DISSERTATION

LEADERSHIP IN CRISIS: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SEVEN SCHOOL LEADERS

DURING COVID-19

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

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This study, grounded in a constructivist view of phenomenology, explores the lived experiences of school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research identifies several implications for practice, including the need to re-evaluate teacher and administrator licensure programs, with a focus on providing opportunities for educators to gain practical experience in navigating crises. Additionally, professional development courses should be tailored to address educators' specific deficits and strengths, fostering better leadership. Addressing inequities in education, particularly regarding food security and the digital divide, remains critical.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of allocating resources to mental health and self-care initiatives, not only for school leaders but also for staff, students, and the community, while actively working to destigmatize mental health. Finally, this research underscores the need to refocus on the primary purpose of education, which is to meet the needs of students, rather than becoming mired in divisive debates.

Recommendations for future research include conducting interviews with a more diverse group of school leaders to capture a broader range of experiences. Additionally, long-term studies may be necessary to understand the lasting effects of leadership decisions during the pandemic.

In conclusion, this research calls for collective action to address systemic inequities in education. It acknowledges the complexity of these challenges and urges stakeholders to support

educators and students. In the interim, school leaders, licensure programs, and professional development courses must prioritize the development of leaders who can effectively navigate uncertainty and crises, thereby benefiting the entire educational community.

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To Matthew and Lyla—thank you for being my light.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to every educator who is working tirelessly to improve outcomes for all students.

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Chapter One: Introduction

As of the time of writing this paper, almost four years have passed since the world first heard of a virus known as COVID-19, which upended modern society. Unprecedented times have become commonplace over the past few years of the COVID-19 pandemic, in part due to the repeated emergence of new COVID-19 variants, which prolong the pandemic's effects. While secondary schools are no strangers to crises—due to their experiences with the rise of school shootings, unexpected natural disasters, student and staff illnesses and deaths, and so on—this pandemic has created a pervasive, long-term crisis. For many schools, the pandemic shed light on inefficiencies, inequalities, and inadequacies. Every school experienced their share of struggles, but most schools demonstrated resilience, compassion, and innovation. This crisis highlighted effective and ineffective leadership, connected or mistrusting communities, and varying levels of decision-making acuity. School staff, especially administrators, found themselves in a state of forced adaptation as they scrambled to meet the ever-changing needs of their communities.

Along with the threat of death, COVID-19 brought a mass of misinformation and intra-community conflict. As "we know that politicized and polarized news coverage can influence public views and encourage individuals to follow political elites over experts" (Hart et al., 2020, p. 691), it is no surprise that these conflicts also fueled division at the national level. Worse, the crisis lacked a unified national response, which "forced state and local officials to set their own policies, with widely varying mitigation strategies" (Halpern, 2020, p. 19). This politicization exacerbated issues for those in school leadership as they served their diverse community populations.

Literature continues to emerge around the lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, but significant gaps still exist in the area of school leaders' experience in navigating this crisis. This study sought to add the voices of seven school leaders, who had various experiences with COVID-19 and at different levels within school leadership, to the research. These leaders range from those early in their administrator careers to those who have been in administrator roles for many years. Chapter 3 includes a comprehensive review of each participant.

The literature on the COVID-19 pandemic still has many gaps because of the pandemic's ongoing nature and the relatively short time that has elapsed since the March 2020 lockdown. These factors, plus the need to analyze other areas such as student performance, suggest the gaps might not be closed in the short term. Both qualitative and quantitative research are vital for school leaders and staff continuing to work through this crisis. The effects of the pandemic vary so greatly within and between individual communities that quantitative data alone could not sufficiently support current educational needs. Research on these effects could help school leaders with sensemaking and reflecting on their experiences, which could support their processing and forward movement.

In addition to supporting current work, this research will add value to a body of research informing future crisis preparation. As practitioners reflect on experiences during the pandemic and research continues to emerge, leader preparation programs can adjust their practices for more effective crisis training. A review of the existing literature suggests that proactive preparation and personal competencies should be prioritized during instruction.

More research needs to be conducted, both on the lived experiences of school leaders and staff and community perspectives on the role of leaders. As much as research on the lived experience of school leaders is essential to understanding the effects of the pandemic, it is

equally important to know how staff and the community viewed the response of school leaders. Unless a school leader actively sought feedback and staff felt comfortable being honest, it is possible a leader might not know the adverse effects of their actions despite their best intentions.

Issues of Equity

The manner in which school leaders responded to inequities unearthed and exacerbated by COVID-19 is also worthy of examination. Since school leaders are often seen as leaders within both their buildings and their broader communities, they are often involved in accountability issues around these inequities. While school leaders were at the mercy of public policy and school district decisions, they still felt the weight of meeting the needs of their community.

Food Insecurity

Before the pandemic, food insecurity was already a pervasive issue in the United States (Figure 1). However, many issues exacerbated food insecurity during the pandemic, including unstable childcare, elevated unemployment rates, loss of free or reduced school meals due to school closures, delays in some relief payment programs (such as the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer), and even delayed unemployment payments (Bauer, 2020; Schanzenbach & Pitts, 2020). All of these issues affected school communities, but the loss of free or reduced school meals due to school closures presented a significant challenge to many school leaders.

The government responded with the Families First Act. This law "also initiated Pandemic EBT (P-EBT), a new program that allowed states to supplement families' food budgets for the value of school meals missed when schools are closed" (Waxman et al., 2020, p. 3). However, delayed payments meant to alleviate food insecurity required some school leaders to take matters into their own hands, an issue described in more detail in Chapter 4.
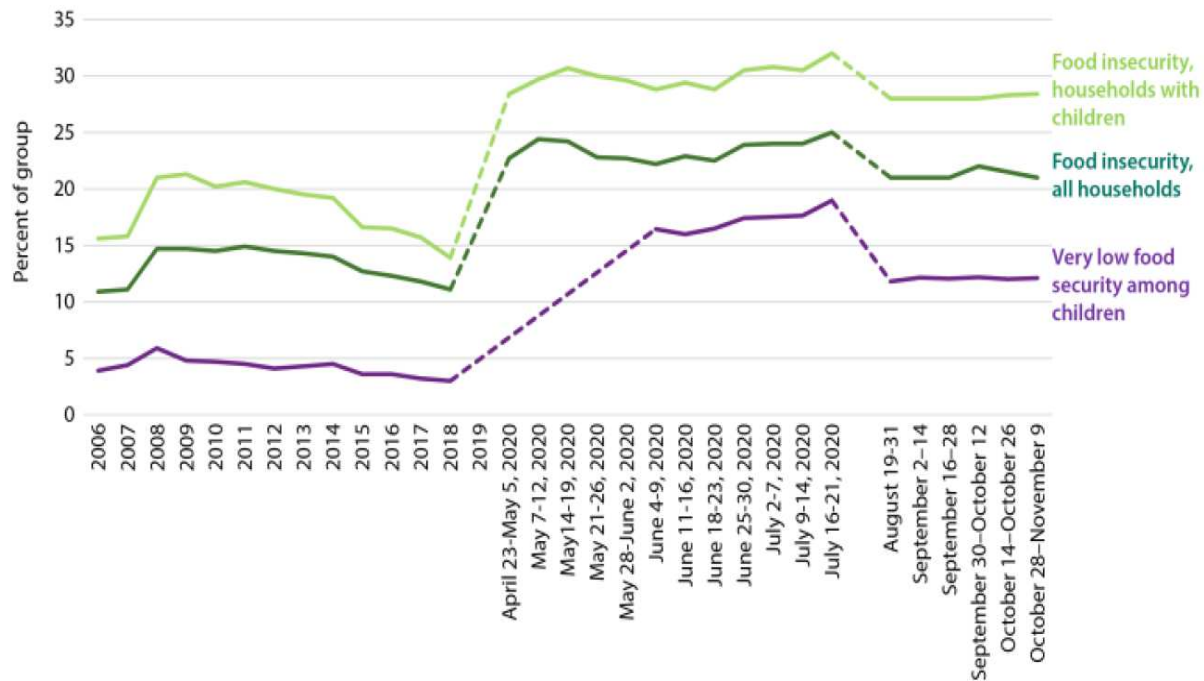
Figure 1. Food Insecurity Among Households and Children. Taken from Bauer (2020).

Access to Technology

The COVID-19 pandemic also exacerbated the pre-existing technological divide. Digital

inequity can stem from economic, social, cultural, geographical, and other differences across

households and between children within households. Beaunoyer et al. (2020) note that "digital

inequalities can be conceptualized as emerging from the differences in actual access to

technology, as well as differences in digital literacy" (p. 1). Digital literacy can be described as

"the degree to which individuals have the capacity, knowledge, motivation, and competence to

access, process, engage, and understand the information needed to obtain benefits from the use

of digital technologies" (Beaunoyer et al., 2020, p. 1). One school district in northern Colorado

responded with ways to provide free or reduced-cost internet connectivity for families, MiFi

devices to support students lacking reliable internet access, rural internet resources, a community

tech support portal, and resources for various needs including but not limited to childcare, food,

mental health, and housing security (COVID Support Funding).

Although some schools and districts have used their resources to navigate these disparities, under-resourced families often continue to struggle with digital inequalities, especially within schools that are under-resourced themselves. Many students would face similar inequities in the event of a return to distance learning (Schulz & Robinson, 2022).

Educators, school leaders, and policymakers should, therefore, plan for the possibility of distance learning and, therefore, view closing the digital divide as a critical educational goal. The digital divide exists at many levels, all of which must be addressed. Some students lack access to any computers, the internet, or other forms of technology. Others may have access to computers, the internet, and possibly other forms of technology, but it might not be the best quality. Others still might have issues with equitable access due to language barriers, multiple users per device, limited internet access, or poor quality internet, among other issues.

Emerging Themes

Literature on the effects of the pandemic on school leadership is still sparse, and additional long-term effects will continue to reveal themselves for years to come. However, the published literature has lessons leaders can use to reflect on their experiences. Across the current research, five choices, or "themes," stand out that either were essential to school leaders successfully navigating the pandemic or were not used but could have benefitted school leaders during this crisis. These five themes are prioritizing communication, promoting self/staff/community care and compassion, connecting to the community, integrating planning and collaboration, and using personal competencies, which are detailed in Chapter 2.

As of the writing of this dissertation, literature continues to emerge about the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic continues to affect communities differently, is still evolving, and has facilitated change, so widespread long-term impacts continue to be evaluated. A recent press

release from the World Bank noted that "preschool-age children in multiple countries have lost more than 34% of learning in early language and literacy and more than 29% of learning in math, compared to pre-pandemic cohorts" (2023). Although these implications barely scratch the surface of the impacts on the entire education system, they show the pandemic's detrimental effect on education. These learning losses will continue to affect the economy and earning potential for future generations. The World Bank calls for countries to focus on building "agile, resilient, and adaptive health, education, and social protection systems that can better prepare for and respond to current and future shocks" (2023).

Research Questions

After considering these emerging themes, four research questions were devised in response to the literature:

1. What skills did school leaders use to navigate the issues of the COVID-19 pandemic successfully?

2. What lessons did school leaders learn from the difficulties of the pandemic?

3. As the pandemic has continued, what shifts have leaders made to remain successful in managing the continued crisis?

4. How can licensure programs and school districts better equip their school leaders to handle crises?

The first question sought to understand the skills that help a leader respond appropriately during a crisis. Three types of skills will be considered within this study. The first is hard skills: specific, measurable, and teachable skills that can be applied to meet technical needs. The second is learned skills: skills within one's area of expertise. Third, the skills personal to an individual are personal skills, or competencies, which are more intangible.

The second question sought to analyze leaders' reflections on their successes and missteps during the pandemic. The ability to reflect, as a means to understand how to move forward, is an important leadership skill. The emerging literature has done a great job of discussing leaders' successes during the pandemic. However, there is currently not much information covering levels of errors and how leaders adjusted in response. While it is essential to analyze the successful management of crises, it is just as important to critically analyze mistakes to learn how to adjust practices to minimize the repetition of similar errors.

The third question sought to understand how adaptability, flexibility, and reflection allow leaders to make necessary changes to continue managing long-term crises. The fourth question assessed how questions one and two could help inform professional development for leaders to build capacity for handling crises. Some of these lessons can inform how licensure programs develop experience-based skill foundations among future school leaders.

Researcher's Perspective

The pandemic greatly affected my life, both professionally and personally, as it did for many members of my personal and professional communities. As a 7th-grade English teacher, my career, my feelings towards my career, and the perceptions of teachers across the United States were constantly in flux. After what was supposed to be an extended spring break, I suddenly needed to adapt to become an online teacher. The decision was later made to return to the classroom in a hybrid setting, with me in the room every day, and students rotating between in-person and online classes. This was a difficult turning point during the pandemic for me because I have an autoimmune condition that makes me more susceptible to sickness. I was also put in a complex situation when my school district decided to start using a sanitizing spray across the building that included chlorine, which I am allergic to. While my administrator made every

effort to support me with accommodations, I still had to thoroughly sanitize my classroom every morning with a cleaner that did not have chlorine. It added a layer of difficulty to the already chaotic teaching nature during the pandemic.

During the 2019-2020 school year, I enrolled in Colorado State University's principal licensure and doctoral program. While I was an adult seeking my third degree, I still experienced the shift that occurred in March 2020 as a student. Then, during the 2020-2021 school year, the first one with students back in the building in some capacity, I completed 300 internship hours at the elementary, secondary, and district levels in an administrator role. Throughout these 300 hours, I experienced many of the same circumstances as the school leaders in this study and those across the United States, all while still teaching 7th grade and experiencing these effects as a teacher. I supported teachers with navigating the switch to remote and hybrid learning, administration teams with designing classroom and building use schedules to align with CDC protocols, school and district staff with creating communications to share with various stakeholders, and more. This firsthand experience helped me appreciate what school leaders were going through, especially the communications component. When crafting the message at different schools within the same district and at different school districts, I saw incredibly politicized and polarized responses.

Personally, I got married and then divorced during the first three years of the pandemic. It was often hard to enter the classroom weighed down by the personal and professional challenges of the pandemic, but I had incredibly supportive administrators who helped me through the difficult days. As a teacher, who was also taking on administrator duties and facing personal adversity, it was hard. That difficulty was compounded when I found myself feeling responsible for the emotions and wellbeing of hundreds of students. Having a leadership team who supported

staff in navigating the decisions being made surrounding the pandemic, buying classroom resources to support the shifts between remote and hybrid learning and accommodate safety regulations, and maintaining the importance of culture was paramount to making it through those first few years of the pandemic.

The importance of the roles of school leaders in successful crisis management is part of what drove me to this research topic. Understanding the experiences of school leaders will support further understanding of the effects of the pandemic, allow those leaders an opportunity for reflection, and provide potential improvement data for administrator preparation and licensing programs.

Significance of Study

The implications of this study can prove useful to school leaders, crisis managers, teacher and administrator preparation programs, and more. By understanding the lived experiences of seven school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic, this research seeks to contribute to the emerging literature on school leadership during the pandemic, and, more broadly, during times of crisis. I also hope that participants can use the findings from this study to make sense of their lived experiences and possibly provide other leaders with a similar sense of reflection and understanding.

Limitations

This study was conducted in northern Colorado with participants recruited from Colorado State University's School Leadership Institute. While the school leaders in this program are located all over Colorado, with some residing out-of-state (refer to Table 4 for a detailed review of participant demographics), the findings discussed in this program are limited to the experiences of seven people. Those who agreed to participate in this research were diverse in

terms of ethnicity, role, length of time in their current role, and other factors, but further diversification could support increased rigor.

