered were unlike anything they had experienced before. While principals discussed a multitude of challenges throughout their interviews, when they were asked about the greatest challenge they experienced during the pandemic, three main themes emerged. Principals found the greatest challenges of working during the pandemic to be uncertainty, helplessness, and work overload. Each theme will be discussed in the subsequent sections.

Uncertainty

Principals discussed the uncertainty of leading during the pandemic as things were constantly changing, there was a lack of consensus on many of the issues, and so much of what they were facing had never been experienced before. As Principal 4 said, "we had always kind of done school a certain way … then COVID sort of blew all that up." Principal 1 summarized:

> You're constantly making decisions and sometimes they're wrong or [you're] making a plan and it's wrong, and no one, you know, we've never done it before. There's no protocol to follow. I'm a big person to look at what's been done before, let me talk to someone who's done this, let me read about this so I can figure out what to do – but there was no handbook, there's no playbook, there's no one to talk to. You just had to make a decision and go with it, and sometimes it worked, and sometimes it didn't. So that was

> really the hardest thing about this year, just so many decisions and no one to really talk to.

Principals were tasked with ensuring protocols were being followed and felt a sense of responsibility in keeping everyone safe and healthy. This was especially challenging due to the uncertainty regarding the virus and the changing guidance from the CDC. As Principal 3 stated, "I was totally out of my comfort zone in terms of infectious diseases." Principal 5 explained the changing guidance led to "constant adjusting, whether it was the state changing their mind or making us wait on requirements and guidelines or the Department of Health and state arguing over it." The continually changing guidance added to the challenges principals were facing; even when they did make difficult decisions, those decisions often had to be changed to stay in line with updated protocols and recommendations.

Helplessness

Principals felt a sense of helplessness regarding several different areas of their job. One aspect of helplessness was the inability to please everyone with decisions, particularly regarding highly politicized decisions such as masks, social distancing, or visitor policies. As Principal 1 shared, "someone is unhappy in pretty much every decision that you make." Many decisions and factors were out of their control. "I think it all boils really down to that, what was in my control and what wasn't… to have all that out of my control is stressful," Principal 5 stated.

Principals also felt helpless in supporting teachers, particularly with online teaching or hybrid models. "Watching teachers be so stressed and challenged. You were helpless… there were so many things you didn't have an answer for," Principal 1 stated. Principal 2 talked about trying to help teachers with programs she had never used, "it was sink or swim." In addition to helping teachers navigate the technical difficulties, they were also dealing with anxiety and burnout. Principal 4 felt one of the hardest parts of the entire thing was "helping teachers to

navigate their own anxiety and burnout, balancing that with my own anxiety and burnout." Principal 5 echoed this sentiment, "it was just keeping up with all the social-emotional needs of myself, the kids, and the adults in the building." Often times principals felt helpless in relieving the sources of stress for teachers. Their teachers were stressed out because of instructional models or COVID protocols that principals were unable to change.

Principal 2 discussed the challenges of communicating with her staff and the school community during the early days of the pandemic when everyone was at home. "Some families have left and gone to live with other people. Not being able to reach our families, that was probably the hardest piece." When families left to stay with other people, they were still enrolled in her school. However, if their children were not engaging in the online work and parents were not answering phone calls or emails, principals felt helpless in reaching those families.

Work Overload

During the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, principals had a lot of additional responsibilities added to their plates. This led to some experiencing work overload. Principal 3 shared that she was working 12- to 16-hour days, 7 days a week which led to her feeling worn out. "I was up here on weekends, cleaning, sanitizing, whatever, and there was always work to be done on the weekends. And so, I was pretty much working, going home, and going to bed." Principal 3's school is a small school and she found herself filling in a variety of roles. She was the only one allowed to go into different classrooms because of contact tracing requirements, so she acted as a substitute when teachers were out. She would often work as a substitute during the school day and then complete her principal duties in the evenings. Principal 3 also shared about filling in as the custodian, the cook, and the PE teacher. She felt that if she did not take care of those jobs, then no one else would.

Principal 4 also discussed the work overload, “you already had the list of the regular things to do. But now they all have to be done differently or multi-step and so it’s like an exponentially growing list of things to always be doing.” Principals found themselves responsible for monitoring COVID protocols, conducting contact tracing, and calling families regarding quarantines.

All of these duties were added on top of their regular workload and took away from the work that drew many of them to the profession – instructional leadership. As Principal 3 expressed, “All of a sudden, my job was not what I signed up for at all.” Principal 4 began her work as an administrator in the fall of 2019. She felt hopeful that the 2022-23 school year would allow her to “finally get to do the job I always thought I would do, because up to this point … none of it has been textbook.” Principals felt pulled in a variety of directions between the added responsibilities and the added meetings with district leadership and health protocols. They also had a steady stream of teachers and students needing their support in dealing with social-emotional issues. Additionally, many schools experienced substitute shortages and administrators had to ensure classes had coverage when teachers had to be out. All of these resulted in work overload for principals.

Resiliency Factors

Principals were asked about the resiliency factors that helped them cope with the challenges they faced during the pandemic. These factors can be categorized into two main themes: supportive relationships and boundaries.

Supportive Relationships

Principals leaned on others to make it through difficult times and the principal group was a significant source of support for participants. Four of the five principals interviewed discussed the support they drew from their principal groups. Principal 1 was thankful she had “a really

strong principal group that we were really tight, and we supported each other." This network not only provided practical support as they could share ideas, but it also provided emotional support. As Principal 1 shared, "everyone was going through it – you weren't alone." Principal 2 also drew support from other elementary school principals, "our elementary group has always stayed very close and helped each other and supported each other." During the spring 2020 shutdown, they would have virtual happy hours after work to provide each other support during a difficult time. Principal 3's network of elementary principals leaned on one another throughout the pandemic; she attributed the support from fellow elementary principals as one of the biggest factors that helped her cope with the stress and challenges of working in schools throughout the pandemic.

As Principal 4 stated, "it's hard to hit those high points all by yourself, those high points come sort of as a result of your interactions with other positive people." Principals in this study also drew support from their district leadership. Principal 1 found it helpful to talk things through with her boss, someone she considered "the smartest person I know." She liked that her boss would listen, ask questions, and coach her through identifying a solution. Principal 3's superintendent was a significant source of support. "He was very supportive the whole way through from the first moment… right up until I sent him an email and told him I don't know how to be on vacation, and he walked me through how to do it." Principal's 5 superintendent was also supportive, "he always let me just do my thing. He trusted I'll do my job. He also communicated a ton." When asked about the factors that helped them overcome the stress and challenges of working in schools throughout the pandemic, all five principals in this study discussed their colleagues and district leadership.

Boundaries

In addition to leaning on others for support, four principals also talked about setting personal boundaries as a means of coping with stressors. Principal 1 felt that balance was a crucial part of coping with the stress of the pandemic. While she admitted this was "easier said than done," she worked hard to keep doing the things she enjoyed outside of school. Principal 5 also discussed balance, "I valued the time outside of work more, like my nights. I just needed that time or the weekends. I tried to ensure that was really uninterrupted."

Principal 3 found it difficult to set boundaries during the course of the pandemic because the work overload was too demanding. She found herself feeling burnt out. In the summer of 2022, she took vacation time to unplug from work and practice self-care. She felt that she was finally "in a place where I can take care of myself, which is going to make me a better administrator for taking care of other people."

Principal 4 also found herself struggling at home with her family because of a lack of boundaries. "I have been so spread thin and so just burned out and tearful and unhappy or annoyed just coming home every day." She talked with her husband and decided she needed to set better boundaries around work for the sake of her well-being and her family's well-being. "I had to do some real gut checks … and learn to leave [work] at school." She went on to explain:

> I can't take home the stress, I can't take home the frustration. I'm not going to go home and check emails. I'm not going to go home and return phone calls. I'm going to go home and be a wife and a mother. And so that was really what kept me from giving up, was shifting my focus to my family.

Both Principal 3 and Principal 4 felt that setting boundaries and allowing themselves time to recharge was good for their leadership practices. They felt they were better able to care for others after they had taken time for themselves to recharge.

Supporting Teachers

Principal participants were asked about the ways they helped support and motivate teachers during the pandemic and the challenges they faced. These factors will be discussed in two main sections: facilitating factors and challenges.

Facilitating Factors

Facilitating factors refer to the actions that principals took that they felt served to support or motivate their teachers during the pandemic. Principals felt that existing relationships with staff and open-door policies helped their teachers feel supported. Principal 1 stated, "I think people knew they could come and talk to myself or my assistant principal or whomever it is and let us know what's going on so that we could help." During the spring of 2020, Principal 2 used small group meeting check-ins to provide teachers "a chance to sound off, and then we would listen."