Another limitation of this study is that one researcher conducted data collection over the course of 6 months. Including a broader representation of school leaders, with multiple researchers over a longer period, could improve the rigor and transferability of this study.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Before beginning the data collection process of this study, ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board (IRB) of Colorado State University. Prior to the first meeting and at the beginning of each interview and focus group, the study participants were informed about its purpose and the study's confidentiality. Participants were ensured they would all be given pseudonyms and informed with whom the results would be shared.

The focus group participants were informed that focus groups inevitably involve some loss of privacy, but every effort would be made to ensure their information remained confidential. Every group member was asked to keep the information they heard during the focus group confidential. Still, prior to their consent to participate in the study, it was acknowledged with the participants that it could not be guaranteed that every participant would keep the information they heard confidential. All participants agreed to take part in the research.

Summary of Results and Implications

With the goals of the research questions in mind, I took a qualitative approach to this study, specifically with a frame of phenomenological methodology. A phenomenological approach "investigates *what* is experienced and *how* it is experienced" (Wertz et al., 2011, p. 125). This approach means this study focused on what and how the participants experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic to gain a more complete picture of their lived experiences.

Compared to other qualitative approaches, such as grounded theory or content analysis, phenomenology places a stronger emphasis on capturing the first-person perspective of participants without imposing preconceived theories or categories. This approach prioritizes the exploration of subjective meanings and lived experiences, making it a valuable choice when aiming to uncover the essence and significance of phenomena from the participants' own standpoint. These individual stories of a lived experience helped answer the first three research questions to provide implications in response to the fourth research question. The findings of this study align well with the five emerging themes from the literature of prioritizing communication, promoting self/staff/community care and compassion, connecting to the community, integrating planning and collaboration, and using personal competencies.

The interviewed school leaders each navigated unique experiences during the pandemic, but they shared commonalities that contributed to their success in managing emergent issues. They agreed that clear, concise, and consistent communication was essential for successfully handling the beginning and ongoing needs of the pandemic. It was even more apparent to those leaders who had missteps with communication how important it was to maintain a strong connection with their community. When leaders understood the purpose of their communication, they found it easier to convey their messages. However, challenges arose when leaders lacked a clear understanding of their communication's purpose or hesitated to assert their voices.

Personal competencies played a vital role in supporting them throughout the challenges they faced. Adaptability emerged as a cornerstone of their successful experiences, requiring flexibility in various aspects of their personal and professional lives, interactions with staff, students, and the community, and adapting to the pandemic's dynamic, politicized, and polarized nature. Resource allocation was a particularly important aspect of a school leader's role,

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especially during the first few weeks of the pandemic, when it helped support students, staff, and the community through constant transitions and close equity gaps.

The results present implications for school leaders, policy makers, and administrator preparation programs. One such implication is the need for administrator preparation programs to enhance focus on personal competencies such as adaptability. The research also validates the necessity of additional funding at a variety of levels across education, including teacher and leader preparation, classroom resources, and self-care.

Chapter 2 of this paper reviews the literature related to crises. Chapter 3 details the methodology for this study. Chapter 4 uncovers the findings from the focus group and individual interviews. Chapter 5 discusses the findings, implications, and recommendations that emerged from the work of this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Few frameworks specifically revolve around crisis leadership within primary and secondary schools. However, many frameworks on crises and leadership exist. Within this review, I focused on six significant frameworks and theories as they were repeatedly referenced in the literature surrounding crises and leadership: crisis management, crisis leadership, turbulence, self-care, sensemaking, and meta-leadership. As part of my work to understand the surrounding literature, theories, and frameworks related to crises, I created a diagram detailing significant concepts within each of the six frameworks and theories of this literature review to highlight certain similarities, connections, differences, and shortcomings (Figure 2).

One of the major takeaways from Figure 2 is the emergence of the Sensemaking framework from the Crisis Leadership framework. This emergence points to the importance of sensemaking for leaders, especially regarding crises. Another important detail that will be further discussed in the Crisis Management Framework section is that this framework has many shortcomings, which caused the Crisis Leadership framework to be formed. Both the Crisis Leadership and Sensemaking frameworks influenced the work of this study, including the forming of the research questions.

The last item of importance to note is that the Turbulence, Self-Care, and Meta-Leadership frameworks do not overtly overlap with any of the other frameworks. Since many of their components are nuanced enough to stand on their own, this gap created a need for these frameworks to be considered within the analysis of this study. With literature still emerging on this topic, it was important for me to be thorough in my analysis of the lived experiences of these leaders. Each framework and theory's section will further detail Figure 2's high-level review.

Connectivity

Situation

Person

High emotional intelligence

Compelling vision and strategy

Decision-making acuity

Three components

Focuses on a return to normal

Doesn't provide support or preparedness

Identifies fundamental qualities of an effective leader

Crisis Management

Meta-Leadership

Leader is the focus, not the crisis

Sensemaking

Decision-making

Meaning-making

Crisis Termination

Learning

Communication

Focuses on a leader's role during a crisis

Identifies critical tasks for leaders

Crisis Leadership

Crisis

Self-Care

Domains

Physical

Professional

Relational

Emotional

Psychological

Spiritual

Lens on personal competencies

Important, but underfunded

Identity construction

Retrospective

Extracted cues

Driven by plausibility

Inactive of environment

Social

Ongoing

Seven properties

Sensemaking

Turbulence

Light

Moderate

Severe

Extreme

Four levels

Joint sensemaking

Structural Contingency vs Structural Intertia

Unintentional or Intentional

Properties of Organizational Environments

Can be subjective

Munificence

Complexity

Dynamism

Figure 2. Intersection and Disparity Between Crisis-Related Frameworks.

COVID-19 is a new sort of crisis for the education world. It is not a stand-alone event, and its repercussions are not limited to the school building or surrounding community. COVID-19 has impacted the entire world on a large scale and continues to affect communities to this day. Since the research surrounding crisis management during the height of the pandemic is still emerging, I needed to look to the past for frameworks that could support my understanding of school leaders in a pervasive crisis.

In reviewing the emerging literature surrounding school leaders and their actions taken during the COVID-19 pandemic, I focused on three main questions discussed in the literature to deepen my understanding.

1. Which theoretical frameworks did researchers consider as they designed studies around school crises?

2. Which methods of analysis did researchers determine to be the best fit to answer those questions?

3. What themes are beginning to emerge from the literature that could inform further research?

The first question sought to analyze the theoretical frameworks researchers used to create a foundation for their research. Understanding these frameworks highlights the purpose behind the development of research questions for each study, the selection of the participants, and the determination of methods of analysis. The second question focused on discerning the different methods of analysis used by the researchers in the current literature. The third question sought to understand the initial findings resulting from the emerging literature. The answers to the second and third questions informed my research as I proceeded with my dissertation.

Crisis Management Framework

Crisis management can be challenging to plan for. It is hard to predict when a crisis will occur, the severity of the crisis, or how those involved will react. Many management strategies for crises have evolved from studying previous crisis events to learn from errors made during the process. Rather than focusing on supporting leaders during a crisis, crisis management is oriented "to design strategies that help organizations return to normal after a crisis or a risky, unsafe, unexpected event defined by its need for ongoing attention" (Urick et al., 2021, p. 2). However, this return to normal does not optimize leadership during a crisis or support change to help prevent further crises. This is especially true in an educational context, considering the nuances that remain present in schools and the long-term effects of a continuing pandemic.

Gaps in the Crisis Management framework have the potential to leave leaders feeling unprepared, unsupported, or both when an actual crisis strikes. This feeling of a lack of

preparedness or support has led to the development of additional frameworks, particularly Crisis

Leadership, seeking to fill the gaps in crisis management (Figure 3). While reviewing the Crisis

Management framework proved helpful to my understanding, its shortcomings led me to set

aside this framework for the remainder of this study.
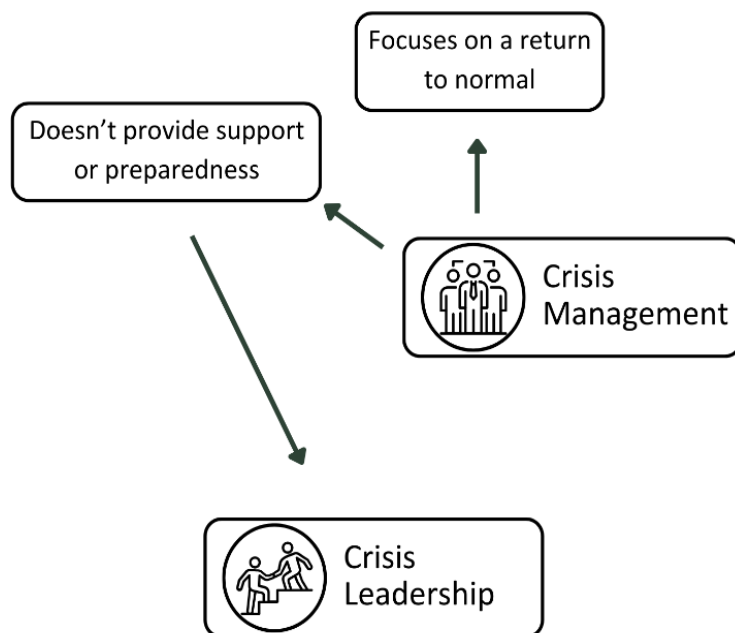
Figure 3. Crisis Management Framework.

Crisis Leadership Framework

The Crisis Leadership framework emerged from crisis management and focuses on a

leader's role during a crisis rather than after it (Figure 4). This framework helps fill critical gaps

within the Crisis Management framework, such as its inattentiveness to preparedness and

support. The Crisis Leadership framework also identifies various critical tasks for leaders and

other areas that provide a greater feeling of support for leaders.
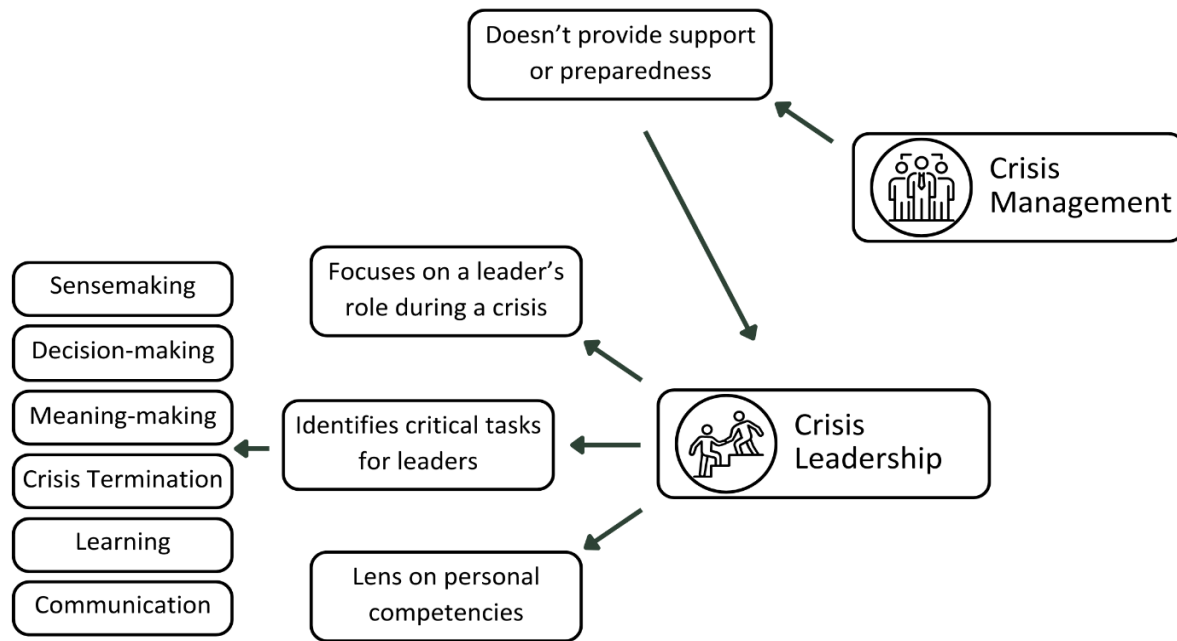
Figure 4. Crisis Leadership Framework.

Numerous scholars have reviewed, refined, and reimagined crisis leadership for many years, coming to different conclusions about crisis and the role of leadership before, during, and after any crisis event. Boin et al. (2005) wrote about five critical tasks in crisis leadership: sensemaking, decision-making, meaning-making, crisis termination, and learning. Sensemaking is when leaders "know what is going on as a crisis develops, but leaders should also be able to recognize prior vulnerabilities as a basis for action to reduce risk and uncertainty" (p. 558). Decision-making requires leaders to make critical choices and then implement those choices. Meaning-making is about "crisis management as political communication" (p. 559). Crisis termination involves a leader's need to "reassure the public that a crisis is at an end and that they are back in control…[to] try to reassert a sense of 'normalcy' and return to routine" (p. 559). Learning is important because "how learning influences reform initiatives depends on the opportunities for change" (p. 559).

These five tasks together can provide a basis for crisis leadership training. However, until a leader experiences a crisis, it is hard to measure the effectiveness of crisis training. Even then, the effectiveness is only tangible in direct relationship to the specific crisis and cannot necessarily be generalized for future crises. With a pervasive crisis like the pandemic, some of these trainings can be adjusted and adapted for a school leader's continuing needs.

Urick et al. (2021) added an additional task to those of Boin et al.—communication—and then analyzed each of the six critical tasks against collected data to understand successful leadership. This is particularly important for school leaders: one of their primary roles during a crisis is to communicate with various stakeholders efficiently, concisely, and empathetically. While other aspects of a crisis are important, such as safety and wellbeing, effective communication can help a school community better navigate the uncertainty of a crisis.

The skills Boin et al. and Urick et al. mention encompass personal competencies that licensure programs and school district professional development courses can integrate into curricula. While having these personal competencies will not necessarily make experiencing a crisis easier, they can help leaders navigate the unpredictability of the crisis. Since needs change as the scope and span of a crisis do, adaptability is a key component of a leader's ability to navigate through a crisis. Due to the variation from crisis to crisis, creating literature around crisis leadership in preparation for crises is challenging. Most of the existing literature examines the response to a crisis and the various successes or shortcomings of that response.

Scholars have repeatedly found communication to be essential during a crisis. Urick et al. (2021) noted that "leaders who regularly practice open, two-way communication to build relationships, transparency, and decision-making capability with an ethical orientation are more prepared to navigate threats and unfamiliar circumstances" (p. 2). This points to the need for a

leader to build a foundation of communication within their community before a crisis happens, as it is hard to establish communication when a crisis forces a community to be in flux. However, strong communication and strong ties to the community can support a leader during a crisis event. For example, during the beginning stages of the pandemic, clear, consistent communication was especially important as communities were receiving conflicting information and, at times, blatant misinformation.

Another aspect of crisis leadership is that of psychosocial needs. Leaders—especially school leaders, who deal with a community of adults and children—need to "build a community of supports to surround individuals who may not recover from a crisis on their own" (Urick et al., 2021, p. 3). With crisis leadership, the goal is to both get through the crisis and to return to "normalcy" as quickly as possible. For some crisis events, this return to "normalcy" could potentially be a quick one; however, for more severe crisis events, such as a pandemic, "normalcy" might never quite be the same. This is true for schools and their districts as much as it is for the communities they serve.

Leaders must be attentive to their most vulnerable populations as they navigate a crisis to assist their community in making it through the crisis with as few adverse effects as possible. As noted by Boin et al. (2013), organizations should have "a shared belief that all involved stand ready to cope with whatever threat they may face" (p. 87). This work begins with an active leader in the community who builds a culture of resiliency and support. The ability to build these cultures of resiliency and support is one of the key personal competencies leaders can draw on to establish this rapport with their communities.

Mutch (2015) developed a three-factor conceptual model of school crisis leadership after the 2010–2011 earthquakes in Canterbury, New Zealand. The three factors are dispositional,

relational, and situational factors. The dispositional factor accounts for what leaders bring to a crisis event "from their background, personal qualities, experiences, values, beliefs, personality traits, skills, areas of expertise, and conceptions of leadership" (p. 190). The relational factor includes "the ways in which leaders offer a unifying vision and develop a sense of community within the organization [adjusted spelling], engendering loyalty, enabling empowerment, building strong and trusting relationships and fostering collaboration" (p. 190). The situational factor focuses on "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" (p. 190). Together, these three factors help researchers and the subject who experienced the crisis gain further insight into the "why" behind actions taken by the subject. While this is valuable information, it is a reactive model and does not account for any proactive work. However, with a pervasive crisis such as the pandemic, this can support school leaders in adapting and adjusting their strategies to support their communities.

All of the literature on crisis leadership points to a need for leaders to be well-versed in crisis management; however, that is not always the case. Time and time again, "we are witness to countless cases of absent, ineffective, or counterproductive leadership in response to a wide range of crisis situations" (Gigliotti, 2020, p. 2). The question, therefore, becomes how to adequately train those in leadership positions to expand their personal competencies to support crisis leadership. This support is important because "the success or failure of an organization hinges upon the actions and decisions of those in leadership roles" (Gigliotti, 2020, p. 2). Because of their high potential for impact, it is increasingly essential for those in leadership roles

to navigate crises in the optimal ways for their individual communities. Leaders must also realize how their actions before, during, and after a crisis event impact how quickly the community can return to "normal" or a "new normal."

While a leader cannot be in complete control of the results of a crisis event, they do affect the response of the community and staff, which can cause further damage if not handled appropriately. This effect demonstrates a need for those in school leadership roles to be explicitly aware of their personal competencies and develop weaker competencies that could be beneficial in a crisis. To support current and aspiring school leaders, licensure programs and continuous professional development courses can integrate personal competency work.

Sensemaking Framework

Sensemaking, which scholars have identified as a critical task within crisis leadership, has been developed into its own framework (Figure 5). Longmuir (2021) defines sensemaking as "making sense of changes, contrasts, and surprises found in new working situations" (p. 4). It was important for scholars to differentiate this framework from previously used terminology since sensemaking encompasses "the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing" and has nuances within its cyclical nature (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). While not unique to crises, as leaders can face new working situations constantly, sensemaking is especially important during a crisis.

The ability to make sense during a crisis event requires work during and after the crisis, and benefits from sensemaking related to previous crises if applicable. According to Muhren et al. (2008), "Sensemaking provides us with a lens to observe and understand how information is processed within and among organizations" (p. 200). This information processing includes relating to the current circumstance and drawing on prior experiences to make sense of what is

happening, which relates to Longmuir's responsive direction orientation. Sensemaking also requires a person to reflectively analyze events to accumulate experience for future events. With all this in consideration, sensemaking becomes a cyclical process when enacted with full efficacy.
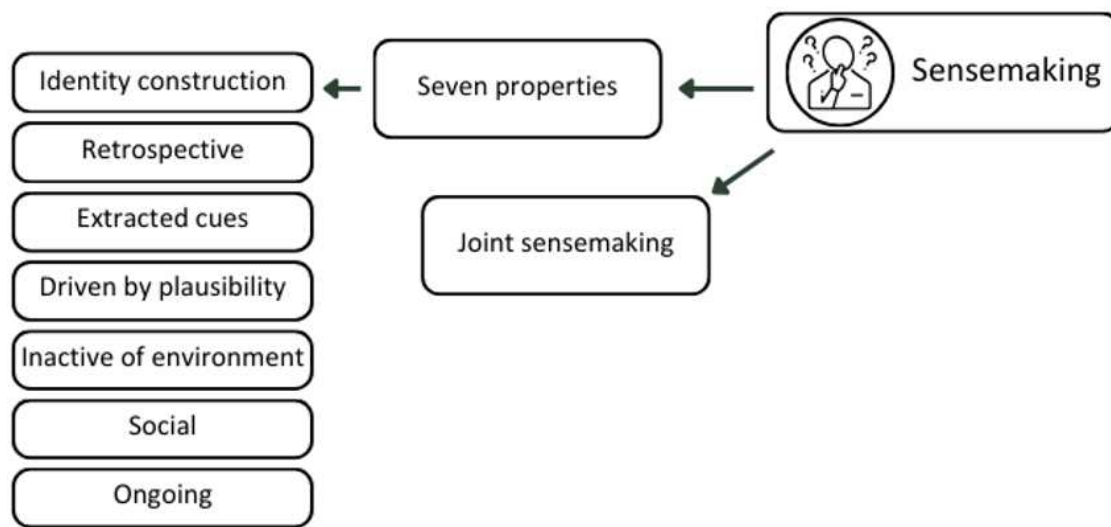
Figure 5. Sensemaking Framework.

Weick et al. (2005) identified seven properties of sensemaking: grounded in identity construction, retrospective, focused on and by extracted cues, driven by plausibility rather than accuracy, enactive of the environment, social, and ongoing. The following sections delve into the distinctions of these characteristics to understand the premise of this theory.

Grounded in Identity Construction

The process of identity construction is continuous; the people, places, things, and events around humans impact them. This property revolves around the fact that "who we are and what factors have shaped our lives influence how we see the world" (Helms Mills et al., 2010, p. 184). Identity construction includes crises, not just everyday occurrences, and the outsize role of a crisis can impact identity construction on a larger scale. Identity construction is even more

complex for school leaders as they are impacted by hundreds, if not thousands, of other community members on a daily basis.

Retrospective

Just as the world around us affects how we make sense of events, past events can also have the capacity for tremendous impact by driving our interpretations of current events. Helms Mills et al. (2010) noted that "in order to give meaning to the 'present' we compare it to a similar or familiar event from our past and rely on the past event to make sense" (p. 184). Since sensemaking is a cyclical process, past events are naturally used to make meaning within the experience of present events. Current events will, therefore, become fodder for analyzing future events. Historical context in individual schools also affects how meaning is made. For example, a school in the Denver Public Schools system was involved in a major cheating scandal in which a principal was found to be doctoring students' answers on standardized tests. This school became part of a national scandal, creating the potential for them to be questioned about cheating within the broader pandemic discussion on learning loss. Mere association with a scandal in the past can taint the experience of current events.

Focused on and by Extracted Cues

Sensemaking has some problematic properties. Within sensemaking, a person tends to focus "on certain elements, while completely ignoring others, in order to support our interpretation of an event. Since sensemaking is retrospective, past experiences, including rules and regulations, dictate what cues we will extract to make sense of a situation" (Helms Mills et al., 2010, p. 185). This can be problematic since it is a form of confirmation bias, which Britannica defines as "the tendency to process information by looking for, or interpreting, information that is consistent with one's existing beliefs" (Confirmation Bias). However, because

it must remain a part of the sensemaking process, it must be acknowledged to fully understand the resulting sense made from the event.

Driven by Plausibility Rather Than Accuracy

Another problematic property of sensemaking is that it is driven by plausibility instead of accuracy. Helms Mills et al. (2010) noted, "We look for cues that make our sensemaking seem plausible. In doing so, we may distort or eliminate what is accurate and potentially rely on faulty decision making in determining what is right or wrong" (p. 185). This property is directly connected to the property of "focused on and by extracted clues" in that it serves as a form of confirmation bias and does not necessarily allow the person engaging in sensemaking to understand an event accurately. School leaders need to be particularly cautious about the properties of "focused on and extracted by clues" and "driven by plausibility rather than accuracy" since they are accountable to whole communities. While the aspect of confirmation bias is not preferable when considering research as a whole, it is helpful for phenomenological research that considers the lived experiences of its participants.

Enactive of the Environment

The environment in which an event occurs influences meaning-making as past experiences do. In turn, a person and their experiences can also impact their environment, so "the environment that has been created by the sense maker reinforces his or her sense of credibility" (Helms Mills et al., 2010, p. 185). While this can lead to problematic confirmation bias, it can also provide the opportunity to reflect on circumstances surrounding the event that relate to the environment in which it occurred.

Social

Human beings are inherently social creatures, so it comes as no surprise that when making meaning, we are inclined to interact with others. When thinking of an organizational structure, "an organization's rules, routines, symbols, and language will all have an impact on an individual's sensemaking activities and provide routines or scripts for appropriate conduct" (Helms Mills et al., 2010, p. 185). These routines become even more critical in times of crisis, when the time to engage in sensemaking may be limited and constantly changing. The social property also connects back to the need for community and robust systems of communication.

Ongoing

Due to its cyclical nature, sensemaking is a process in which we constantly engage, even subconsciously. However, in relation to events, "we are constantly making sense of what is happening around us but…we isolate moments and cues from this continuous sensemaking to make sense of the current situation, which we will be 'forced' to attend to because of a break in the routine" (Helms Mills et al., 2010, p. 186). A crisis event can break the routine to engage a person in the act of sensemaking. As previously noted, a current crisis event will eventually become a part of the past used to inform action during any future events.

Joint sensemaking also assists school leaders in times of crisis. Boin and Renaud (2013) noted that "if decision makers do not have a shared and accurate picture of the situation, they cannot make informed decisions and communicate effectively with partners, politicians, and the public" (p. 41). The most effective leaders cooperate with their team and community. Joint sensemaking also provides an opportunity for leaders to gain a different perspective on the crisis to make more accurate decisions to move their community forward.

In terms of understanding crisis response, sensemaking "provide[s] a useful way of uncovering the social psychological processes that contribute to organizational outcomes, rather than focusing on the outcomes themselves" (Helms Mills et al., 2010, p. 183). Processes are just as important as outcomes, especially when it comes to improving leadership during a crisis.

Weick et al. (2005) noted that "sensemaking is about the interplay of action and interpretation rather than the influence of evaluation on choice" and that "to work with the idea of sensemaking is to appreciate that smallness does not equate with insignificance. Small structures and short moments can have large consequences" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). Given all these components, sensemaking is a cyclical process that is constantly transforming itself, as seen in Figure 6, especially when the feedback loop occurs.
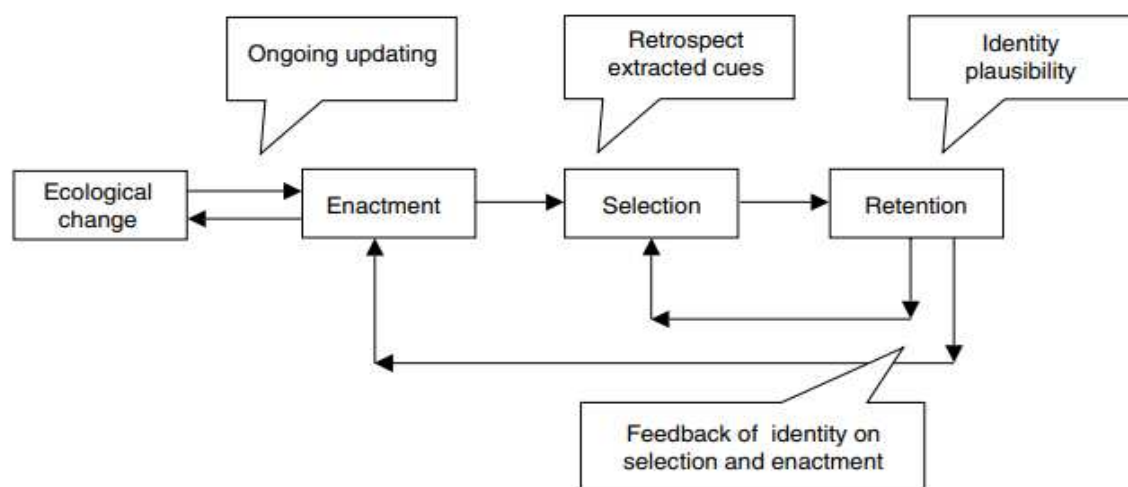
Figure 6. The Relationships Among Enactment, Organizing, and Sensemaking. Source: Jennings and Greenwood (2003; adapted from Weick, 1979, p. 132).

Turbulence Framework

Turbulence theory, developed by Steven Gross in the late 1990s, focuses on four levels of crises: light, moderate, severe, and extreme. Table 1 defines Urick et al. (2021)'s four levels of turbulence. These four levels of turbulence do not necessarily have to occur within the scope of a

large crisis. Even what might be considered a minor crisis, such as a few staff members mistrusting school leadership, can result in any of the four levels of turbulence. For instance, if three staff members mistrust school leadership, there can be a light level of turbulence if they cause minor difficulties such as skipping staff meetings or not following leadership guidance. However, if those three staff members begin discussing their mistrust of school leadership with other teachers, the level of turbulence could rise to a moderate level with all staff aware of the mistrust and a widespread lack of following leadership guidance. Then, if students and parents were to hear of this widespread mistrust, the level of turbulence could rise to severe with calls for the principal to resign. Finally, if the mistrust was founded on legitimate reasons, and the school district needed to get involved with hiring new leadership and support staff, students, and parents to regain trust, the level of turbulence can rise to extreme.

Granted, a large crisis, such as a school shooting or natural disaster, might bypass the lower levels of turbulence and likely begin at severe or extreme levels of turbulence. However, there are also varying levels within an occurrence, such as a natural disaster. For example, if a tornado destroys a school building, having to account for displaced students and staff could create an extreme level of turbulence. But if a tornado destroyed the homes of a couple of students, the turbulence might remain at the light level as the community works to support those families.

A crisis can also begin at the light level of turbulence but then progress to extreme turbulence. During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools experienced varying levels of turbulence, which shifted as the pandemic affected different communities at different levels of severity, trust, and political influence, among other factors. Understanding the levels of turbulence can help researchers analyze data collected when placed in a frame of reference for context.

Table 1

Levels of Turbulence

Levels of Turbulence	General Definitions
Light	Associated with ongoing issues, little or no disruption in the typical work environment, and subtle signs of stress
Moderate	Widespread awareness of the issue with specific origins
Severe	Fear for the entire school system, the possibility of community demonstrations, a feeling of crisis
Extreme	Structural damage to the school's typical operation occurring

Note. Adapted from Urick et al. (2021).