Principals tried to acknowledge and recognize teachers by writing notes and doing small acts to encourage them. For Principal 2, this meant making home visits during the spring of 2020 when everyone was at home. "We continued to just let them know that they were appreciated, and the hard work mattered."

Existing systems and school culture also helped to support teachers during stressful times. Principal 1 felt "the school is a pretty well-oiled machine. It's not perfect or anything, but we have those things established already and the teachers were really good about doing those things." Principal 2 was intentional about returning to existing systems in the 2021-22 school year, "back to those systems that we knew were good, research-based systems," such as professional learning communities (PLCs) and classroom visits.

Additionally, principals tried to keep morale up by celebrating little moments, although some recognize that in retrospect this may have been viewed as "toxic positivity." Principal 3

highlighted national days and planned treats for teachers around the national days. Principal 4 said, “we were very ‘gifty’ this year, every holiday there was some little gift.”

Finally, principals tried to honor teachers’ time. Principal 1 would “cancel a meeting if we don’t need it or make it a paper meeting if we can.” Principal 3 tried to take care of everything for her teachers, which she felt set some unhealthy precedents that she is having to backtrack on, but it allowed her staff to feel supported knowing she would act on what they needed. Principal 4 honored teachers’ time by getting non-teaching staff or parent volunteers to cover duties for teachers, “coverage to have more time to breathe.”

Challenges

This section will examine the challenges principals faced in supporting their teachers or what they wished they could have changed to better support their teachers during the pandemic. Principal 1 wished for more staff. If she had more staff, she could help cover teachers’ lunch duty. She felt that this was something that could go a long way in boosting teacher morale. In general, she wished for more staff to better support teachers. Principal 5 wished she had more substitutes to fill in for teachers when they had to be out.

Principals also expressed a desire to reduce the number of new programs being implemented. Principal 2 wanted to see less turnover in resources and programs in her district:

> There’s never been one pill or magic bullet thing that we can have for students, and we are constantly grasping at all these different things. If we can just stick to something long enough to see if it works, I think that’d be better than just changing it all the time.

Principal 3 said, “everyone has been through something that’s really hard and people need more time to take a breath and focus on self-care.” She would like to see district leadership be mindful of the residual effects of COVID that educators are experiencing.

Some principals expressed that the last three years took them away from instructional leadership. Principal 5 explained:

> It took us away from what a principal is supposed to do – an instructional leader. That's what we've always been told that that's your priority and we really ventured off into a lot of health and nursing things and measuring. So, it was just a lot, and we weren't able to do really what our role says we should be doing.

Part of being an instructional leader for the participants involved being physically present in their building. Principal 4 wished she had been more present for her teachers but was constantly pulled into meetings and tasks that kept her away from classrooms; "no amount of giving them lunch duty coverage and gifts can make up for my presence. So that's a huge thing that I wish I could undo."

Challenges and coping factors played influential roles in individual principals' experiences. Additionally, facilitating factors and challenges impacted the extent to which principals were able to support their teachers during the pandemic. The next section will present an unanticipated finding of leadership stories.

Leadership Stories

An unanticipated finding was leadership stories that revealed unique challenges, creative problem-solving, and tales of crisis leadership. While these stories may not fit in the themes of principals' stories, they offer an important glimpse into their experiences.

Principal 3 shared about her foresight going into the shutdown and how it allowed her teachers and students to be slightly more prepared in March 2020 than many other schools across the country. She talked about sitting in meetings with boards of health in late February and early March of 2020, recognizing that her job was "about to change dramatically." During the week of

March 8-13, 2020, cases were spreading rapidly. Her school was scheduled to have an early release on Friday, March 13th and the afternoon was for teacher professional development.

> So, the plan for that Friday the 13th was going to be to give teachers some time to start thinking about what will be put together if kids are going to have to be home. And worst-case scenario was two weeks, "What do we do if kids had to be home for two weeks?" And they were going to start thinking about that after the kids went home for early release on that Friday. The day before that, I got a call from my cousin who teaches in Connecticut and she said, they just shut us down. And so, I said, "If we wait until the kids go home tomorrow, it's going to be too late."

She decided to have her instructional assistants cover classes for the morning and gave her teachers time to get materials prepared. She had teachers ensure that kids had books to read, journals to write in, and math manipulatives with them when they left school that Friday. Her foresight allowed her school to avoid having families come to pick up materials later during the shutdown.

Principal 5 changed the way some of her staff were utilized in a creative attempt to support her teachers with virtual instruction during the 2020-21 school year:

> I had four intervention teachers. So, because they couldn't meet with kids, they [could] only see them maybe once a week, I decided I wasn't using them in that role for the year. So, I took each one of my [intervention] teachers and put them with a grade level teacher and they were my remote team for that grade level. Because they had up to 25 to 30 kids that were choosing to go remote.

She let the remote teams decide how to work together. One grade level split the students into two smaller classes, while the other grade levels used some form of co-teaching. It allowed them to meet with smaller groups and get more instructional time with students.

Principal 1 shared a story about standing up to her district leadership. Two days before the first day of the 2021-22 school year, her district decided to change course and offer an online option for parents. COVID cases were on the rise and parents were expressing outrage that a virtual option was no longer being offered, particularly for students coming from high-risk families. The district surveyed the community and found that Principal 1's school had the highest number of families wanting a remote option. She got a call on the Friday before the first day of school informing her she needed to have one teacher in every single grade level teach online for the entire district.

> This was on a Friday and school started Monday and I said "No, no. I'm not. I'm not doing it. I'm not, I'm not, I will not do that. You guys can't ask me to do that. I'm not asking my teachers to do that. I promised them and you promised them that we were not going to do this." …and so, I got many calls and I just said "We're not doing it. I don't care what you do, I'm not going to" … So, then I kept getting some more calls and finally I was like "I'm not doing this, if you do I'm not supporting this. If y'all think this is what has to be done, then you have to call them in here and tell them because I'm not going to tell them this."

Ultimately, her district decided to come up with another option for offering a remote model for families and did not ask her teachers to teach virtually. Principal 1 reflected on what she called "the worst call I've ever had" and how it represented so many of the unknown challenges principals were facing. "There were so many things happening behind the scenes that you can't tell anyone, and you can't talk about."

Summary of Findings

Teacher and principal participants described their experiences during the pandemic in four main phases: spring 2020, summer 2020, the 2020-21 school year, and the 2021-22 school

year. For both groups, these phases consisted of shock, uncertainty, technological difficulties, COVID protocols, and unexpected challenges. Participants also shared key scenes of their stories: high points, low points, and turning points. High points for participants included stories around unity, accomplishment, and relationships with students. Low points for participants centered around divisiveness, emotional weight, COVID-specific challenges, and challenges with leadership. Turning points for participants included both positive and negative shifts in their stories or perspectives.

Teacher participants shared about challenges and the factors that helped them cope with the challenges. Their challenges included uncertainty, health concerns, student concerns, and divisiveness within the community. The resiliency factors shared by teacher participants included supportive relationships, self-care/personal attributes, and a sense of purpose. Additionally, teachers shared about the ways their school leadership helped support and motivate them, along with the ways leadership made them feel unsupported.

Principal participants also described challenges and the factors that helped them cope with the challenges. Their challenges included feelings of uncertainty, helplessness, and work overload. The resiliency factors shared by principal participants included supportive relationships and setting and/or maintaining personal boundaries. Additionally, principal participants shared the ways they helped support and motivate teachers during the pandemic and the challenges they faced in doing so.

Finally, an unanticipated finding of leadership stories was explored. Leaders talked about foresight heading into the pandemic, creative use of staff during hybrid instructional models, and standing up to district leadership to support their staff. Chapter 5 will discuss conclusions, implications, and gaps to be considered for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of elementary educators who worked during a global pandemic and to examine how leadership practices affected teachers' experiences and perceptions of their work during this complex time. The questions that guided the study addressed how the teachers and school leaders characterized their work and related challenges, the factors that influenced their professional experiences, and perceptions of their work, and the factors that facilitated or constrained school leaders in supporting their teachers. Having provided an in-depth look into elementary educators' experiences during the 2019-20, 2020-21, and 2021-22 school years, several areas should be addressed to support educators in the aftermath of the pandemic. The findings of this study also lead to other potential studies, regarding educator experiences, retention, and demoralization. In this chapter, I discuss recommendations for campus leaders, school district leaders, and policymakers, along with implications for future research.

Considerations

This study was designed as a phenomenological qualitative study utilizing an interpretive approach seeking to describe, understand, and interpret the experiences of six elementary school teachers and five elementary school principals during the COVID-19 global crisis. Each of the eleven participants was interviewed twice using semi-structured interview protocols.

The results of this study can be used to help campus leaders, school district leaders, and policymakers better understand the challenges and factors that influenced elementary school teachers' and leaders' professional experiences. As schools across the country face teacher shortages (Natanson, 2022), the insight presented by this study can be valuable to those responsible for supporting and retaining quality teachers.

The conceptual framework that guided this study drew on an intensive review of the literature related to burnout, resilience, and crisis leadership. The framework posits a variety of factors that add to or mitigate teacher stress and, therefore, teacher burnout and resilience. The factors thought to add to or mitigate teacher stress included job demands, job resources, environmental supports, individual factors, leadership factors, and COVID-19-specific stressors.

Burnout is defined as "a distinctive kind of job-related stress that inhibits the person's capacity to function effectively because the body's resources for resisting stress have become exhausted." (Davidson, 2009, p. 47). There are three agreed-upon components of burnout: (a) emotional exhaustion; (b) depersonalization; and (c) reduced personal accomplishment (Van Droogenbroek et al., 2021; Huberman, 1993; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Maslach et al., 2001; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Burnout can occur when job demands lead to exhaustion and a lack of resources complicates meeting the job demands (Demerouti et al., 2001). The findings of the present study suggest that educators have experienced emotional exhaustion. Participants expressed feeling tired, overwhelmed, and exhausted because of excessive job demands and lack of resources. Job demands reported by teachers included physical workload, time pressure, role conflict, classroom discipline, and external regulations (Beltman et al., 2011; Davidson, 2009; Demerouti et al., 2001; Friedman, 1995; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Huberman, 1993; Kyriacou, 2001; Maslach et al., 2001). Job resources include feedback, rewards, supervisor support, professional development, curriculum resources, and material resources (Beltman et al., 2011; Demerouti et al., 2001; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Huberman, 1993; Kyriacou, 2001; Maslach et al., 2001; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2001).

Despite all the challenges, many teachers, like the teachers in this study, continue to stay in the classroom. Resilience is defined as the ability to cope and grow through adversity (Sokal et al., 2020). The compensatory model of resilience proposed by Toland and Carrigan (2011)

suggests that severe stress can be counteracted by individual factors and environmental supports. The findings of this study suggest that social support served as a protective factor for many educators during challenging times.

Leading during a crisis involves managing events and emotions in a way that will minimize harm. This requires a combination of experience, time, and common sense (Brion, 2021; Smith & Riley, 2012). School leaders were faced with the challenging task of leading school communities through uncertain times, difficult decisions, and intense public scrutiny. This study explored the leadership practices that affected teachers' experiences during this complex time. Campus and school district leaders' dispositional, relational, and situational factors had significant impacts on teacher participants' experiences and perceptions of their work.

In addition to job demands, job resources, environmental supports, individual factors, and leadership factors, COVID-19-specific stressors heavily influenced teacher and principal participants' experiences. These stressors included distancing protocols, health, and safety requirements (such as masks), and physical changes to the classrooms. The protocols drastically changed the way classrooms functioned in elementary schools. While the protocols have been removed, their impacts on educator stress are important for stakeholders to consider when planning for future potential crises.

The stories and experiences shared by teachers and principals during the interviews provided a lens through which others can better understand their lived experiences and challenges during a pandemic. The results of this study are essential for educational stakeholders, including campus leaders, school district leaders, and policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels.

Study Recommendations

Drawing on existing research, I propose several recommendations relative to the guiding conceptual framework. Recommendations for campus leaders, school district leaders, and policymakers focus on increasing protective factors for educators to reduce burnout and increase resilience. The findings of this study indicate that teachers and campus principals benefit from environmental support, strong crisis leadership practices, and an increase in job resources. To better support educators in the aftermath of COVID-19, stakeholders must take actions that will combat educator burnout and increase resilience in educators. The following sections outline recommendations for campus leaders, school district leaders, and policymakers.

Recommendations for Campus Leaders

Campus leaders' practices can have a significant impact on teacher well-being and burnout (Marshall et al., 2022; Westphal et al., 2022). As schools continue to recover from the COVID-19 crisis, leaders must take intentional steps to reduce teacher burnout and promote resilience. While the following recommendations are important for helping schools recover from the pandemic, they also serve to create the type of school climate that can better equip schools in the event of future crises. Campus leaders can combat teacher burnout by increasing environmental support through staff relationships, providing opportunities for shared decision-making, and focusing on their leadership styles and practices.

Foster Staff Relationships

Resilience theory posits that mutually supportive relationships, including supportive colleagues, are important in the development of resilience (Beltman et al., 2011; Bobek, 2002; Masten, 2001; Masten & Tellegen, 2012; Sumsion, 2003). For teachers, burnout is related to the quality of social interactions within a school community; teachers may experience higher levels of stress when they are lacking social support from colleagues (Beltman et al., 2011; Howard &

Johnson, 2004; Huberman, 1993; Kyriacou, 2001; Maslach et al., 2001; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021). When teachers have supportive relationships with their colleagues, they may experience lower stress and be more resilient in the face of adversity.

Throughout the interviews, teachers discussed the importance of relationships with colleagues in helping them cope and persevere through stressful times. For example, Teacher 2's school began a group text amongst staff during the pandemic that she considered "the lifeline for all of us" because it allowed them to freely share ideas, and concerns without worrying about the administration hearing their conversations. Teacher 3 and Teacher 5 also recognized the role that their colleagues had in coping with the stress. Teacher 3 felt that "other people really helped us through this" and Teacher 5 found it especially helpful to be able to lean on people that were "doing exactly what I was doing" because she felt people outside of teaching did not really understand what it was like.

Having supportive relationships with colleagues does not mean that everyone will get along all the time or even form close friendships like in Teacher 2's school. As Teacher 4 recognized, sometimes supportive relationships mean compromising for the greater good. Her team initially had some different opinions on how their classrooms would function during the pandemic. However, they figured out how to come together when times were hard. "You realized we needed to band together, or we were just going to sink. So, we all kind of had to give up a little something to just make things work."

Since supportive relationships among staff can help to lower teacher stress and provide a source of resilience during challenging times, campus leaders can support teachers by proactively fostering staff relationships. One practice that campus leaders can incorporate to build community is meeting rituals. Campus leaders can have staff begin meetings with a brief community-building activity or check-in statement, which allows staff to connect and create a

sense of belonging (Oakland Unified School District, 2016). Another practice campus leaders can institute is gratitude. For example, at a staff meeting, campus leaders can have people take a moment to share a time when another staff member did a favor or a small act of kindness. Gratitude in the workplace can help build a positive school climate and increase satisfaction among coworkers (Greater Good in Education, 2022). However, campus leaders must be careful to avoid toxic positivity or the belief that regardless of difficulties teachers should always maintain a positive outlook. In order to avoid toxic positivity, campus leaders can acknowledge the current reality and focus on creating a strong positive school culture. Additionally, campus leaders can create opportunities for staff to connect outside of school or in social settings. During the initial lockdown in the Spring of 2020, Teacher 2's principal instituted a standing weekly zoom room that served as a way for staff to virtually connect and socialize. While schools are always short on time, taking the time to intentionally build relationships among staff can help improve teacher stress and reduce burnout.

Be Physically Present

A second recommendation for campus leaders is to be physically present in the building and within classrooms. Lasater (2016) states that school leaders can build rapport with staff by increasing their visibility and accessibility. By being physically present in hallways, classrooms, and throughout the building, leaders increase their visibility. This increased visibility provides opportunities to initiate conversations with staff members and other members of the school community (Lasater, 2016). It is also important that leaders follow through on any reported concerns that result from these conversations. Additionally, when teachers ask leaders to visit their classrooms, they should make every effort to do so.

When asked how school leaders motivated them during stressful times, two of the teachers mentioned physical presence. Teacher 1 felt motivated when her leaders "show up and

they come, and they see what the kids are doing, and they ask about what you're doing." Teacher 2's principal motivated her by coming into her classroom to check-in. "She would pop around to everybody's classroom to see if we needed things. Sometimes she'd bring in muffins or little treats."

Conversely, Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 both felt frustrated when leaders were not physically present or did not follow through on showing up when they were invited to visit. Teacher 2 shared about inviting district administrators to come to visit their classrooms when they were overwhelmed by the hybrid model. She was disappointed in the lack of follow-through by one administrator. "She came around one time and she literally spent maybe 20 seconds in each person's classroom, so she didn't get a feel for what we were doing." Teacher 1 talked a lot about her frustration with the lack of presence, physical help, and follow-through by her campus leaders:

> They've got to get out of their offices and get into our rooms to see and experience what the kids are truly seeing and experiencing. I think a year ago everybody lived behind that computer and this year I think they were pulled in so many directions that we really didn't see them this year either. I feel like now that's kind of become the norm and that we're not going to see them. I think they've lost a lot of perspective on the building, not being in the rooms.