Each community, and even each school within each community, has a unique pandemic experience. Different school leaders might even attribute different levels of turbulence to similar events. Turbulence theory is not new to the world of crisis leadership (Figure 7). However, it has become even more poignant as the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated turbulence across education. While crises can sometimes create change, "turbulence constrains and sometimes catalyzes organizational behavior and performance" (Urick et al., 2021, p. 3). For those hoping that turbulence will create lasting, positive change, some things might be sacrificed in the process. Beabout (2012) acknowledged that "the potential for change is great, but treasured relationships and access to valued resources may be challenged" (p. 17). This potential loss is more likely in cases of extreme turbulence that affect the entire world, such as the pandemic. Collective response becomes an integral part of maintaining community through crisis, which requires an existing framework if a leader wishes to capitalize on it for more effective action.
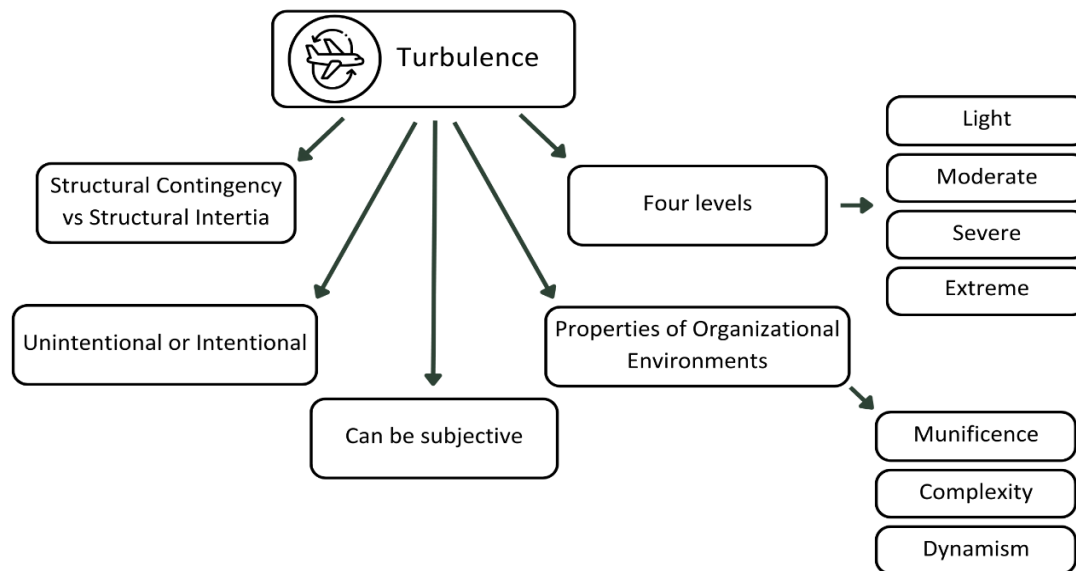
Figure 7. Turbulence Framework.

Part of being a successful leader is moving through a crisis and helping a community recover. Urick et al. (2021) identified three main properties of organizational environments: munificence, complexity, and dynamism. Munificence is "the economic resources a private or public organization has at its disposal" (Urick et al., 2021, p. 4). Complexity "refers to the heterogeneity or homogeneity of the external conditions that affect an organization" (Urick et al., 2021, p. 4). Dynamism is the "change over time in munificence and complexity" (Urick et al., 2021, p. 4). These three properties of organizational environments dramatically impact an organization's ability to navigate a crisis and the level of turbulence that will occur from it. Unfortunately, these three properties are largely entirely outside the control of school leaders, but leaders must be aware of them to mitigate potential adverse implications during a crisis.

As Boyne and Meier put it, "turbulence is unpredictable change in the munificence and complexity of an organization's environment" (Boyne & Meier, 2009, p. 803). Urick et al. (2021) summarized Steven Gross' work describing the four levels of turbulence, as seen in Table 1. However, while turbulence can be defined using concrete criteria, it inherently contains a degree

of subjectivity. Beabout (2012) noted that "turbulence is not necessarily denoted by measurable changes in environmental conditions, just a human perception of this possibility" (p. 17). The effect of a crisis on those involved is just as significant as the actual conditions it creates. What might seem like a light level of turbulence to one person could be perceived as severe turbulence by another—similar to the turbulence experienced in airplanes, where anxiety levels vary among individuals experiencing comparable disruptions on their flight.

Unfortunately, "turbulence has a negative effect on performance in schools" (Urick et al., 2021, p. 5). Internal organizational change during times of severe or extreme crisis can cause adverse effects on performance in schools. A leader's job during a crisis should be to help mitigate the crisis while stabilizing and, if possible, strengthening the internal organization. This was particularly difficult during the pandemic, which facilitated unusually high turnover in school leaders and staff due to safety concerns, politicization, and other issues.

Unintentional Turbulence

There are two forms of turbulence: unintentional and intentional turbulence. "Unintentional turbulence" is what most people think of when they think of turbulence in a crisis. This type of turbulence usually comes in the form of unplanned events, such as natural disasters or pandemics, that unintentionally create change or "can be thought of as the perception of a potential conflict" (Beabout, 2012, p. 21). In a school setting, drills may be performed to help staff and students know what to do in case of a tornado. However, until the tornado happens, predicting what change might occur from the turbulent event is impossible. It is also impossible to predict what level of turbulence will result.

Intentional Turbulence

A turbulent event is considered intentional when leaders create a situation that is "intentionally unleashed on an organization to spur change" (Beabout, 2012, p. 22). This intentionality might be necessary for an organization where stagnation has occurred, and some form of turbulence is needed to force change. For example, a school that has remained loyal to a certain English curriculum for many years without considering culturally responsive teaching might have a curriculum review forced upon them. This event might cause different levels of turbulence for the school staff, students, and community, but would ultimately lead to a review and reconsideration of the curriculum. Despite the intentionality, a leader must still navigate these events carefully and provide appropriate support to those experiencing turbulence at higher levels.

Still, there is a gap within the turbulence theory when considering the restraints of how intentional and unintentional turbulence are defined. Mismanagement sits somewhere between these two constructs, especially when the outcomes are not what was intended. For example, a curriculum director might be aware that many teachers are asking for classroom resources to support a new reading curriculum. Instead of addressing this request, the curriculum director continues to ignore the teachers' requests. This could create turbulence if teachers have difficulties teaching the new curriculum, if students do not perform at expected levels, and other negative results. While the turbulence was unplanned, it might have been prevented if the curriculum director supported teachers with their requests. This nuance is due to mismanagement rather than unplanned or planned events.

Structural Contingency Theory

The question of how to respond to a crisis event goes back to the various levels of turbulence. Two major theories exist to inform best practices, and they completely contradict each other. The first is structural contingency theory, which, at its core, suggests that change is the best for navigating crises. Many scholars have worked to develop the structural contingency theory. In his work, Donaldson (1996) noted that the quest for effectiveness "leads the organization to adapt its organizational structure so that it moves into fit with the contingency factors" (p. 2). According to this theory, change is a necessary result of turbulence: "internal structural change may be regarded as the appropriate reaction to external volatility" (Boyne & Meier, 2009, p. 805). This theory suggests that the best opportunity to create change is when a community is in flux.

Structural Inertia Theory

On the other side of crisis response is structural inertia theory, which suggests that remaining consistent is the best way to navigate crises. In this theory, "internal change is still viewed as counterproductive because the process is disruptive and undermines performance, regardless of the content of the change itself" (Boyne & Meier, 2009, p. 806). When system processes are changing, it can cause confusion about who is responsible for what within an organization. To minimize further repercussions from a crisis event, organizations may benefit from remaining as steady as possible to provide needed support.

Structural inertia theory and structural contingency theory both have their merits when it comes to handling crises. However, there is not necessarily a correct answer as to which better supports crisis management. Instead, a leader should determine the state of which their community is experiencing turbulence and what supports they might need to navigate the crisis.

If the entire community is experiencing an event at the extreme level of turbulence, change might not be the best option to help a community feel supported, or it might, depending on the nuances of the circumstance. A leader who is in tune with their community could be better positioned to decide which theory will be best for crisis management.

Perturbance

Perturbance is another concept that exists under the umbrella of turbulence. Beabout (2012) distinguished "between the words *turbulence* and *perturbance* by defining *turbulence* as the perception of potentially disruptive forces in an organization's environment or operating conditions and *perturbance* as a social process in which people respond to turbulence by considering organizational practice" (p. 17). While turbulence can exist without perturbance, the entire premise of perturbance depends on turbulence's existence.

Assuming that perturbance would follow as a response to turbulence seems natural. However, Beabout (2012) noted that "people can ignore turbulence or can attend to it in superficial ways without implicating organizational practice, and thus the system remains unperturbed" (p. 17). Acknowledging the difference in the implication of response allows for proper analysis of effectual change that results from a turbulent event.

Self-Care Framework

Self-care can be difficult for school leaders to focus on: their primary goal is the care of others, especially considering many school leaders are servant leaders. However, self-care is essential to school leadership retention because it reduces burnout. Within the Self-Care framework, "two specific aims of self-care are: (a) to guard against, cope with, or reduce stress and related adverse experiences and (b) to maintain or enhance wellbeing and overall functioning" (Urick et al., 2021, p. 6). Table 2 details six self-care domains described by Butler

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et al. (2019) and referenced by Urick et al. (2021), which hold the two specific aims of self-care at their core.

These six domains are not limited to the professional aspects of being a school leader; they consider every area where self-care supports school leaders. However, more improvement is certainly needed in the area of self-care as it relates to careers in education. In the context of this research, knowing these six domains can assist researchers in more fully understanding the effects of the pandemic on school leaders. Knowing how school leaders were or were not affected in these six areas, including any proactive or reactive measures meant to ensure self-care, can shed further light on the full impact of the pandemic.

Table 2

Six Domains of Self-Care

Domain	Description
Physical	Tending to the needs of the physical body to achieve or support optimal functioning and to avoid breakdowns or deterioration within systems
Professional	Managing or preventing work-related stress and stressors, reducing the risk, or mitigating the effects of burnout and other workplace hazards
Relational	Efforts made to maintain and enhance our interpersonal connection to others
Emotional	Practices engaged in to safeguard against or address negative emotional experiences and wellbeing
Psychological	Pursuing and satisfying intellectual needs and purposeful and reflective efforts to understand and attend to the overall needs of the organism
Spiritual	Creating space to reflect on our own inner needs and our role or place within the world and universe

Note. Adapted from Butler et al. (2019).

Self-care is an area that has been getting more attention and funding lately; still, professionals across various industries do not receive enough support (Figure 8). Urick et al. (2021) noted that "today's principals are one of our nation's most stressed and burned-out cohorts

of professionals, leaving the field at alarming rates" (p. 6). A lack of emphasis on self-care is one of the main contributing factors to this burnout rate. While school leaders can appreciate the need for self-care among their staff and students, they often have a more challenging time extending that grace to themselves. This difficulty in including themselves among those who need grace is especially true for school leaders who identify as servant leaders because "self-identification as a sacrificial leader is inherently at odds with many self-care behaviors" (Ray et al., 2020, p. 447). Given the immense pressures of working through a pandemic, self-care is necessary for school leaders to maintain the requisite mindset to navigate such a difficult time.
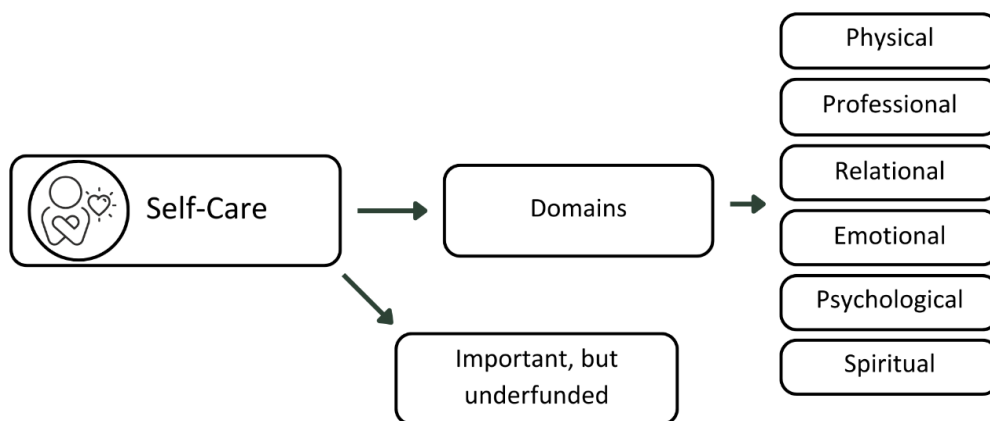
Figure 8. Self-Care Framework.

Leaning on the work of Bluth and Neff (2018), Lanaj et al. (2021) noted that "existing self-compassion research indicates that people may benefit from taking a self-compassionate stance in challenging environments that have implications for their sense of self" (p. 2). It can be easy for leaders to put themselves last in a crisis event due to their focus on their community and those most vulnerable. However, when the blame for difficulties in the crisis falls on the leader, an existing foundation of self-care and self-compassion can help a leader recover from the potential emotional harm of carrying the weight of a crisis. Self-care and compassion also serve as forms of "nudging leaders to be kind and gracious to themselves in relation to challenges in

their leader role" (Lanaj et al., 2021, p. 2). This supports a leader in times of crisis when "leaders may regard leadership hardships as 'just part of the role' and view them with an attitude of appreciation and understanding rather than as a threat to their leadership abilities, making it easier to view themselves as a leader on a day-to-day basis" (Lanaj et al., 2021, p. 2). Having this stable view of themselves can support a leader in navigating a complex crisis or even one that is considered "light turbulence."

Meta-Leadership Framework

The Meta-Leadership framework McNulty, Marcus, and Henderson developed results from over 15 years of work with the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative at Harvard University. In their 2019 article, the three discuss the resulting framework and its implication for leaders through any crisis. These implications were important in the analysis of collected data as compared to this framework. Meta-leadership has three dimensions: person, situation, and connectivity. The dimension of "person" refers to the leader in a crisis scenario. "Situation" refers to the context in which this person is leading. "Connectivity" refers to the "network of people, entities, and assets you link and leverage to create a positive outcome" (McNulty et al., 2019, p. 34).

Within the Meta-Leadership framework, the crisis is not the center of focus; the leader is. The framework "reframes the process and practice of leaders with a comprehensive organizing framework for understanding and integrating the many facets of leadership, a method for catalyzing high performance, and tools for improving coordination and collaboration within and across organizational boundaries" (McNulty et al., 2019, p. 34). Essentially, this framework aims to provide guidance for leaders to perform well while understanding the nuances that make each

leadership scenario unique, which can help leaders process their decision-making during events (Figure 9).
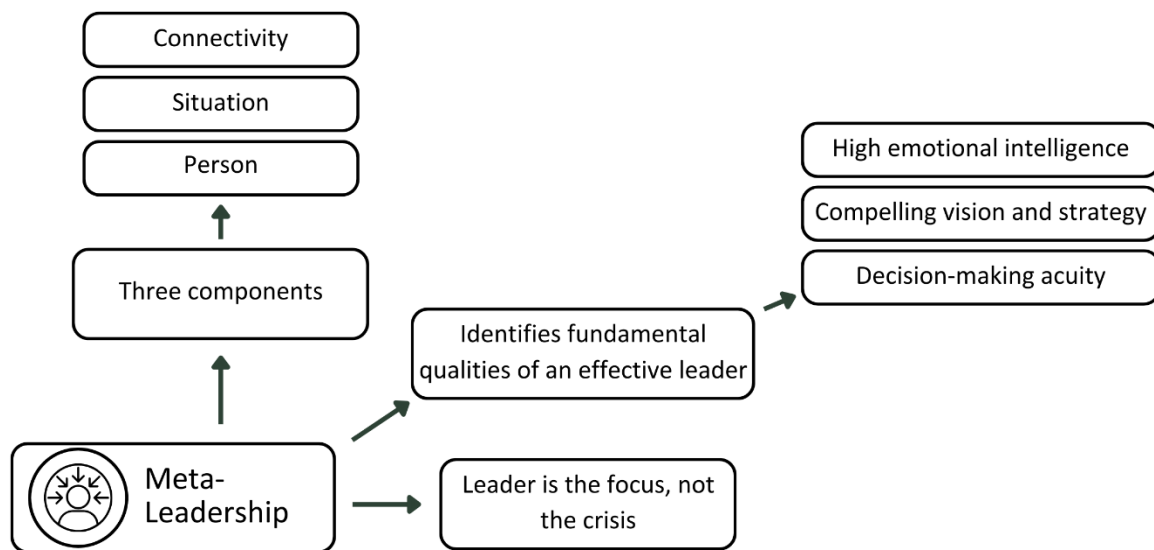
Figure 9. Meta-Leadership Framework.