Principal 4 talked about the challenges of getting out into classrooms. She expressed a desire to have spent more time being physically present with her teachers and she knew that was something they wanted from her, but she found herself stuck in zoom meetings or on calls doing logistical planning and that pulled her away from being physically present.

Campus leaders will need to take intentional steps to make visiting classrooms and increasing visibility a priority. For Principal 2 this meant having a system in place with a

calendar to ensure she and her Assistant Principal were visiting classrooms every week. “My AP and I made a goal… we would sign up for 10 classes a week and, they were our walkthroughs, but we would be in those classes.” During crises such as the pandemic, campus leaders were pulled in many different directions. However, taking the time to visit classrooms and be physically present throughout the building can increase rapport with staff and open the opportunity for more dialogue within the school community. This helps leaders keep a pulse on what is going on in the building and, as expressed by some participants, can motivate teachers during challenging times.

Practice Shared Decision Making

Another recommendation for campus leaders is to include teachers in decision-making. The literature states that schools can create a climate of personal and professional support by involving teachers in decision-making, having teachers participate in meaningful roles, and encouraging shared responsibility and participation (Bobek, 2002; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Patterson et al., 2004). Additionally, when teachers have opportunities for shared decision-making and planning, they may be able to better cope with high-stress working conditions (Tait, 2008).

In this study, Teacher 5 shared about making some significant changes in the kindergarten program at her school. These changes came because of meetings with her team and her campus leadership. She discussed how her team played an active role in those decisions. “We had monthly meetings with our assistant principal and our principal and they just kind of checked in, asking ‘How’s it going? This is the direction we want to be moving, what are your thoughts?’” During these meetings, her team discussed wanting more time to spend on literacy instruction. Her leadership was also trying to solve a staffing problem for the kindergarten extended day program. As a result, they came to a mutual agreement to extend the kindergarten

school day which would solve the staffing problem and allow for more instructional time without compromising recess or other special classes.

Principal 5 made sure to involve teachers when developing reopening plans and protocol planning at her school. “I had a committee; they were part of that because they were going to have to live it.” By ensuring teachers had a voice in the plans, they were more likely to be accepting. Campus leaders can provide opportunities for teachers to take part in decision-making, whether through regular check-in meetings or special committees. By providing these opportunities, leaders are sharing authority which increases trust among staff (Lasater, 2016) and creates a climate of support which increases teacher resilience (Bobek, 2002; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Patterson et al., 2004).

Practice Compassionate Leadership

The final recommendation for campus leaders is to practice compassionate leadership. Poorkavoos (2016) defines compassionate leadership as “a) being a compassionate person and b) trying to create a culture whereby seeking or providing help to alleviate a sufferer’s pain is not just acceptable but is seen as the norm” (p. 8). The Compassion in the Workplace Model is a framework with five attributes of a compassionate leader (Poorkavoos, 2016). According to the framework, compassionate leaders are *alive to the suffering of others*, meaning they are sensitive to the well-being of others and notice when someone experiences a behavior change. Second, compassionate leaders are *non-judgmental*, they do not judge and accept and validate others’ experiences. Compassionate leaders can *tolerate personal distress*; they can hear about someone’s distress without being overwhelmed by the emotion. This attribute goes together with the next attribute *empathy*. Leaders need to understand someone else’s emotions, but without being overwhelmed by the emotion. Finally, compassionate leaders *take appropriate action* to help the person who is suffering.

Compassionate leadership can improve employee engagement and retention by connecting psychologically and forming stronger bonds among coworkers (Poorkavoos, 2016). If Teacher 1's principal had practiced compassionate leadership, perhaps they would have recognized that Teacher 1 was suffering. Instead, Teacher 1 did not feel seen by her leadership. "I feel invisible. I feel totally and completely invisible. I'm very much an introvert. I don't want to be the center of attention. I also don't want to be invisible." For Teacher 4, she wished her leadership would have acknowledged the difficulties of teaching during a pandemic. "I feel like it would have been really nice for them to just acknowledge that we were doing our best in situations that had never been gone through before."

Principal 3 shared a simple strategy she used to stay aware of the well-being of her staff during the spring 2020 shutdown. During that spring, her staff met virtually every morning. She noticed that her staff, which is usually interactive, was non-responsive when she would ask how everyone was doing:

> So, I started having everyone put into the chat just a number. 0 means when this meeting is over, I'm going back to bed, putting the blankets over my head, and not dealing with this today. And 10 was I am nailing this whole remote learning thing and I got it. I decided to do that in the moment because I wasn't getting any interaction from people because it was like zombie land. And that ended up being one of the most helpful things to do. First of all, if anyone had a really low number, I could get in touch with them after… And it also gave me a chance, because I was kind of keeping track, to see if things were starting to feel better over time.

Jimerson et al. (2005) suggest that following a crisis, organizations should work to meet the physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual needs of the individuals and the community.

Practicing compassionate leadership is one strategy campus leaders can use to help their staff recover from the pandemic crisis.

Recommendations for District Leaders

School district leaders are tasked with supporting campus leaders while also making decisions that impact the entire school district community. Within the study findings, actions (or inactions) on the part of school district leaders impacted the experiences of both teachers and campus principals. Campus principals in this study felt supported by their school district leaders in part because of the relationships they had with other campus principals. School district leaders should continue to foster relationships among principals. Conversely, some teachers in this study felt a lack of support from district leadership in response to the resources available for meeting the social-emotional needs of their students. School district leaders can work to increase the number and quality of resources available for students' social-emotional needs. Finally, this study revealed that campus principals carried a significant emotional burden during the pandemic leading to emotional exhaustion. School district leaders can better support campus leaders' well-being by training them in the practice of self-compassion.

Foster Relationships Among Principals

In this study, four of the five principals specifically talked about the support they received from their principal group when asked how they coped with the challenges of the pandemic. Resilience theory suggests that supportive relationships are an important component for developing resilience (Beltman et al., 2011; Bobek, 2002; Masten, 2001; Masten & Tellegen, 2012; Sumsion, 2003). For principals in this study, the supportive relationships with other elementary school principals gave them a support system to lean on during uncertain times. Principal 1 described her network of other administrators as one of the biggest factors that helped

her cope. “Everyone was going through it – you weren’t alone.” Principal 3 said, “had I not had the other three principals to lean on, I don’t know how I would have survived.”

The principals in this study had strong connections with their principal group before the onset of the pandemic. District leaders can foster these relationships among campus principals by providing ongoing opportunities for principals to come together. Principal groups can meet weekly or bi-weekly to engage in professional learning and collaborate on district goals and initiatives. In large districts, leaders may want to consider creating cohorts or smaller groups of principals that can network and participate in training together. Additionally, new principals can be assigned a mentor to support them in their new roles.

Provide Additional Support for Social Emotional Needs of Students

One significant result of the pandemic has been a rise in adverse mental health symptoms among students. In an analysis of 36 studies from 11 countries involving nearly 80,000 children and adolescents and approximately 18,000 parents, Viner, Russell, and Saulle (2022) found that school closures and school lockdowns were associated with adverse mental health symptoms such as depression and anxiety. Additionally, children’s hospitals reported a rise in self-injury and suicide cases in children ages 5-17 in the first part of 2021 (Prothero & Riser-Kositsky, 2022). Schools are also reporting a rise in student misbehavior; in a national survey of 1,210 educators, two out of three participants reported an increase in student misbehavior since the onset of the pandemic (Kurtz, 2022).

In this study, Principal 5 talked about the number of students in her school experiencing severe trauma. “So many students with comments or actual actions of hurting themselves, and at this age level, [grades] three through six, it’s scary.” Teacher 2 described one of her greatest challenges as dealing with the social-emotional needs of her students due to the number of students dealing with significant trauma and anxiety. Teacher 3 estimated that 90 percent of her

time was spent on student behaviors. Principal 2 described the return to school as "off the chart anxiety" for her students.

While schools are dealing with increased trauma and student behavior, many districts are lacking the resources to help students. Prothero and Riser-Kositsky (2022) reported that in the 2020-21 school year, only 14% of districts met the ratio of 1 school counselor to 250 students, the recommendation set by the American School Counselor Association. In this study, Teacher 3 wished her district would provide more counselors and that the counselors they did have were better equipped to deal with the trauma students were experiencing. Teacher 2 expressed a lack of district support in meeting the social-emotional needs of her students. They had a district curriculum, "but it doesn't actually address what the real issues are going on currently in the classroom."

School districts need to find ways to increase the number of mental-health professionals available to help students. Additionally, schools need better training on how to address the trauma and subsequent student misbehavior. Addressing students' social-emotional needs not only benefits the students but reducing student behavior and discipline issues can also help combat teacher burnout (Beltman et al., 2011; Davison, 2009; Friedman, 1995; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Huberman, 1993; Kyriacou, 2001). Managing student behavior requires a lot of time, effort, and energy for teachers and may trigger a serious stress response (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

Train Campus Leaders in Self-Compassion

A final recommendation for district leaders is to train campus leaders in the practice of self-compassion. In this study, four of the five principals talked about the emotional weight they carried during the pandemic. Neff et al. (2020) call this empathy fatigue, the emotional exhaustion of caring for others. One practice that can help combat empathy fatigue is self-

compassion. According to Neff et al. (2020), self-compassion is a "healthy way of relating to oneself when faced with difficulties including feelings of inadequacy and general life stressors" (p. 1544). Self-compassion is based on three main pillars: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness; self-compassion is different from self-care in that it is practiced at the moment pain arises (Neff et al., 2020).

The results of this study suggest that self-compassion could be a useful tool for principals as they struggle with the emotional exhaustion that comes with caring for others. Principal 1 described the emotional weight she felt and how it seemed to get worse over the course of the pandemic:

> You keep the weight of 520 kids and then 70 staff on your shoulders, and sometimes I'm like *Why do I want to?* I have my own issues. I can't keep everyone else's problems here too. So, there are a lot of times when you just want to not have to shoulder the weight of everything. I've never felt that before the last three years… it's always been hard, but never felt the weight of everything until the last three years.

Principal 3 told a story about her doctor expressing concern over her dangerously high blood pressure. She described the stress she was experiencing as this overwhelming fear of messing up. "If I don't do this right, for the first time in my career, if I don't do something right, someone could be really negatively affected. Someone could die." Principal 4 felt one of the hardest parts of the entire three years was carrying the emotional weight of her staff. She had a constant revolving door of teachers coming into her office crying and many times she could not change the parameters that were causing them distress. She said, "That was probably the hardest thing for me because I'm such a people person and I just want to make things better for them."

For the principals in this study, the emotional weight they talked about could be interpreted as empathy fatigue.

District leaders can help their campus principals combat empathy fatigue by training them in the practice of self-compassion. Neff et al. (2020) created a training program for healthcare workers that included informal practices, such as putting one's hand on one's heart and speaking kindly to oneself and breathing techniques. They piloted the training program in two different studies and found that participants experienced a reduction in secondary traumatic stress, burnout, and exhaustion (Neff et al., 2020). District leaders can explore similar programs for educators to reduce emotional exhaustion in campus leaders.

Recommendations for Policymakers

In addition to campus leaders and school district leaders, the findings of this study also have implications for policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels. The COVID-19 pandemic provided unprecedented challenges for policymakers as they scrambled to provide students across the country with online education and a safe return to in-person school. Policymakers at all levels would benefit from completing crisis management audits and creating contingency plans for future health crises in schools. While the full ramifications of the pandemic are still yet to be determined, emerging research is beginning to reveal the significant learning loss that occurred for students across the country. Policymakers need to institute evidence-based programs to help all students recover from learning loss.

Complete Crisis Management Audits

Policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels should reflect on the COVID-19 crisis in schools and use the experience to plan for the possibility of future crises. Smith and Riley (2012) encourage leaders to ask and seek answers to questions around each phase of the crisis management process as these answers can help them create contingency plans in the event of a similar crisis occurring in the future.

One of the challenges discussed by campus principals in this study was the timeliness of decisions being made at the district, state, and federal levels, particularly regarding school reopening plans and COVID protocol requirements or recommendations. Principal 1 talked about the summer of 2020 and how the decision to begin the year online was not made until about a week before teachers returned in August. "You can't make us wait a week before and now have to plan it out and then have to tell teachers *'Okay, by the way, you're all going to be online."*" Principal 3 discussed the conflict in the community that came because of a lack of guidelines:

> There was a lot of fighting in the community. The Governor and the Commissioner weren't setting guidelines fast enough. So, communities were doing this thing where they were arguing with each other and then after they had figured it out, then the Governor would come out and say, "this is what we're doing." Well, that would have been helpful to know. We could have avoided a whole lot of ugliness if you had made some decisions earlier.

Principal 5 talked about how the same thing happened in the summer of 2021 when it came to waiting for guidance. "It was again constantly waiting for the state for information and guidance and what they wanted to see from us."

By taking the time to complete crisis management audits, policymakers could potentially prevent similar challenges if schools are required to shut down or operate under distancing protocols for future health crises. Smith and Riley (2012) suggest four key questions for schools to consider when conducting a crisis audit. These questions could be considered at the local, state, and federal levels. (1) What things, if they went wrong, would create major problems for the school? (2) What is the probability of each of those things occurring? (3) What impact would each crisis have on the school? What and who would suffer? (4) What factors might prevent each crisis from occurring? (Smith & Riley, 2012, p. 62)

Taking the time to complete a crisis audit can allow policymakers to develop various contingency plans. While future crises will likely differ from the exact challenges faced by schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is easier and quicker to adapt an existing contingency plan than to develop a new one during an unfolding crisis (Smith & Riley, 2012). By creating a culture of preparedness, policymakers could avoid some of the community conflicts that came because of unclear or changing guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Implement Evidence-Based Acceleration Programs

The second and final recommendation for policymakers is to implement wide-scale evidence-based acceleration programs. Emerging research is reporting the learning loss that took place because of the pandemic. Schwartz (2022) reported that the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Long-Term Trend test revealed an unprecedented seven-point drop in math scores and a five-point drop in reading scores for nine-year-old students. Before the 2022 tests, there had never been a decline in math scores in the 50-year history of the test. The five-point drop in reading scores was the greatest drop since 1990.

Learning loss following a crisis can have significant impacts on a population. Andrabi, Daniels, and Da (2020) conducted a study following a devastating earthquake in Northern Pakistan in 2005. In the aftermath of the earthquake, schools were shut down for 14 weeks. Four years later, the researchers found that students who were directly affected by the earthquake were 1.5 years behind peers living in unaffected regions (Andrabi et al., 2020). However, not all children were impacted equally. Children whose mothers completed primary education were fully protected against learning loss. Fothergill and Peek (2015) state that “those who are already living at the margins are even more susceptible to experiencing extreme cumulative vulnerability after a disaster” (p. 197).

While research has shown that crises result in learning loss and widened achievement

gaps, teachers in this study reported pressure to return to normalcy without a plan in place to adequately address academic concerns. Teacher 2 stated, “kids aren’t where they’re supposed to be. We need to make decisions around where they are, not where they should be if the pandemic never happened.” Teacher 3 discussed expectations returning to normal once students came back to campus:

> Now that we’re back and expectations are going to be exactly the same as before because nothing has changed. Remember the lip service, everyone was like “oh we’re going to give these kids some time.” And there were no special programs… and [testing] came back this year.

While some districts and states have implemented various programs or passed legislation aimed at addressing learning loss, these solutions seemed ill-matched with the actual needs and often created a significant burden for teachers and school leaders who were already experiencing great stress.

This is a complicated issue and at this point in time, researchers are still exploring evidence-based acceleration approaches to help all students recover from learning loss, particularly marginalized student groups. Policymakers should consider approaches that address developmental delays in addition to academic delays/learning loss. Additionally, policymakers should take into consideration the implications for teacher burnout when adding new programs and regulations.

Implications for Future Research

The findings of this research lead to many new questions. With the impacts of the pandemic on schools continuing, additional studies are needed to fully understand the experiences of educators during this complex time. Additionally, reports of understaffed schools and teacher shortages continue to appear in mainstream media. Research studies are needed to

fully understand the issue of teacher retention and the underlying causes of why teachers may be leaving the field. Finally, the findings of this study suggest that some educators may be experiencing demoralization as opposed to burnout. Future research is needed to understand the difference between these two concepts, how they manifest in educators, and what leaders can do to support educators experiencing demoralization.

Educator Lived Experiences

Allowing educators to share their lived experiences through the life story interview protocol provides many insights into the challenges educators face daily and how they can be supported by various stakeholders. This study focused on elementary school teachers and elementary school principals and consisted of six teachers and five principals across the country.

Future research could continue this work but increase the number of participants. Additionally, future research could look at different subpopulations of educators, such as secondary teachers, special education teachers, or teachers serving different student populations. A larger study could also explore the similarities and differences between different subpopulations of educators. For example, what differences occurred for teachers in low-income schools compared to teachers in high-income schools? Did the age of the educator make a difference in their experience? A larger study could compare the experiences of educators grouped by age or other demographic information. As tensions continue to remain high in many school districts, ongoing research regarding educators' lived experiences will be important in understanding the different stressors impacting educators.

Teacher Retention

The findings of this study suggest that teachers and principals experienced some symptoms of burnout because of the challenges they faced during the pandemic. During the interviews, participants were asked if they ever felt like giving up. While some participants

stated that they had moments where they felt like giving up, only two were leaving the field. Teacher 3 retired at the end of the 2021-22 school year, a decision she said was based on retirement incentives and not COVID factors. Principal 5 decided to retire at the end of the 2022-23 school year, the earliest she would be eligible. This was a decision she felt was a direct result of the stressors she experienced over the last three years.