This guidance is especially important in the field of education, where each crisis, and the level of turbulence felt during each crisis, can wildly vary from school to school, even within the same school district. School leaders are responsible for the safety of the students and staff in their schools, which can be impacted by any level of turbulence. Having the ability to process during events can potentially lead to better decision-making and an increased frequency of positive outcomes.

Through this work, McNulty et al. (2019) identified several fundamental qualities of an effective leader, including "high emotional intelligence, a compelling vision and strategy, and decision-making acuity" (p. 34). These skills drive effective leadership and, more importantly, allow a leader to guide those around them through crises. McNulty et al. (2019) noted, "The key to performing well in both routine and crisis situations was learning how to deploy those skills in a pivot from initial panic into productive action" (p. 24). Using this framework to assess a leader's self-perception of efficacy in crises will be helpful in analyzing their lived experiences.

The Meta-Leadership framework helped with the development of my research questions, interview questions, and how I approached data analysis. By using the principles of the Meta-Leadership framework, I analyzed the data collected during this study to explore new views on the lived experiences of the participants and provide recommendations for continued growth.

Methods of Analysis Within the Literature

This review focused on different forms of research to view as many aspects of the emerging research surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic as possible. Three main methods of analysis were seen across the articles chosen for this review: synthesis of frameworks, thematic analysis, and case study. The following section briefly overviews the three main methods used across the articles.

Synthesis of Frameworks

Urick et al. (2021) focused primarily on evaluating Crisis Management and Leadership, Turbulence, and Self-Care frameworks to suggest curricular adoptions that can be made by leadership preparation programs to better prepare school leaders for crises. Urick et al. (2021) "suggest leadership preparation programs author and implement a three-pronged curricular strand that provides conceptual frameworks necessary for leaders to successfully navigate during stress-specific contexts associated with crisis and turbulence while maintaining their overall health and wellbeing" (p. 8). While their suggestions are not derived from field research, they align with the analysis of multiple frameworks derived from quantitative and qualitative research. The Meta-Leadership assisted in the development of this research study to analyze the effects of the pandemic on school leadership.

Thematic Analysis

McLeod and Dulsky (2021) and Longmuir (2021) used thematic analysis in their research. While differing in their initial reasoning for data collection, both groups of researchers used convenience sampling to identify participants. They also both used interviews to collect data around the lived experiences of their participants, which lent itself well to thematic analysis.

McLeod and Dulsky focused on exploratory research stemming from their podcast series, *Coronavirus Chronicles*. Since these interviews did not begin as a part of a qualitative study, the researchers used a semi-structured interview approach. Their focus on the participants' lived experiences lent itself to the emergence of common themes presenting, in aggregate, potentially useful information, which is when the authors transitioned to the role of researchers. This shift from podcaster to researcher resulted in the use of "ongoing, open, inductive coding" and then "selective coding to validate the relationships between themes against the data" (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021, p. 5). While this study revealed rich analyses, there is the potential for ethical concerns. Since the participants agreed to be recorded for distribution through the podcast, they might have given consent that would be comparable to what is needed by IRBs. However, the production of a podcast does not need IRB approval, and the safeguards for research with human subjects might not have been as robust within this study.

There is also the potential that post hoc analysis occurred as the study was created after much of the data had been collected. Regardless, the research revealed five major themes: vision and values; communication and family community engagement; staff care, instructional leadership, and organizational capacity-building; equity-oriented leadership; and silver linings and future opportunities.

Longmuir also used a semi-structured interview protocol focused on the participants' lived experiences. Longmuir's thematic analysis consisted of several phases to provide "a review and validation that all relevant data informed the interpretation of each theme" (Longmuir, 2021, p. 7). This analysis resulted in four themes: connection to community, crucial communication, care and compassion, and possibilities and potential.

There is an overlap between the two research groups employing thematic analysis: They both focused on lived experiences in their data collection phase. However, questions remain about the transferability of themes across school leaders in various countries with potentially different educational, social, and cultural institutions, as McLeod and Dulsky's study took place in the United States, and Longmuir's took place in Australia.

Case Study

Netolicky's (2020) research sought to review their own lived experience as a school leader in Australia during the pandemic via the case study method of analysis. This case study leaned on existing literature surrounding crisis leadership to examine Netolicky's own experiences and pose questions as society moves back to the "next normal." Netolicky examined their perceived successes and failures, as well as those of the staff and leaders around them, during this time, holding themself to a standard of honest, deep reflection. Case studies have the potential to help capture detailed experiences of leaders' actions during the pandemic.

Emerging Themes

The initial emerging themes from the literature review assisted my development of this study, including the interview questions and protocol. The following sections detail the emerging themes of prioritizing communication, promoting self/staff/community care and compassion,

connecting to the community, integrating planning and collaboration, and using personal competencies.

Prioritizing Communication

Communication has always been, and will continue to be, a vital component of leadership. In the beginning stages of the pandemic, communication was crucial, especially given the lack of clarity across the world about what was actually happening. The spread of conflicting information rapidly politicized the pandemic. School leaders found themselves "collating and interpreting information from a range of sources and they found ways to disseminate it so that it decreased the ambiguity and confusion for their communities" (Longmuir, 2021, p. 8). Having existing solid systems of communication allowed school leaders to disseminate that information quickly. These "structures and systems of communication that existed prior to the pandemic were relied upon heavily to ensure that meaningful connections were maintained" (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021, p. 7). Without these established systems, leaders could have found themselves floundering to create new systems while making sense of the chaos.

Besides leaning on existing communications systems, school leaders needed to quickly adapt to new ecosystems for their schools. With the abrupt shift to remote learning, "school leaders needed to set up new systems and processes for communication within the remote learning environment" (Longmuir, 2021, p. 9). For most schools, this shift to remote learning was a completely new venture, which required all school staff to learn a new skill set seemingly overnight.

School leaders also had to determine what other shifts were needed structurally and systematically to enable their staff and community to be successful with remote learning. Part of

school leaders' responsibility was to enable a forum for two-way communication. According to McLeod and Dulsky (2021), "The importance of feedback in a school's communication strategy was recognized as a critical component of managing the challenges of remote learning" (p. 7). Leaders needed to be flexible as they considered their different constituents: teachers, staff, students, parents, and potentially their local communities.

A valuable lesson for school leaders during this crisis was that "encouraging transparent and collaborative approaches to communication" and, by extension, taking a proactive, instead of reactive, approach to crisis management and leadership "creates consistency before, during, and after a crisis" (Urick et al., 2021, p. 8). This theme of proactive approaches appears across this entire review.

Promoting Self/Staff/Community Care and Compassion

During the pandemic, school leaders found themselves attending more to the socioemotional needs of their staff than was historically expected. In Longmuir's (2021) study, "all the school leaders prioritized [adjusted spelling] the welfare and wellbeing of members of the community above any other concerns" (p. 10). They also needed to undertake various roles to ensure the care of their communities.

Additionally, schools are where many children get their meals and are sometimes the only place where they can access devices and the internet. Longmuir (2021) noted that school leaders in their study found themselves "organizing [adjusted spelling] food hampers for families whom they knew to be particularly economically impacted, providing devices for students who did not have access, and connecting teachers, students and parents to counseling [adjusted spelling] and other support services as needed" (p. 11). These various community care roles required significant time and attention to manage. Most of the work fell to school leadership

because staff members were already overwhelmed with the adjustments needed to teach and support students successfully.

While self-care and compassion during a crisis may seem natural, it can be challenging for some leaders to remember that they, too, need care and compassion. Urick et al. (2021) learned a valuable lesson from their study around self-care. They noted that leaders need to focus on "physical, professional, relational, emotional, and psychological aspects of self-care to avoid burnout" (p. 9). This lesson reflects the six domains of self-care Butler et al. (2019) describe in Table 2. However, without a solid foundation for promoting self-care among school leadership during "normal" times, it is nearly impossible for school leaders to focus on it during crises. Licensure programs should seek to address this issue so school leaders can learn to appropriately prioritize self-care.

Connecting to the Community

Prioritizing communication with and care and compassion for the community required school leaders to connect with the community. Having a strong, pre-existing connection to the community made this process easier since school leaders had already established trust. However, a lack of a relationship with or a low-trust connection to the community resulted in a tumultuous communication process.

One participant in Longmuir's (2021) study noted that "it seems that the next voice that many community members go to, particularly families, is to school leaders" (p. 7). These leaders found themselves being the primary source of communication for their community. Connection to the community played an integral role, as the constant shift in how schooling took place during the pandemic required clear communication. In McLeod and Dulsky's (2021) study, participants found that "the personal nature of voice-to-voice connection became an essential

component of the difficult transition to remote learning" (p. 7). By continuing to build those personal connections and helping their staff make them as well, school leaders helped their schools navigate a tumultuous time.

Integrating Planning and Collaboration

While still limited in scope, research from the pandemic has shown that school leaders who planned and collaborated with staff more successfully navigated pandemic-related challenges. As with the areas of communication and community, schools and school leaders with previous systems of collaboration in place, such as professional learning communities, were able to more quickly and reliably turn to collaboration as a system of support.

Schools without systems of collaboration already in place found themselves engaging in informal professional learning communities or "collaboration borne out of necessity and urgency" (Netolicky, 2020, p. 393). Having a system of collaboration in place would have benefitted staff, who would not have had to spend time creating new collaborative practices. One participant in Netolicky's (2020) study found that "much of the collaboration happening during this pandemic embodies the principles of collaborative professionalism, particularly collective autonomy, collective efficacy, collective responsibility, collective initiative, joint work and common meaning and purpose" (p. 393). Many leaders hoped to see improved collaboration as a silver lining of pandemic struggles. For systems of collaboration developed during the pandemic to remain in place, leaders and staff must understand the value of proactive collaboration.

Urick et al. (2021) found a similar key lesson from the pandemic: the need to integrate planning and collaboration. They also found that "the questioning of what is next orients leaders and stakeholders toward the collaborative planning of action steps that may, in fact, reduce risk and extend into progress toward restoration and positive change" (p. 8). While leaders can never

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be fully prepared for every potential crisis, reasonable forward planning can help mitigate future problems.

Using Personal Competencies

Personal competencies are a common theme throughout the literature emerging from the pandemic. The personal competencies mentioned most throughout the literature used for this review include adaptability, communication, dependability, empathy, teamwork, and problem-solving. While incredibly valuable to any person, personal competencies are often not explicitly taught.

Final Considerations

While much work has been done to study the aftermath effects of crises on leaders, most of the literature is filled with generalized suggestions for improvement. There is room, especially within primary and secondary education fields, to study the lived experiences of leaders who have been through crises. It is clear how the Crisis Leadership framework uses sensemaking and how the various levels of turbulence can affect the sensemaking process. Self-care, in particular, needs attention because leaders often neglect it.

The frameworks of Meta-Leadership, Crisis Leadership, Sensemaking, Turbulence, and Self-Care provide a valuable lens through which to view the emerging research on the lived experiences of school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the lived experiences of leaders were the focus of this review, the data collected related to the frameworks and theories of Meta-Leadership, Crisis leadership, Sensemaking, Turbulence, and Self-Care.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

COVID-19 has caused vast personal and professional shifts in people's lives, especially in an educational context. In order to capture the lived experiences of seven school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study utilized a constructivist epistemology and phenomenological methodology in the research design. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What skills did school leaders use to navigate the issues of the COVID-19 pandemic successfully?

2. What lessons did school leaders learn from the difficulties of the pandemic?

3. As the pandemic has continued, what shifts have leaders made to remain successful in managing the continued crisis?

4. How can licensure programs and school districts better equip their school leaders to handle crises?

Qualitative Research

A qualitative approach was chosen for this study to allow for a "focus on the *qualities* of phenomena, rather than their *quantities*" (Bazeley, 2021, p. 6). While there is a time and place for quantitative aspects of the pandemic to be analyzed, it is important to begin understanding the experiences of school leaders to assess long-term impacts in greater detail. Given the research questions, it was vital to focus on the qualities of participants' experiences. The understanding derived from these experiences could potentially improve future crisis responses.

To engage in a qualitative study, the researcher must observe, describe, interpret, analyze, and abstract from "the way that people experience, act on, or think about themselves and the

world around them" (Bazeley, 2021, p. 6). There is inherently some researcher bias when engaging in qualitative research. However, this lends a human aspect to the world of research that can, unfortunately, sometimes feel cold. When dealing with the lives of humans, the experiences they had, and the impacts of school leaders' experiences on the staff, students, and communities they affect, this is extremely important.

Constructivism

Ontologically, constructivists take a relativist position, meaning that reality is holistic and does not exist independently. This view aligns with the previously discussed Sensemaking framework and is part of why the constructivist paradigm was embodied for this study. Epistemologically, constructivism takes a subjectivist stance. This means that "inquirer and inquired into are fused into a single (monistic) entity. Findings are literally the creation of the process of interaction between the two" (Guba, 1990, p. 23). Constructivists posit the natural inclination for interaction between what an inquirer already knows and what they are learning. As such, a researcher is constantly intertwining their personal realities with those of their subjects. Using a subjectivist stance when designing this study lent itself well to the creation of focus groups because of how participants could evaluate their perceptions of their lived experiences in the presence of others. The subjectivist stance was also conducive to individual interviews.

Methodologically, constructivists use a hermeneutic, dialectic approach to their studies, meaning the researcher engages participants in a natural context rather than in a laboratory. For a study centered on the lived experiences of others, this stance is important. Context affects both experiences and the reporting of those experiences.

Phenomenology

Phenomenological approaches to research have been used since the early 1900s. The approach has evolved in its use, but the essence has remained the same – understanding the core of an experience by exploring the reality of those who experienced it. The principles of hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology, with philosophical origins in the work of Heidegger and Gadamer, lend themselves well to the current research study. As seen in Table 3, the ontological assumption of hermeneutic phenomenology rests in an individual's experience and how they contribute to the meaning of their lived experience.

Hermeneutic phenomenology also acknowledges that because a researcher is part of the world in which a phenomenon occurs, they cannot possibly be free of bias. Especially with a phenomenon as pervasive as a pandemic, it is impossible to conduct this research without any sense of bias during this or any comparable study's interpretation and analysis process. Hermeneutic phenomenology also aligns well with the findings and discussion sections of this paper, in which consideration of the whole is essential for implications.

Table 3

Aspects of Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Aspect	Description
Ontological assumptions	Lived experience is an interpretive process situated in an individual's lifeworld
Epistemological assumptions	Observer is part of the world and not bias-free; understands phenomenon by interpretive means
Researcher role in data collection	Reflects on essential themes of participant experience with the phenomenon while simultaneously reflecting on own experience
Researcher role in data analysis/writing	Iterative cycles of capturing and writing reflections towards a robust and nuanced analysis; consider how the data (or parts) contributed to evolving understanding of the phenomena (whole)

Note. Adapted from Neubauer et al. (2019).

Research Design

The research design of this study began with a comprehensive literature review to understand the landscape for school leaders during a crisis. This literature review helped establish the theories that would inform the development of the study, participant recruitment, interview questions, data analysis, and other study components.