Other participants in this study expressed feeling too committed to their careers to leave the field. Teacher 2 shared that she had researched other options, but "none of them would give the same paycheck that I make right now… I'm sort of stuck." One limitation of this study was that 10 out of the 11 participants were classified as Late Career Teachers, meaning they had been in education for at least nineteen years (Gu & Day, 2007). A study consisting of more participants in the early (5 or fewer years of experience) or middle (6-18 years of experience) phases of their careers may have had different responses.

While research is conflicted on the number of teachers who leave the field, a recent study by Madigan and Kim (2021) focused on teachers' reported intentions to quit the profession. Future research could continue to study the intention to quit for teachers in different phases of their careers, particularly in the wake of the pandemic. Research studies could explore the impact that retirement benefits and compensation have on teachers' reported intentions to quit. Are teachers in higher-paying districts more likely to stay? At what point in a teacher's career does retirement impact their decision to stay or leave? Do these decisions vary by state? By exploring these issues, future research could shed light on the factors that cause some teachers to leave the profession.

Demoralization versus Burnout

While much of the literature around teacher dissatisfaction focuses on burnout, Santoro (2018) proposes that burnout is only one possible manifestation of dissatisfaction. Conversely,

demoralization "is a form of professional dissatisfaction that occurs when teachers encounter consistent and pervasive challenges to enacting values that motivate their work" (Santoro, 2018, para. 3). Teachers experiencing demoralization feel confident in the right course of action, but because of policies, mandates, and school practices they are not allowed to take the action. Demoralized teachers remain committed to teaching and continue to perform well, but their value dissonance is the source of their dissatisfaction.

In this study, several teacher participants shared examples of value dissonance when their values and beliefs about what students needed conflicted with the demands of their jobs. Two of the kindergarten teachers referred to times when expectations conflicted with what they felt was appropriate for young students. Teacher 1 stated, "I have enough research base that I know what kindergarten needs to look like for brains that are developing, and this isn't it." Teacher 4 discussed the challenges of keeping students in their seats all day due to distancing protocols. "It's very important to me that my classroom is developmentally appropriate and that I'm asking students to do things that they are truly capable of doing."

One limitation of this study is it did not use a burnout scale with participants. Any indicators of burnout or demoralization are based solely on their interviews and the stories and words participants chose to share. Another area to explore would be the distinction between burnout and demoralization. Are teachers experiencing burnout or demoralization? To what extent is this occurring for teachers across the country? Studies could also explore the various actions school and district leaders can take to address demoralization and how these may differ from burnout.

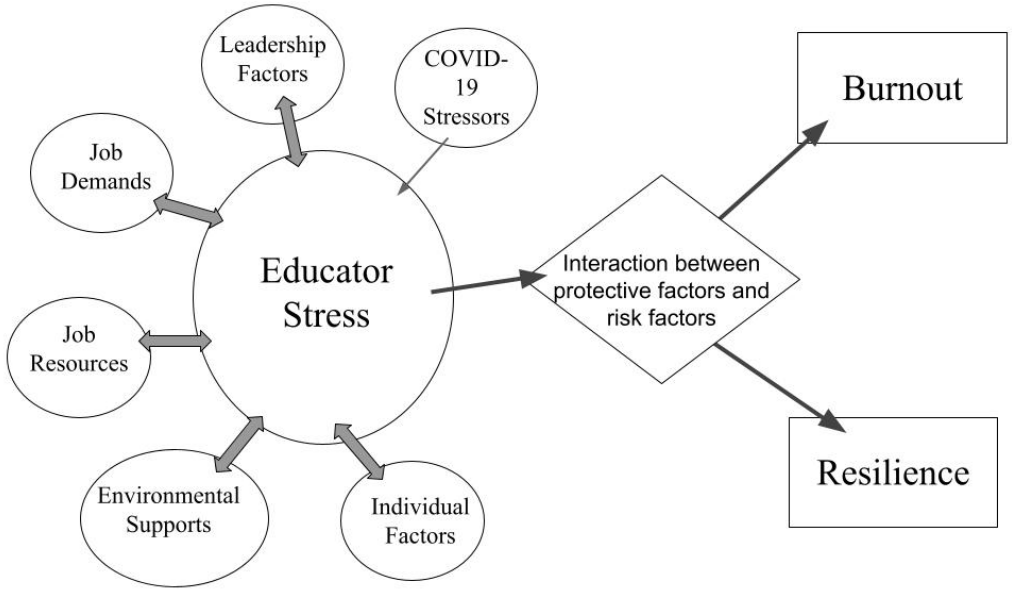
Revisiting the Conceptual Framework

For this study, I proposed a new conceptual framework (see Figure 4) that demonstrates a variety of factors that can add to or mitigate educator stress and the implications for educator

burnout and resilience. All the factors with arrows pointing to/from educator stress are factors that are known to add to relieve stress. Leadership factors include both the actions and inactions of school and district leaders in times of crisis. Job demands and job resources, drawn from Demerouti et al.'s (2001) job demands-resources model, include the demands and presence, or lack thereof, of job resources for educators during COVID-19. The presence of individual factors and environmental supports may counteract severe stress (Toland & Carrigan, 2011). COVID-19 stressors have also been included in the conceptual framework. However, since these stressors were assumed to add to, and not mitigate, educator stress they are represented with a one-sided arrow. Finally, the proposed conceptual framework demonstrates that the outcome of an interaction between the balance of protective factors (factors that mitigate stress) and risk factors (factors that add to stress) can lead to burnout or resilience for educators.

Figure 4.

Conceptual Framework: Educator Experiences During COVID-19



The findings of the study aligned with the conceptual framework, with a few variations. In this study, leadership factors were found to increase teacher stress when teachers felt unacknowledged by leaders or when they felt leaders were unfair or harsh in their criticisms. Leadership served to relieve educator stress when participants (both teachers and principals) felt supported by leaders, or their leaders removed job demands. While the conceptual framework listed leadership factors as an isolated factor, the study findings revealed leadership to be intertwined with job demands, resources, and environmental support.

Job demands, including physical workload, time pressure, role conflict, classroom discipline, and external regulations, added to educator stress. There was very little mention by participants of demands being decreased or mitigating stress in any way. In this study, job resources, including feedback, recognition, supervisor support, professional development, and curriculum resources were significant factors related to educator stress. When these resources were lacking, stress increased. When these resources were present, educators felt more prepared to do their job and expressed less stress.

In terms of environmental support, a lack of community support was a significant factor related to educator stress. Both teacher and principal participant groups discussed divisiveness in their communities and considered it one of their greatest challenges during the pandemic. Conversely, supportive relationships with colleagues served as a protective factor for both teachers and principals. Individual factors, such as setting boundaries, coping skills, and mindset also impacted educator stress. When participants struggled to set boundaries or select appropriate coping skills, their stress increased. Conversely, personal boundaries, coping skills, and mindset helped to relieve stress for some participants.

Finally, COVID-19 stressors, such as distancing protocols, health and safety requirements (such as masks), instructional models, and physical changes to the school, were

found to increase stress for both teachers and principals. In line with the proposed conceptual framework, these were not found to relieve educator stress. It is clear that all of these factors combined additively and the outcomes for each individual were a result of the balance between the protective and risk factors. The study also found that this balance changed throughout the pandemic for individual participants. In some parts of their story, they felt resilient and able to overcome the challenges, while in other parts of their story they were ready to give up and did not feel they could continue their work.

Each factor in this framework is always adjusting and collectively the factors are constantly combining to impact educator stress. The proposed framework and the present study demonstrate that leaders cannot ignore some factors, they must all be taken into consideration. Leaders must be in tune with their educators and their individual needs; they need to keep a pulse on their staff's well-being and adjust resources, supports, and demands as necessary. Clearly, educator burnout is a complex issue.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic completely changed school as we knew it. Over the course of the last three school years, educators in every corner of the nation were impacted by unimaginable challenges related to the pandemic. The ongoing politicization in schools across the country continues to provide stressors for teachers and campus leaders as they try to navigate an ever-changing climate in already difficult times. As schools struggle to find and retain high-quality teachers, stakeholders must understand the experiences of educators and look for more ways to support teachers and school leaders during this complex time.

The findings of this study described the lived experiences of teachers and principals, including the high points, low points, and turning points. Participants in this study shared challenges and factors that helped them cope with the challenges. The data demonstrated that

educators have experienced unprecedented stressors and emotional exhaustion. The findings also articulated the importance of supportive relationships and leadership practices.