Literature Review

A comprehensive literature review of the research landscape was conducted prior to the development of research questions and the research design. The first keywords used during the search for relevant literature were "crisis management," "school leaders," "COVID-19," "pandemic," "crisis leadership," and varied combinations of these. Initial reviews of the literature allowed for the development of narrowed frameworks and theories to refine search criteria and hone in on the articles chosen for this literature review, which are detailed in Chapter 2. An in-depth analysis of the literature contributed to the research questions and corresponding interview questions.

Participant Recruitment

All participants were recruited from Colorado State University's School Leadership Institute. The institute is designed to support school leaders in their first three years of a new leadership role. Upon the completion of the institute, participants have the option to apply for a fellowship program to continue receiving support and learn more about evolving leadership research and practices. This year-long fellowship program includes two retreats and continued mentoring. At these retreats, participants continue their work on setting a vision, personal leadership styles, shared leadership, organizational politics, and more. Figure 10 details the central tenets of the School Leadership Institute.
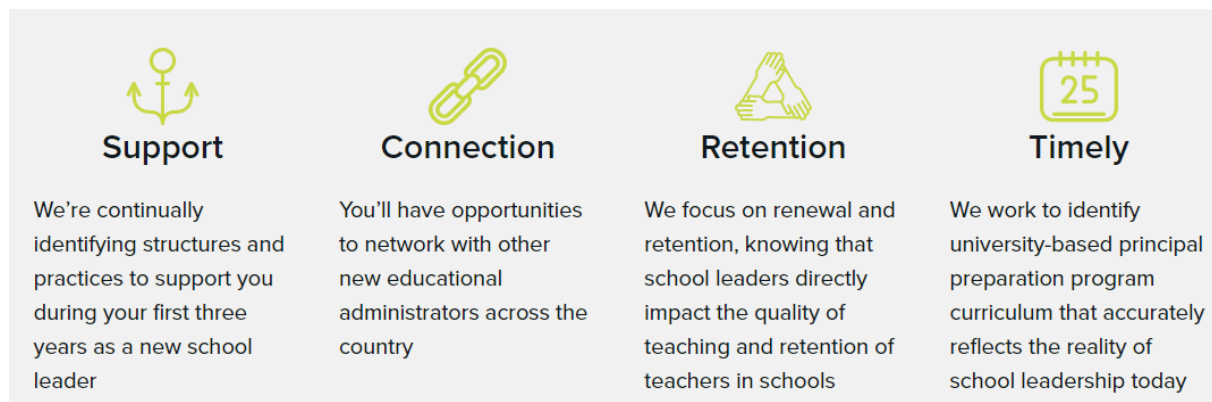
Figure 10. Colorado State University's School Leadership Institute Tenets. Obtained from the School Leadership Institute website: https://www.chhs.colostate.edu/soe/center-for-educator-preparation/school-leadership-institute/

The participants who were chosen for the focus group interview were members of the fellowship program who attended the December 2022 retreat. At this retreat, fellows had the option of participating in the focus group, but were not mandated to. All five fellows who were able to attend the winter retreat opted to participate in the focus group. By targeting those participants who were willing to opt-in to the focus group, I was able to have access to their retreat and gain additional insights that I might not have received. In addition to those who were able to attend the retreat, the School Leadership Institute leaders sent an introductory email to all fellows, allowing the recruitment of members for one-on-one interviews. This recruitment yielded two additional fellows who participated in the interviews via Zoom.

Participant Demographics

I used a Google Forms survey to collect demographic data from participants to better understand their lived experiences (Appendix A). This survey collected general demographic data and specific data for the 2019-2020, 2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023 school years. I also collected data about geographic area, political affiliation, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation. Since the pandemic became politicized and polarized, these demographics could have

impacted their experiences. All of the participants in this study hold a Master's degree and administrator's license. Each participant identified as heterosexual. All participants reported a household income of over $100,000 for each of the years surveyed, except Chase, who reported a household income between $75,000-$99,000. Tables 4-10 contain an overview of each participant's compiled demographics from the Google Form.

Table 4

Bobby's Demographic Information

Variable	Bobby's Response			
	2019–2020	2020–2021	2021–2022	2022–2023
Age	46	47	48	49
Gender	Male			
Race	White			
Political Views	Neither Liberal nor Conservative			
Religious Affiliation	Christian			
Years in Education	22	23	24	25
Years in an Administrator Role	1	2	3	4
Leadership Position	Assistant Principal/ Athletic Director	Assistant Principal/ Athletic Director	Assistant Principal/ Athletic Director	Assistant Principal
Community Type	Suburban			
Relationship Status	Married			
Household Size	4			

Table 5

Megan's Demographic Information

Variable	Megan's Response			
	2019–2020	2020–2021	2021–2022	2022–2023
Age	41	42	43	44
Gender	Female			
Race	Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin			
Political Views	Very Liberal			
Religious Affiliation	Prefer Not to Say			
Years in Education	19	20	21	22
Years in an Administrator Role	4	5	6	7
Leadership Position	Assistant Principal	Assistant Principal	Principal	Principal
Community Type	Suburban			
Relationship Status	Married			
Household Size	5			

Table 6

Nick's Demographic Information

Variable	Nick's Response			
	2019–2020	2020–2021	2021–2022	2022–2023
Age	32	33	34	35
Gender		Male		
Race		White		
Political Views		Slightly Liberal		
Religious Affiliation		Not Applicable		
Years in Education	8	9	10	11
Years in an Administrator Role	2	3	4	5
Leadership Position	Dean	Assistant Principal	Assistant Principal/Dean	Assistant Principal/ Athletic Director
Community Type		Suburban		
Relationship Status		Married		
Household Size		3		

Table 7

Matthew's Demographic Information

Variable	Matthew's Response			
	2019–2020	2020–2021	2021–2022	2022–2023
Age	34	35	36	37
Gender	Male			
Race	Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin			
Political Views	Very Liberal			
Religious Affiliation	Not Applicable			
Years in Education	1	12	13	14
Years in an Administrator Role	4	5	6	7
Leadership Position	Assistant Principal	Assistant Principal	Assistant Principal	Principal
Community Type	Suburban			
Relationship Status	Married			
Household Size	4		5	

Table 8

Josh's Demographic Information

Variable	Josh's Response			
	2019–2020	2020–2021	2021–2022	2022–2023
Age	42	43	44	45
Gender		Male		
Race		White		
Political Views		Slightly Liberal		
Religious Affiliation		Christian		
Years in Education	17	18	19	20
Years in an Administrator Role	5	6	7	8
Leadership Position		Principal		
Community Type		Suburban		
Relationship Status	Divorced		Married	
Household Size		2	4	

Table 9

Chase's Demographic Information

Variable	Chase's Response			
	2019–2020	2020–2021	2021–2022	2022–2023
Age	40	41	42	43
Gender	Male			
Race	Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin			
Political Views	Slightly Conservative			
Religious Affiliation	Christian			
Years in Education	17	18	19	20
Years in an Administrator Role	8	9	10	11
Leadership Position	Principal		Superintendent of Schools	
Community Type	Rural			
Relationship Status	Divorced			
Household Size	1			

Table 10

Zachary's Demographic Information

Variable	Zachary's Response			
	2019–2020	2020–2021	2021–2022	2022–2023
Age	40	41	42	43
Gender		Male		
Race		White		
Political Views		Neither Liberal nor Conservative		
Religious Affiliation		Christian		
Years in Education	18	19	20	–
Years in an Administrator Role	3	4	5	–
Leadership Position	Principal	Founding Principal		Senior Culture Engineer
Community Type	Rural	Urban		Rural
Relationship Status		Married		
Household Size		5		

Data Collection

As this study took a constructivist approach to epistemology, focus groups and interviews were the chosen methods of data collection. Interviews occurred in the form of in-person focus groups and one-on-one interviews via Zoom. Bazeley acknowledges that "knowledge is constructed through discourse in the context of individual histories and social interactions" (Bazeley, 2021, p. 32). For all interviews, I used a recording and automated transcription service called Otter. This program allows users to record interviews, which it then automatically transcribes. Otter initially labels participants with numerical signifiers. However, when a user

labels the section of text with the name, or pseudonym, of the person speaking, Otter learns their voice patterns and relabels the names throughout the transcript. The service also allows users to edit, highlight, and annotate the transcript.

Prior to each interview, I read participants the IRB-approved Verbal Recruitment and Consent Script for Focus Groups and Interviews (Appendix B). With approval, I recorded each interview. I asked the questions in the interview protocol as the interviews naturally progressed.

In-person Focus Groups. Since all my participants were recruited from Colorado State University's School Leadership Institute, I attended their annual winter in-person gathering. Attending this retreat was extremely helpful for learning more about the participants in an informal setting. More importantly, it was required for me to conduct an in-person focus group with five of the participants: Bobby, Megan, Nick, Matthew, and Josh. As the nature of this gathering was relaxed and supportive, I strove to create the same environment for the focus group. Participants sat in a variety of comfortable seating options in a semicircle, while I sat at a table to support my laptop, which I had set up to record the interviews via Otter. During this process, I ensured each participant had the opportunity to respond if they wanted to, but I did not pressure anyone into responding if they chose not to. This focus group lasted approximately one and a half hours. Originally, the focus group was scheduled for 90 minutes, but I let participants finish their discussions before concluding the process, which accounted for the additional time spent. Each participant spoke for approximately the same amount of time at about 18 minutes.

While participants were long-standing members of the School Leadership Institute and had grown close over their various experiences, retreats, and conversations, there is always the possibility that not every participant was as forthcoming with me as they would have been if I had conducted personal interviews.

Zoom Interviews. Due to their availability, Chase and Zachary could not attend the School Leadership Institute in-person gathering. Instead, I had one-on-one interviews via Zoom with these participants. These interviews were also recorded using Otter with the participant's permission. While conducted in a virtual environment, the structure was similar to that of the focus groups—participants gave consent prior to recording, introductions were made, participants joined the interview from a comfortable location of their choosing, and the interview protocol was followed.

These individual interviews lasted for approximately 30 minutes each. As I had their individual attention, Chase and Zachary were able to speak slightly longer than the participants in the focus group. Since I did not have to ensure each participant had time to respond, I was able to ask clarifying and probing questions that accounted for the longer time spent on the Zoom interviews.

Data Management

Data were securely stored on my password-protected computer and Otter account. In order to protect the identity of participants, names were replaced with pseudonyms throughout all data and materials related to this study. After I confirmed Otter's transcription of all interviews, I deleted the recordings of the interviews to further protect participants. Data will be maintained in a secure file on my password-protected computer for potential use in other studies with the participants' permission.

Interview Protocol

To ensure my research questions were explored within the collected data, I organized my interview questions around my research questions.

Research Question #1 Interview Questions. What skills did school leaders utilize to navigate the issues of the COVID-19 pandemic successfully?

1. If you were in a leadership role during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, please share your experience in managing the crisis.

   a. If not, please share your perception of leadership in your building at that time.

      - What was done well?

      - What wasn't done well?

2. What skills (personal, professional, academic, etc.) do you think supported successful crisis management?

3. How did you support your staff?

4. How did you support students in your building?

5. How did you support your community?

6. How did you support yourself?

   a. Did you make any changes in your personal life in regard to impacts on your professional life? (e.g., more cautiously wearing your mask knowing that you were in a school building?)

7. Given how politicized and unknown the start of the pandemic was, how was your community coping? What was going on in your community?

8. Do you live in the county/community where you work?

   a. Were there differences in regulations among staff, students, and communities that made it easier or more difficult to abide by school-mandated regulations?

Research Question #2 Interview Questions. What lessons did school leaders learn from the difficulties of the pandemic?

1. What skills do you think would have improved your ability to manage the crisis?

2. Describe a time you messed up in handling any aspect of the pandemic (personal, admin-related, etc.) and the consequences of those actions.

3. What do you think is the most important lesson you learned from the pandemic?

4. Would you change how you handled anything, knowing everything you do now?

5. What lasting impacts from the pandemic can still be felt in your communities?

    a. Positive or negative

6. Did you feel supported by your community? (staff, students, community at large?)

7. What feelings do you wish you could have expressed but always felt you couldn't?

Research Question #3 Interview Questions. As the pandemic has continued, what shifts have leaders made to remain successful in managing the continued crisis?

1. What changes did you make (or were perceived to be made by admin) for the 2020-2021 school year based on successful and unsuccessful crisis management?

    a. 2021-2022 school year?

    b. 2022-2023 school year?

2. As a school leader, how did the choices other schools, districts, or states made in regard to regulations affect your choices?

Research Question #4 Interview Questions. How can licensure programs and school districts better equip their school leaders to handle crises?

1. Was there anything you learned or experienced in your teacher or admin prep programs that supported you through this crisis?

2. What do you think teacher and admin preparation programs can improve on to better prepare teachers and leaders for any form of crisis?

Data Analysis

Data analysis began with a thorough initial read-through of each transcript from all interviews while listening to the recording. This process allowed for the verification of accuracy and an initial understanding of the emerging themes and potential codes, as codes are created during the data analysis process of a phenomenological study. During the initial review, I annotated the text with my various thoughts or questions, highlighted quotes for potential use, and created potential cross-reference connections between interviews and participant responses. This process allowed for a holistic review of the data before embarking on a cyclical coding process.

Otter assisted with the coding process as it provided summary keywords for each transcript. This form of in vivo codes replaced any initial, open coding I might have engaged in. With these initial codes, I moved to focused coding, which is a stage of "refining or interpreting to develop more analytical categories or clusters" (Bazeley, 2021, p. 157). Throughout the process of identifying codes, I wrote a memo for each with details for later analysis. These memos served as reminders and justifications for the code categorization, allowing for connections to the overall analysis. Throughout the analysis, I engaged in the process of "opening" the data to understand the "what," "who," "when," "where," "why," "how," and the often overlooked "so what" of what participants were conveying in their responses.

When creating these connections and codes across the data, I shared my analysis of each participant's responses with the individual participants to ensure I captured the essence of their

lived experiences. As I was the only researcher on this project, I needed the participants themselves for member-checking.

For example, several participants mentioned or alluded to the word communication during the focus groups. One participant said, "being open and honest about why we're making the decisions that we're making." This statement, among others, led to the creation of the code "honest communication." By asking the questions of "why, "how," and "so what," this code evolved into the theme of consistently clear communication. This form of data analysis and coding was most appropriate for this study as I gathered multiple perspectives and lived experiences that needed to be synthesized for understanding and implications.

Ethical Considerations

Before embarking on data collection, I sought Colorado State University's Institutional Review Board's approval. It was my responsibility to maintain the confidentiality of the participants to help secure honest responses and minimize any potential retribution or adverse effects of participating in this study. My files were kept secure on my password-protected computer. All transcripts and data were edited to remove any identifiable information and replace names with pseudonyms throughout. Any paper copies of data will be digitized and stored in accordance with other digital files to allow for immediate shredding. After the completion of the study, all digital files will be stored in a password-protected file on my password-protected computer.

Limitations

As with most research studies, there were limitations to this study. One primary limitation was that of participant selection. Participants of this study are all part of Colorado State University's School Leadership Institute. Two of the participants are located outside of

Colorado, but as most participants are located in Colorado, the data can be skewed toward this region. Another limitation of this study is its gender diversity. Only one out of seven participants identify as female, leaving room for improvement in this area.

While diversified demographics could better support the rigor of this study, its findings still add value to the emerging literature on crisis leadership in education. Due to the subjective nature of lived experiences and reflection, the more stories that can be added to the research could support understanding crisis management.

Criteria for Judging Quality

With qualitative research, it is important to have internal consistency with a study and present findings that are justified by the research. Internally, the study needs consistency between the epistemology, methodology, and methods so a structure exists that works well together. Holistically, the four areas considered for judging quality are dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability.

Dependability

Dependability, also known as reliability and confirmability, is seen "in the consistency of and between data collection and analysis" (Bazeley, 2021, p. 493). However, this is not as simple when considering the nature of a constructivist approach to qualitative research in which the researcher is inherently biased and part of making meaning of data. For this study, dependability took place in the form of member-checking, where I asked participants to verify that I interpreted the appropriate findings from their interviews.

Credibility

To ensure credibility, also known as validity, authenticity, and trustworthiness, I focused on the analysis and presentation of analysis within this study. All inferences and conclusions

made in this paper come from deep analysis backed by transcription annotation, memos, coding, member-checking, and more. Thick descriptions also add to the findings and discussions, while leaving room for further inquiry.

Transferability

With qualitative research, transferability is not necessarily focused on the findings, but also on the process of conducting research. All participants of this study were located at different schools, and while mostly in Colorado, there were those who were located in other states. Each participant also had different experiences in school leadership during the pandemic, which added to the thick descriptions in the findings and discussion.

Confirmability

Within the constructivist stance, it is understood that researchers can hold bias. As a graduate of Colorado State University's principal licensure program and having been a teacher in a northern Colorado school district, I knew some of the participants in this study on a professional level. Throughout the process, I assured confidentiality, however, it is possible the participants I know did not share every detail with me.

Summary

This qualitative study was grounded in a constructivist view of phenomenology, in that lived experiences are understood by the interaction of participants and researcher. These seven lived experiences of school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic are meant to begin exploring and understanding the implications of this crisis. As you will see throughout Chapter 4: Results and Analysis and Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions, this study honors those lived experiences while presenting recommendations to better prepare and support our school leaders in a time where unprecedented times have become precedent.

Chapter Four: Results and Analysis

This study sought to give voice to the lived experiences of seven school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the continuing aftermath. To accomplish this purpose, this study used a constructivist epistemology and phenomenological methodology in the research design. The following chapters aim to illuminate the essence of these experiences and put forth actionable recommendations aimed at better preparing and supporting our dedicated school leaders. Participant responses to the interview questions are organized by the four guiding research questions in this chapter:

1. What skills did school leaders use to navigate the issues of the COVID-19 pandemic successfully?

2. What lessons did school leaders learn from the difficulties of the pandemic?

3. As the pandemic has continued, what shifts have leaders made to remain successful in managing the continued crisis?

4. How can licensure programs and school districts better equip their school leaders to handle crises?

Research Question #1: What skills did school leaders use to navigate the issues of the COVID-19 pandemic successfully?

This first question focused on understanding the skills that help a leader respond appropriately during a crisis, considering both hard skills and personal competencies. Interview questions asked participants to reflect on their lived experience to determine what, in retrospect, went well for them as they navigated the pandemic. Several themes emerged during the focus group when participants were given the space to reflect on their successful experiences:

adaptability, consistently clear communication, decision-making, resource allocation, self-care, and staff connections (Table 11).

Table 11

Research Question #1 Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme(s)
Adaptability	Learning
Consistently Clear Communication	None
Decision-making	Community Support
Resource Allocation	None
Self-Care	None
Staff Communication and Connections	None

Adaptability

In this study, adaptability means adjusting to different conditions or circumstances. All seven participants discussed the ability to adapt as an important skill in many different scenarios throughout the pandemic. Chase found innovation and creativity to be particularly helpful for the problem-solving aspect of adaptability:

> We're gonna be creative. We're gonna be innovative. We're going to embrace technology that we haven't done in the last 10 years. Well, I'm going to teach new teachers how to be innovative with our new technology, we're going to get our kids, you know, ready to go.

Zachary, who was the principal of a brand new charter school during the first years of the pandemic, also noted the importance of adaptability when it came to building processes. Because the school was just starting, they didn't have a lot of processes in place. Fortunately, Zachary had "an amazing administrative team that tried to build all that stuff. Just on the fly at the last segment, you know, before we had kids coming in, and it worked."

Chase also drew on his previous experiences to support staff through change:

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I would say the first thing that went through my mind, as a principal at the time, was, "Alright, what's my game plan?" I always think of how we are going to adapt to the current situation. And I was very fortunate that I had some blended learning background. I actually worked at [school name], which is a school that does on-site and online [learning] together. I had the experience of what we were going to do, so I felt like I was very fortunate because I'd already had some of that training.

Learning. In this study, learning means acquiring new knowledge or skills. Within

adaptability, Nick recognized the need to learn on-the-go, both for himself and his staff:

There was a lot of new for everybody. I think one of the skills that was really important was being able to take a moment to step out of the war room and say I need to learn these things because I can't lead it if I don't know it. We were putting so many new skills and technology, so much new, very quickly onto people's plates as leaders. In addition, we had to know what we were asking and what it meant in the grand scheme of things that we were putting out there.

Chase also related this to his previous experiences blending learning and supporting staff:

I think the difficult piece of it was the majority of my staff had none of that [blending learning experience]. So, I had to focus on how to get them the necessary training to provide the support that they can provide to our kids.

Consistently Clear Communication

In this study, consistently clear communication means keeping stakeholders informed by

providing up-to-date information in plain language. Communication is an essential skill set for

any leader to have, but the participants noted that during a crisis, it was particularly crucial to be

clear and consistent. Bobby views honesty as essential to clear communication:

It was important to be open and honest about why we were making the decisions that we were making. I thought that was really helpful, and that was a skill that I began using as a teacher. I found that when I was just open and honest with my students about why we were doing the things, I became less afraid of the question, "Why?" If they're asking why, I have them. They want to hear me, they trust me, and that is kind of that same approach with teachers and coaches and athletes and families alike. Here's the "why." You may not agree with me. But here's why we're making the decisions that we're making.

In addition to honesty, Megan felt that purpose was necessary for her to be a clear

communicator, especially in those first few weeks of uncertainty during the initial shutdown of

the pandemic:

> Being really clear around the purpose and communicating that to everyone, over-communicating it, and in different modes. Some people were so stressed that they could not hear it, so they needed to be able to read it. So just really thinking about how you communicated, when you did, and all around that clarity.

Decision-making

In this study, decision-making means making a choice out of multiple presented options

or scenarios. The decision-making ability was a recurring theme in participant responses, with

participants often noting that the scope of this crisis required a sense of decisiveness to move

quickly. Josh noted that his team focused on short, intense deliberation and quick action:

> I think we deliberated more. But it was like generals on the battlefield. It wasn't like a series of meetings every two weeks. It was like a Sunday night from nine to midnight. Everybody's in the boardroom. And we're like, what on earth is happening right now? But it was intense, radical candor … we didn't want to just pick something and go with it.

Bobby echoed what Josh had to say about making purposeful decisions, but also gave

insight into the importance of supporting a team through that deliberative work:

> And so sometimes to help folks that we were working with to be like it's going to be okay to be slow here for a minute. And I rely on that. Sometimes, to go fast, you have to go slow so that we can make some quality decisions, not just make a decision. And I thought our district did a good job of kind of finding that balance but being able to then play off of what [Megan] said about communication, of like, this is why we're going slow right now. This is what we're trying to figure out and just letting people know, like, listen, we don't have the answers.

Zachary felt that collaboration was key to decision-making through crisis, especially in

the startup-like environment of a brand new school. As he put it, "It was on the fly. What do you

need? Let's just jump in. And let's get this done together."

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Community Support. In this study, community support means leaders using their influence and decision-making abilities to support various aspects of the community. It was also important for school leaders to effectively make decisions to enable their communities to support one another during the pandemic. Chase specifically noted the work his rural community did to support small businesses such as restaurants:

> Local businesses were getting hit significantly hard because they couldn't have you come into the restaurants. However, they were doing to-go orders and things like that. So, I took it upon myself as a community leader to find ways to tell folks to still support local businesses. So what I would do is I would go and order a to-go meal, you know, I hadn't spent so much money on eating out. Then, I would pick a business every other day and take a picture and post it on Facebook, like, please support them. I think doing little things like that helped our community be like, you know, we can figure this out.

Resource Allocation

In this study, resource allocation means using available funds to purchase, secure, and distribute resources. Participants consistently mentioned resource allocation. Matthew noted how the ability to quickly acquire and allocate resources was critical in supporting students, staff, and the community through the pandemic, especially in the early days:

> It's an important skill to recognize the needs of your staff right away in a time of crisis. Like, okay, we're all going to remote learning. So what [resources] do staff need right now to make that somewhat successful, and then, you know, recognizing what trainings need to happen next week. What do we need to purchase for teachers and students to be successful in that moment? So, like allocation of resources, knowing how to do that and just identifying and recognizing the needs of staff is a skill. Because if you even wait two more weeks, maybe you can't get it. It's already sold out because everybody's trying to get this resource. Teaching is happening now. So how do we purchase things or have trainings to catch kids before we lose the rest of the year?

Both Josh and Bobby discussed ways they helped allocate resources for their students and community members. Josh spoke about the need he felt to purchase resources and worry about budgeting and repercussions later:

> We spent a lot of money on buying things that [students] needed, and…anytime we heard kids needed books, we just bought a bunch of books and dropped them off on their front

porch. It was kind of crazy, but we reoriented our budget to buy them materials and bring them to their house. It was surreal, but effective.

Bobby focused on increasing equity for students, such as with WiFi, food, and other support:

> I thought our district did a really good job of supporting the community in kind of peripheral academic ways. We found the places in our district where WiFi was not good, and we found a way to deliver WiFi. My school district was behind as far as like one-to-one technology, and that was fixed. And so now every student has that ability to have technology at home. That worked because WiFi became available. You talked about other things like food and the things that you kind of take for granted, finding a way to continue those steps. You really highlighted some of those peripheral things about what schools do to support their community. Here we are, a couple of years into the whole process, to where there's legislation to continue to provide food and meals for free because that's such an important need. So I think that was a success. It did highlight some of those areas that need to help the community be able to do school.

It was important to Megan that her school district had unified communication around resource allocation so leaders across the school district could support one another through the crisis:

> I think our district did a really good job of coordinating efforts that then we could build off of. So basic needs, food, technology services, here's where you can go, here's how you're available. There were a lot of coordinating efforts for families all over. So, even though I may have worked at one school, I knew how it would work district-wide so I could support a friend who was at a different school.

Chase highlighted the pressures many participants echoed about being responsible for resource allocation across all levels:

> And then you go straight to, "How are we going to feed our kids? How are we going to get technology in their hands while figuring out how we're going to deal with the pandemic?" So there were a lot of things to think about. I think, though, as a leader, I always feel like it's my responsibility to jump into action. And also be very calm about it because all my staff was not.

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Self-Care

In this study, self-care encompasses the six domains within the Self-Care framework.

Self-care frequently came up during the focus group and individual interviews with participants.

Chase was particularly adamant about self-care:

> I've been doing this for 11 years. And one of the things I know, is if I don't [take care of myself], I'll be stressed. So I worked out. That was a big thing for me. I worked more during the pandemic than I did when the pandemic was not here. You know, I was constantly on the phone with the county, the CDC, quarantined families, and multiple calls constantly. And so, the way I took care of myself was exercise. Because, to me, we needed to be more leaders than any time in my career, you know. I needed to be visible for my community, for my staff, and for my kids. I needed to be available for them at the drop of a hat. So I mean, there were 18-hour days, you know, sometimes more, but it was my responsibility.

Staff Communication and Connections

In this study, staff communication and connections means communicating with staff to

keep them informed, but also to know and support them on a personal level. Every participant

discussed the need for support to and from staff. Each one of them understood the importance of

staff. Megan worked with her administration team to build deep connections with each staff

member:

> We divided up the stack and made personal phone calls. Just a phone call and not talk school. Asking them, "How are you? How's your family? What can we do?" And I learned in some of those moments, thinking, why didn't I do this before? Like, I learned so much in that one phone call. That just was different. It provided a more vulnerable space because of the situation. Then, when needs came up, I had already built that place and relationship with them, and they knew who to go to. Yeah, I felt like that was a really good thing that we did.

Nick and his team also focused on staff connections, and he noted that it was important

for leaders to model the right expectations and give staff "permission" to go slow:

> Whenever we're going to have a meeting or check-in, there's always going to be intentional time built in to see how they're doing as a person. You know, "How is your family? How are things going?" It can get so easy to get caught up, and then there are 1,000 things to do. It's easy to think, "We should just jump into this and be as efficient as

possible." But to model that it's okay to slow down and say, "We are still people in this together, and let's connect first. How are you doing as a person? Now tell me about your concerns and questions." I think as a leader, modeling like it's okay, we can slow down, and we can have this conversation because we're going to get through it together.

Chase felt that having a positive attitude was necessary for building connections between him and his staff:

I would tell my staff that we're going to do this with a smile on our faces and be positive. Because again, you know, it starts with us. We're gonna keep going. And I really think that's the thing I was very impressed with my staff about. I know it wasn't easy for them, but they could see what we were doing compared to other places. You know? I was very fortunate because I retained a lot of staff after all this occurred. And I think it was because of how we did things and our approach to things, you know.

For Bobby, listening was the key to making staff connections:

The most important thing, honestly, was listening. Like, the number of phone calls, online calls, or text messages that I took. Just listening and being able to honestly do kind of that reflective cognitive coaching type of thing. "Tell me what's working. Tell me what's not working. Let me hear what you're experiencing." Because I think, as we all know, that if I just go in and try to tell someone how to do it, that's not gonna work. So that was one of the biggest things was being willing to listen first. Then, helping guide, coach, and problem-solve together was probably one of the most supportive things that I was able to do.

Research Question #2: What lessons did school leaders learn from the difficulties of the pandemic?

The second question analyzed leaders' reflections on their areas of success and needed improvements. Reflection is an essential leadership skill, and while it might be uncomfortable to process mistakes, it's necessary for continuous improvement. Major themes emerged from the focus group and individual interviews—focus on the students, lasting ramifications and guilt, mental health matters, owning your voice, supporting teachers, and vulnerability (Table 12).

Table 12

Research Question #2 Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme(s)
Focus on the Students	None
Lasting Ramifications and Guilt	None
Mental Health Matters	Looking for the Positive
Own Your Voice	Politicization and Concerns
Supporting Teachers	None
Vulnerability	None

Focus on the Students

In this study, focus on the students means prioritizing student needs through the decision-making process. A lot of the participants discussed the need to take care of staff, students, and the community. They felt pulled in different directions, which they felt was sometimes to the detriment of students. Nick felt like schools did not do a great job of putting students first at the beginning of the pandemic:

> When I think back and just the tug-of-war battle between taking care of the adults and doing what's right for the kids, I think I would have liked to have focused on our agreements for what we're gonna do for kids. We left a lot of autonomy to teachers in terms of what was gonna happen in their online classrooms and what things were happening for kids, and that's a hard one to rein in once it's already out there. And we didn't do a great job, in my opinion. Setting the expectation of what we want kids to know and be able to do from classroom to classroom versus what we did was created like very different tracks of kids within our own school.

> For Zachary, there were issues with starting a new school and needing additional

resources on top of the strain of the pandemic:

> With COVID, everyone was already stressed, and it felt like everyone in the district thought we were just another problem. And I knew that if they actually had a chance to sit down and think about it, they would remember, "Oh, yeah, these are all of our kids. And they're just doing their job."