While schools have returned to more normal routines and procedures, the effects of the pandemic continue to impact educators. The study highlighted the importance of supporting educators. By seeking to understand their experiences, stakeholders will be better able to support educators.

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APPENDIX A

Teacher Interview Protocol: The COVID-19 Educator Story Interview (adapted from McAdams, 2007)

Introduction

This is an interview about *the story of your life as an educator during the COVID-19 pandemic.* As a researcher, I am interested in hearing your story, including parts of the past as you remember them and the future as you imagine it.

I'm going to ask you to think of your experience as an educator in a new way - as an *educator story* with chapters and key scenes. As a fellow educator, I chose this method because I believe educators must have the opportunity to share their stories. First, we will start big, and talk about the chapters. Then we'll focus on the details of these chapters later.

This interview is for research purposes only, and its main goal is simply to hear your story as an educator during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a researcher, I am collecting educators' stories to understand the different ways in which the pandemic has impacted educators. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Instead, I would like you simply to tell me about some of the most important things that have happened over the past three school years and how you imagine your educator story developing in the future. Everything you say is voluntary, anonymous, and confidential.

Do you have any questions?

Demographic Questions

Let's start with some simple questions so I can gain an understanding of your teaching experience and what the last 3 years have looked like in your position.

1. What is your current role?
2. How long have you held your current role?

3. How many total years have you been teaching?
4. In that time, what subjects and grade levels have you taught?
5. Tell me a little about the school where you teach in terms of the grade levels, the size, and the student population
6. I'd like to hear about what teaching looked like for you over the past 3 years and the different instructional models you have used, specifically synchronous v asynchronous, online v in-person, hybrid, or other combinations, and the COVID measures your school had in place (masks, cohorting, social distancing, etc.)
    a. What did teaching look like in the spring of 2020?
    b. What did teaching look like during the 2020-21 school year?
    c. What did teaching look like during the 2021-22 school year?

Educator Chapters

Please begin by thinking about *your life as an educator during the COVID-19 pandemic* as if it were a book or novel. Imagine that the book has a table of contents containing the titles of the main chapters in the story. To begin here, please describe very briefly what the main chapters in the book might be. Please give each chapter a title, tell me just a little bit about what each chapter is about, and say a word or two about how we get from one chapter to the next. As the storyteller here, go chapter by chapter and give me an overall plot summary of your story. You may have as many chapters as you want, but I would suggest having between about two and seven of them. We will want to spend no more than about 20 minutes on this first section of the interview, so please keep your descriptions of the chapters relatively brief.

Follow-up Q: Can you tell me a little bit more about what each chapter is about, and tell me how you get from one chapter to the next?

[Note to interviewer: The interviewer should feel free to ask questions of clarification and elaboration throughout the interview (e.g., Can you tell me a bit more about why…? Can you think of an example of …? Do you mean that…?)}

Key Scenes in the Educator Life Story

Now that you have described the overall plot outline for *your COVID-19 educator story*. I would like you to focus on a few key scenes, events, or specific incidents that stand out in your story. Think of key scenes as moments in your educator story that stand out -- maybe because they were good or bad, vivid, important, or memorable. For each of the key events we will consider, I ask that you describe in detail what happened, when and where it happened, who was involved, and what you were thinking and feeling during the event. Then, I'll also ask you to tell me why you think this particular scene is significant in *your COVID-19 educator story*.

1. **A high point** - The first key event I would like you to focus on is a High Point. Thinking back to the chapters you have told me about, can you describe a scene, episode, or moment from your COVID-19 educator story that stands out as an especially positive experience? This might be the high point scene of your entire educator experience during the COVID-19 pandemic or else an especially happy, joyous, exciting, or wonderful moment in the story. Can you describe this high point in detail? What happened in the event, when and where was it, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling?
    a. Follow-up Q: Can you tell me briefly why you think this particular moment was so good and why the scene is so significant to you as an educator?
2. **A low point** - The second scene is the opposite of the first - a low point. Thinking back over your entire educator story during the COVID-19 pandemic, can you describe a scene, episode, or moment that stands out as a low point or an especially negative

experience? Even though this event might be unpleasant, I would appreciate it if you can tell me about it in detail. What happened in the event, when and where was it, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling?

   a. Follow-up Q: Can you tell me briefly why you think this particular moment was so bad and why the scene is so significant to you as an educator?

*[Note to interviewer: If the participant is uncomfortable doing this, tell him or her that the event does not have to be **the** lowest point in the story but merely a very bad experience of some kind.]*

3. **A turning point -** Now I want to ask you about a turning point. Looking back over the chapters of your COVID-19 educator story, it may be possible to identify certain key moments that stand out as turning points - events that marked an important change in you or your educator story. Can you think of particular episodes in your educator story that you now see as a turning point in your story? For this event, can you again describe what happened, where and when it was, who was involved, and what you were thinking and feeling?

   a. Follow-up Q: Can you tell me in a few words why this scene is so significant to you as an educator?

[If no: If there is no key turning point that stands out clearly, please describe a key event in your COVID-19 educator experience in which you went through an important change of some kind.]

The Future Plot of your Educator Story

1. **The next chapter** - So far, I've asked you to think about your teaching experience during COVID-19 as a book with chapters and scenes from the past and present. Now I'd like you to extend your book chapters into the future by telling me how you see or imagine

your future. Can you describe what will be the next chapter or chapters in your educator story?

Challenges

This next section considers the various challenges, struggles, and problems you have encountered over the last three years as an educator.

1. **Challenges** - Looking back over the last three years of your teaching experience, please identify and describe what you now consider to be the greatest challenge or problem you have faced as an educator during a global pandemic. What is or was the challenge or problem? How did the challenge or problem develop? How did you address or deal with this challenge or problem? What is the significance of this challenge or problem in your own educator's story?
2. **Giving up** - Looking back over the last three years of your teaching experience, can you think of a scene or period in your story when you met a problem or had challenges that made you want to give up and stop teaching? Please describe in detail what the problem was and how it developed. What was it about the problem or challenges that made you want to give up as an educator?
    a. Follow-up Q: How did you cope with the problem or challenge? What impact did this scene or period have on your overall educator story?

Other

1. What else should I know to understand your educator's story?
2. Was there anything else happening in your life, school, or community during this time that impacted your experiences?
3. What role did your school and/or district leadership play in your experiences over the last 3 years?

a. Did they play a particular role in any of the key scenes you described? What role did they play in the challenges you described?

Wrap-up

This interview was the first part of the study. The second part of the study is one more interview. I'd like to schedule it for about 1-2 weeks from now. The second interview will be shorter. We will follow up on some of the big ideas from this interview.

I'd also like to ask you to go back through your photos and see if you can find any photographs that represent key scenes or chapters you shared about today. The pictures will stay private, we'll just use them as a talking point in the second interview.

APPENDIX B

Principal Interview Protocol: The COVID-19 Educator Story Interview (adapted from McAdams, 2007)

Introduction

This is an interview about *the story of your life as an educator during the COVID-19 pandemic.* As a researcher, I am interested in hearing your story, including parts of the past as you remember them and the future as you imagine it.

I'm going to ask you to think of your experience as an educator in a new way - as an *educator story* with chapters and key scenes. First, we will start big, and talk about the chapters. Then we'll focus on the details of these chapters later.

This interview is for research purposes only, and its main goal is simply to hear your story as an educator during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a researcher, I am collecting educators' stories to understand the different ways in which the pandemic has impacted educators. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Instead, I would like you simply to tell me about some of the most important things that have happened over the past three school years and how you imagine your educator story developing in the future. Everything you say is voluntary, anonymous, and confidential.

Do you have any questions?

Demographic Questions

Let's start with some simple questions so I can gain an understanding of your experience and what the last three years have looked like in your position.

1. What is your current role?
2. How long have you held your current role?

3. How many years have you worked in formal administration – as an assistant principal or principal?
4. Before that, how many years did you teach? In what subjects and grade levels did you teach?
5. Tell me a little about the school where you work in terms of the grade levels, the size, and the student population.
6. I'd like to hear about what teaching looked like at your school over the past three years and the different instructional models your teachers used, specifically synchronous v asynchronous, online v in-person, hybrid, or other combinations, and the COVID measures your school had in place (masks, cohorting, social distancing, etc.)
    a. What did teaching look like at your school in the spring of 2020?
    b. What did teaching look like at your school during the 2020-21 school year?
    c. What did teaching look like at your school during the 2021-22 school year?

Educator Chapters

Please begin by thinking about *your life as an educator during the COVID-19 pandemic* as if it were a book or novel. Imagine that the book has a table of contents containing the titles of the main chapters in the story. To begin here, please describe very briefly what the main chapters in the book might be. Please give each chapter a title, tell me just a little bit about what each chapter is about, and say a word or two about how we get from one chapter to the next. As the storyteller here, go chapter by chapter and give me an overall plot summary of your story. You may have as many chapters as you want, but I would suggest having between about two and seven of them. We will want to spend no more than about 20 minutes on this first section of the interview, so please keep your descriptions of the chapters relatively brief.

Follow-up Q: Can you tell me a little bit more about what each chapter is about, and tell me how you get from one chapter to the next?

[Note to interviewer: The interviewer should feel free to ask questions of clarification and elaboration throughout the interview (e.g., Can you tell me a bit more about why…? Can you think of an example of …? Do you mean that…?)}

Key Scenes in the Educator Life Story

Now that you have described the overall plot outline for *your COVID-19 educator story*. I would like you to focus on a few key scenes, events, or specific incidents that stand out in your story. Think of key scenes as moments in your educator story that stand out -- maybe because they were good or bad, vivid, important, or memorable. For each of the key events we will consider, I ask that you describe in detail what happened, when and where it happened, who was involved, and what you were thinking and feeling during the event. Then, I'll also ask you to tell me why you think this particular scene is significant in *your COVID-19 educator story*.

1. **A high point** - The first key event I would like you to focus on is a High Point. Thinking back to the chapters you have told me about, can you describe a scene, episode, or moment from your COVID-19 educator story that stands out as an especially positive experience? This might be the high point scene of your entire educator experience during the COVID-19 pandemic or else an especially happy, joyous, exciting, or wonderful moment in the story. Can you describe this high point in detail? What happened in the event, when and where was it, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling?
    a. Follow-up Q: Can you tell me briefly why you think this particular moment was so good and why the scene is so significant to you as an educator?

2. **A low point** - The second scene is the opposite of the first - a low point. Thinking back over your entire educator story during the COVID-19 pandemic, can you describe a scene, episode, or moment that stands out as a low point or an especially negative experience? Even though this event might be unpleasant, I would appreciate it if you can tell me about it in detail. What happened in the event, when and where was it, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling?
    a. Follow-up Q: Can you tell me briefly why you think this particular moment was so bad and why the scene is so significant to you as an educator?

    *[Note to interviewer: If the participant is uncomfortable doing this, tell him or her that the event does not have to be **the** lowest point in the story but merely a very bad experience of some kind.]*
3. **A turning point** - Now I want to ask you about a turning point. Looking back over the chapters of your COVID-19 educator story, it may be possible to identify certain key moments that stand out as turning points - events that marked an important change in you or your educator's story. Can you think of particular episodes in your educator story that you now see as a turning point in your story? For this event, can you again describe what happened, where and when it was, who was involved, and what you were thinking and feeling?
    a. Follow-up Q: Also, can you tell me in a few words why this scene is so significant to you as an educator?

[If no: If there is no key turning point that stands out clearly, please describe a key event in your COVID-19 educator experience in which you went through an important change of some kind.]

The Future Plot of your Educator Story

The next chapter - So far, I've asked you to think about your educator experience during COVID-19 as a book with chapters and scenes from the past and present. Now I'd like you to extend your book chapters into the future by telling me how you see or imagine your future. Can you describe what will be the next chapter or chapters in your educator story?

Challenges

This next section considers the various challenges, struggles, and problems you have encountered over the last three years as an educator.

1. **Challenges** - Looking back over the last three years, please identify and describe what you now consider to be the greatest challenge or problem you have faced as an educator during a global pandemic. What is or was the challenge or problem? How did the challenge or problem develop? How did you address or deal with this challenge or problem? What is the significance of this challenge or problem in your own educator's story?
2. **Giving up** - Looking back over your last three years, can you think of a scene or period in your story when you met a problem or had challenges that made you want to give up being an educator or administrator? Please describe in detail what the problem was and how it developed. What was it about the problem or challenges that made you want to give up as an educator?
    a. Follow-up Q: How did you cope with the problem or challenge? What impact did this scene or period have on your overall educator story?

Leadership

1. What challenges did you face in supporting your teachers?
2. What factors facilitated or allowed you to support your teachers?

Other

1. What else should I know to understand your educator's story?
2. Was there anything else happening in your life, school, or community during this time that impacted your experiences?
3. What role did your district leadership play in your experiences over the last three years?
    a. Did they play a particular role in any of the key scenes you described?
    b. What role did they play in the challenges you described?

Wrap-up

This interview was the first part of the study. The second part of the study is one more interview. I'd like to schedule it for about 1-2 weeks from now. The second interview will be shorter. We'll follow up on some of the big ideas from this interview.

I'd also like to ask you to go back through your photos and see if you can find any photographs that represent the key scenes or chapters you shared today. The pictures will stay private, we'll just use them as a talking point in the second interview.

APPENDIX C

Follow-up Teacher Interview Protocol

1. To start with, let's review the key scenes you shared in our first interview. *[Go over key takeaways from the first interview]*. Is there anything you would like to add or change to what you shared?
2. Before this interview, I asked you to find photographs to represent the key scenes we discussed in your first interview. Could you share those with me?
    a. Tell me more about what is happening in this picture.
    b. Can you tell me what this picture represents in terms of your educator story?
3. When you think back about your low points and challenges, what would you consider the biggest factors that added to your stress? What role did your campus leadership play in this?
4. When you think about your high points and/or successes over the last few years, what would you consider the biggest factors that have helped you overcome and/or cope with the stress and challenges of working in schools throughout the pandemic?
5. What do your campus or district leaders do that helps you stay motivated on the job?
6. What do you wish your campus or district leaders would do or stop doing to help you cope with or reduce the stressors you've dealt with?

APPENDIX D

Follow-up Principal Interview Protocol

1. To start with, let's review the key scenes you shared in our first interview. *[Go over key takeaways from the first interview]*. Is there anything you would like to add or change to what you shared?
2. Before this interview, I asked you to find photographs to represent the key scenes we discussed in your first interview. Could you share those with me?
    a. Tell me more about what is happening in this picture.
    b. Can you tell me what this picture represents in terms of your educator story?
3. When you think back about your low points and challenges, what would you consider the biggest factors that added to your stress? What role did your district leadership play in this?
4. When you think about your high points and/or successes over the last few years, what would you consider the biggest factors that have helped you overcome and/or cope with the stress and challenges of working in schools throughout the pandemic?
5. What are some things you do to help your staff stay motivated on the job?
6. Is there anything you wish you could do or refrain from doing to help your staff cope with stress? What factors prevent you from doing those things?

APPENDIX E

Analytic Researcher Memo Template

Title:
Date:
Time:
Participant Demographics:

Instructional Models:

School Demographics:

Descriptive Summary:

Timeline of COVID	
Chapter titles	
High point	
Low point	
Turning point	
Future	
Challenges	
Giving Up	

Data Interaction
How do teachers and leaders characterize their work and related challenges during the period from March 2020 to present?

Literature Review	
Theoretical Framework	
Participant Comparison • Confirm, enhance, illustrate • Disconfirm, refute, disagree And how?	

What factors influenced elementary teachers'/ leaders' professional experiences and perceptions of their work?

Literature Review	
Theoretical Framework	
Participant Comparison • Confirm, enhance, illustrate • Disconfirm, refute, disagree And how?	

What facilitated or constrained school leaders in supporting/working with their teachers as they wanted?

Literature Review	
Theoretical Framework	
Participant Comparison • Confirm, enhance, illustrate • Disconfirm, refute, disagree And how?	

Quotations

Insights - what did I find intriguing, surprising, or disturbing?

Code Choices - reflect on why I chose some of the codes and their operational definitions

Horizontal comparison - reflect on any similarities and differences between other participants

APPENDIX F

Provisional Code List Based on Conceptual Framework

Job Demands Time pressures Work overload Role conflict Student behavior Class size Student support needs External regulations Negative media perceptions	**COVID-19 Stressors** Masks Quarantine Teaching online
Job Resources Social support at work Relationships with parents Relationships with students Information required for job Active decision making	**Leadership Factors** Dispositional Relational Situational
Environmental Supports Supportive relationships	**Burnout** Exhaustion Disengagement Reduced personal accomplishment
Individual Factors Problem solving Coping Professionally proactive "Do whatever it takes"	

VITA

Sally Katherine Osborne was born in Mississippi in July 1986. She attended public schools in Grapevine-Colleyville Independent School District in Texas. Sally graduated magna cum laude from Texas Christian University in May 2008, receiving the degree of Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education. She went on to receive a master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Texas at Arlington, graduating in December 2012. She received a Doctor of Education from Texas Christian University in December 2022. She has served in public schools as a teacher for 14 years.

Sally is the daughter of Bill and Colene Barnard. She grew up in Colleyville, Texas with her parents and her two brothers, Chris and Scott Barnard. Sally married her husband Justin Osborne in April 2014. They have two children, Jack and Miles Osborne. She resides in Fort Worth, Texas with her husband and children.