Lasting Ramifications and Guilt

In this study, lasting ramifications and guilt means the emotional burden school leaders carry from the implications of their decisions. Another prominent theme that participants repeated throughout the entirety of the focus group and individual interviews was that of lasting ramifications and the guilt each leader carries with them. Bobby felt like there was not enough done to support students:

> Our approach as a school was to make sure that we were taking care of our teachers and adults so that they could take care of the kids. In hindsight, and in all honesty, I don't feel like we did enough to support our students. I think we're seeing some of those ramifications. And I know it's a nationwide issue with how [student] behavior has changed and different things like that. But I think had we done more to intentionally keep students feeling connected to their school and that they were doing school. And I don't know, still to this day, how I would have done that.

Megan also felt that not enough was done to support students and that she also lacked personal connections with students, and she carries guilt about it:

> I feel like I was most disconnected from kids during that time. I feel like I had zero connection with any kid. I knew teachers where they were at and what they needed. We [the administration team] tried. But I remember I relied on our computers and our teachers, and through them, I got a feel for the students, but I don't feel like I connected.

Chase also felt that we are not returning to normal in part because some of the lasting ramifications will be seen for years to come:

> We're going to be dealing with this for a decade. The learning gap, the learning loss, student behavior, social-emotional, I mean, there's going to be a lot of impact. Also, our economy is still struggling. I mean, there are so many factors, and we're still dealing with the aftermath of COVID. Going back to adapting, we're now in a different world. We cannot just focus on best practices anymore. We have to focus on the next practices. And next practices can mean a variety of things. But it's literally changing the way we look at things, the world, instruction, how we support kids and our community, and more.

Mental Health Matters

In this study, mental health matters means the importance of mental health for leaders and those around them in navigating crises. Participants emphasized mental health for

themselves, staff, and students. Chase noted the shifts he had to make when he had to support his

staff with their mental health more than he had originally anticipated:

> On top of them [teachers] being blended, remote, or whatever it may be, they had to take care of the kids, try to teach and navigate the digital curriculum, and still maintain their own personal lives. Mental health for staff during that time would be something I would definitely work to provide. And we did as we went on, but I don't know that any of us were prepared for what was going to hit us.

Megan also reflected on how her mental health affected her team and the staff around

her:

> I feel like it's all the little moments that I wasn't good. I was frustrated. I was stressed. I was tired. I didn't want to be there anymore. And I think I tried to put up a good base, but I don't think I did. I just think of how that probably affected the immediate team. I feel like it was a big piece of it, and I feel bad for it.

Looking for the Positive. In this study, looking for the positive means finding

experiences to appreciate even in the midst of a crisis. It was important for leaders to focus on

the positive aspects that were emerging from the pandemic to support their mental health. Bobby

reflected that while he was initially saddened by sports being canceled, in retrospect, it was what

helped him survive that first year:

> I don't think I would have made it as an assistant principal and athletic director had COVID not shut our sports world down. I would be done for the day, and I still had a third of my work left to do. So it was important to just take that time to slow down and be able to disconnect when it was time to. It was helpful to focus on being thankful that my family was near and healthy, getting outside, and learning to appreciate the friendships because that became more obvious when you weren't able to immediately connect with friends. I was forced into that, but it helped me to recognize that I needed to slow down and take time to connect with family, who were very present and being willing to put work away when the day was done.

Matthew was grateful for the grace that everyone extended towards each other when

adapting to the situation:

> With working parents and two kids at home who were not of school age yet, they were on your lap during meetings. And I think everybody gave everybody grace for that. You know, it didn't matter if you were a teacher, student, or administrator. You just had to do

what you had to do to get through the day with small children or whatever responsibilities you had at home. Knowing that was a reality, that you can work in different ways and still get the job done, opened up doors for working remotely, giving yourself grace in situations, and prioritizing needs at home.

Megan treasured the moments she had with her friends and family, which she viewed as byproducts of figuring out how to stay connected during the lockdown, such as Zoom calls:

I feel like it was the biggest blessing that came out of COVID. My family went for a walk every day. And they might have complained about it at first, but by the eighth time, they were like, this isn't so bad. We played a lot of hoops outside. I started zooming with my girlfriends once a week to connect. I'm super close with my parents and was used to seeing them almost every day. I taught them how to use Zoom, and we laughed through it. Those are memories I'll hold on to, and they got me through those really hard times.

Hearing Megan reminisce about treasured memories led Matthew to remember some of the moments that helped him get through the hard times:

It's so funny how fast you forget some of the things that happened two years ago. Once a week, I would do a game night with my siblings. It would be a cool online game or something, and that was awesome. I saw them more than I do now, and it was just on a screen.

Josh also used online and personal communities to get through hard times and support his mental health, especially during the lockdown:

I got really lonely at times since I was a single dad and only had my kids 50% of the time. So when they were there, it was chaos and fun, but when they were gone, it was quiet, sad, and anxiety-producing. I struggled with that a lot. So, I created a lot of community. Online happy hours with my college roommates and I started a fireside chat-like web series. Also, just sitting in the driveway and having a beer with the neighbor.

Own Your Voice

In this study, own your voice means having the courage to speak up and voice concerns or opinions when needed. For many leaders, the polarization of COVID-19 and fear of conflict made them feel like they could not be as vocal or firm with their decisions. Josh felt he could have been firmer with his opinions:

But what I didn't do well was speak truth to power in those moments and talk to the people above me and say, "No, absolutely not. We're not going to do that. And here's why." And I chickened out. I didn't want to fight, but I was also probably too tired and anxious to do a lot of fighting with the bosses.

As an assistant principal, Megan had direct disagreements with her principal that she felt affected many aspects of her personal and professional life:

I disagreed a lot with the way things were being done or how my work was maybe being misrepresented. I grew very resentful and was ready to walk away because I just couldn't do it anymore. I felt like things were unethical and not fair. I kept it in because I didn't want to go against our agreements, yet I should have done that because I think we would have gotten to a better place. But, I bottled it in. What bums me out is fast-forward to the following year, and the other AP and I had the same exact feelings about it. I chickened out because I was worried about hurting someone's feelings and speaking my truth, and I should have.

Matthew sometimes wondered if speaking up was worth it and, if he spoke up, whether anything he suggested would be implemented:

I remember having those meetings with all district leadership on one screen. And you wonder if you speak up or not, and if you do, does it go anywhere? Sometimes, it's better just to be quiet. At least, that's the feeling. I really have little voice in this. They're almost asking our opinion to say they asked for our opinion, but then something else happens.

Politicization and Concerns. In this study, politicization and concerns means understanding how the political landscape can affect a crisis and what the potential ramifications were when speaking up. The politicization of the pandemic raised concerns for school leaders when they communicated with the community. Chase used social media to consistently stay in touch with his community, even with the divisive response to his posts:

I posted on Facebook as much as possible, using social media to my school's advantage. We were keeping people in the loop and being transparent, even though folks didn't like that half of the time. But I would say, you know, in the end, I had quite a few parents who said, "I didn't like half the things that you posted, but at least you did," or "At least you communicated with us, you know. It doesn't mean I like it, but I appreciate it."

Matthew felt that his community was very divided, and there weren't many successes when it came to communicating:

> It was so hard to communicate because you knew whatever information you put out there, half would really agree with it, and the other half would say that it is dumb. But that is not reality. And you had a very crazy political climate at the same time. That was the most challenging time I hope I ever have with my community.

Bobby acknowledged that communication was difficult in such a divisive climate because leaders were learning as they went and had never been in a situation like the pandemic. In Bobby's role as an athletic director, he felt the strain when his school district decided to cancel sports in response to the pandemic:

> As leaders, we've never been in this situation either. And so we're trying to figure this out. And then thinking about the different groups of people we're working with because I got to work on both sides from an academic standpoint as an assistant principal and then with coaches and families in the athletic world. Which we talked about the political climate, that was a challenge.

For Chase, there was also a distinction between rural and urban communities and the polarization within his rural community.

> You had a lot of rural people who were like, "We're not doing masks; it doesn't matter what you tell us. We're not doing that to our kids." You know, and I think there's a significant difference between urban versus rural, you know, because the majority of rural schools were in school or found ways to figure that out.

Supporting Teachers

In this study, supporting teachers means understanding the various needs of teachers during and after a crisis and providing various supports to meet those needs. Bobby, Nick, and Matthew all reflected on teacher turnover during the pandemic and what they could have done to better support teachers. Bobby wondered about his influence, putting a lot of pressure on himself:

> We've had a few teachers over the last few years who have left the profession. And I think back, "Is there something that I could have done?" I do think there were definite

connections to how things went through those COVID-heavy years that played into their decision. And when I think about myself as somebody who's there to support, encourage, build trust with, and develop people, I wonder if I missed something, could have said something, or handled something differently. Maybe they would have felt more supported and wouldn't have felt like they needed to leave the profession. I'm in the profession and want it to grow, and I feel like I absorb some of that guilt.

When making hiring decisions, Nick found himself more concerned with filling the needs for the year instead of thinking about the long term:

I definitely made some short-term, one-year-only decisions. I did not pour into them and support them. From beginning to end, there are ways I could have better supported staff. I look back at some missed opportunities with teachers who left the school or profession.

Vulnerability

In this study, vulnerability means being willing to feel uncomfortable by being honest throughout a crisis. Matthew reflected on his reservations about being vulnerable on a larger scale. He was able to be vulnerable with his staff and students, but was more hesitant when engaging his broader community:

You knew that 50% of the population was probably going to disagree with communication about why we're doing what we're doing. I didn't feel vulnerable enough to speak to a bigger audience without messaging. Because of the vulnerability of receiving negative backlash. I don't know that I was ready for that. So now I think it would have been easier to do it. But I think that has also come with some experience of how to handle that negative feedback that might be out there. But I do think back that I wish that I would have been willing to put myself out there to a wider audience.

For Josh, the vulnerability piece came with acknowledging the mistakes he had made during the stressful times of the first few weeks of the pandemic. He remembers a meeting he had that is still referenced with a nickname by his staff now that enough time has passed for everyone to process it. With time and reflection, Josh learned from a particularly challenging experience:

I lost it. I was meeting with my bosses and another principal, and like there were F-bombs and full-throated yelling. And it was the combination of not speaking up over time, but I was out of reserves. And it was a Sunday night, we were still working, and

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someone I worked with really undermined and backstabbed me after we had come to an agreement on something. It was the result of exhaustion and anxiety and envy of not being my best at the time, and all these things came together, and I made a fool of myself. I really lost it. And I think the impact of that is that no one will forget. No one in that room will forget that meeting, and it will be part of my resume forever. It felt very justified in the moment, but the reflection came after.

Research Question #3: As the pandemic has continued, what shifts have leaders made to remain successful in managing the continued crisis?

The third question focused on long-term crisis management and the potential to support leaders through future crises via adaptability and reflection. The major themes that emerged from the focus group and individual interviews were continued staff care and self-care, reflection, and resilience (Table 13).

Table 13

Research Question #3 Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme(s)
Continued Staff Care and Self-Care	None
Reflection	Self-awareness, Slow Down, Unearthed/Increased Attention on Inequities
Resilience	None

Continued Staff Care and Self-Care

In this study, continued staff care and self-care refer to the six domains of the Self-Care framework. Staff care and self-care came in many forms during the pandemic and are, unfortunately, still underfunded. Matthew wondered about continuing the personal staff connections forged during the pandemic:

I think about some of the things that have already disappeared, like the Thursday happy hour and all of the educators being on your patio. But now, we're too busy for that. But again, some of that was because there were fewer things that were going on. What are

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some things that we can continue to do to keep fewer things from being on our calendars? I know it's almost impossible, but is there a way to do it?

Nick focused on the support staff received and living the practice of "people first." It was important for Nick to reinforce this ideal even after things settled from the initial days of COVID-19:

> Number one is not just the belief, but a true live the practice of people first. Having that for kids and adults, they are people first. Before there's a classroom, before you're a math teacher in a classroom, you're a person first. It's important to tap into that and to pay attention to that.

Reflection

In this study, reflection means thinking about experiences and learning from them. Reflection was an essential skill that participants brought up during both the focus group and individual interviews. Having the ability to reflect allowed the leaders to notice different aspects of continuous improvement.

Self-awareness. In this study, self-awareness means understanding personal strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and limitations. Participant reflections consistently emphasized the importance of self-awareness. Nick noted how self-awareness could support leaders in responding to a crisis:

> I think the skill that I would want anyone to have is that self-awareness piece. By knowing how I respond to a crisis, I know what I can do and what I can't do. And then there's a broader awareness of what we all bring to the table, within teams and schools.

Megan had a moment of self-awareness when it came to having a growth mindset for herself and her team:

> I think we can do hard things. There are so many things that I never thought possible, and we found a way to do it, and then we learned from it. It's important to have a growth mindset like we can always do better. I'm sitting here thinking about what we did well, but also, there's a whole lot still to do. I think that piece is huge. And it's okay to be you.

Slow Down. In this study, slow down means processing decisions before making them.

Participants noted the need to sometimes slow down during the hectic decision-making process.

Bobby focused on the word "pause":

> The first word I thought of was pause. I'm thinking about a crisis situation happening. And those that can execute at that moment probably would say, I don't know, everything just slowed down. I have the ability to calmly think through that. Even though yes, this is a very turbulent moment. You need to slow things down to make decisions clearly.

Matthew emphasized that just pausing is crucial to preventing decision paralysis:

> I think the worst leadership in a crisis is somebody who just is paralyzed and can't even take the smallest step forward, make that phone call, or give one directive. Like, what's one thing you can do at this moment, positively, to move forward?

Unearthed/Increased Attention on Inequities. In this study, the term inequities refers

to resource disparities. Matthew and Josh both discussed various inequities they learned more

about. Matthew saw things first-hand when he would drive to students' houses:

> I always knew there was inequity. But, until you actually drive to people's houses in a district and see the lives of different families and how vastly different they are, it might not hit you. That made me a better person, professional, everything. I saw a mobile home with a kid watching three kids, not logging into class because they were cooking. Then I went to a big house, where mom was home cooking and making sure the kids had snacks. And those students are being asked to do the same thing. Knowing it's one thing, but actually seeing it is another. And it's in the same damn town. Those two kids are experiencing very different things, and you wonder how that relates to education and their future and how systemically screwed up that is.

Josh saw a systemic issue with the standardization of education when his own child

struggled during the pandemic:

> One of the teachers called him a behavior kid. He did his work well, and he's a really smart kid, but he didn't like school. When COVID hit, he kind of arrived. He got all his work done by about 11:30 and then would play video games the rest of the day, but he was just crushing everything. His test scores were good. He got into advanced math classes. And I just started thinking about the one-size-fits-all approach and how we label kids based on their ability to fit this one mold. I saw it because my younger kid hated it. He wanted to be with his buddies and learn together, and do fun things together. And my older kid was dominating the world of doing it in his own time and space.

Resilience

In this study, resilience means the ability to adjust and recover from continued changes. Resilience consistently came up when participants discussed what has continued to keep staff, students, the community, and themselves moving through the lasting effects of the pandemic. Megan noted the resilience and grace everyone needed:

> You started the year thinking, "This is going to be our most normal year." And then a week later, it's like, "Nope, sorry. You can't do this now." I felt like I painted a picture of what I thought would be more stability with staff, and then I would have to turn around and be like, "Nevermind, it's not going to be like that." I was creating a rippling effect, but I couldn't control it.

Matthew discussed how the pandemic's coincidence with Colorado's wildfires demanded even greater resilience:

> In Colorado, we had the ash from fires go on for about six months. It was this really dark place, literally and figuratively, and how do you come out of that? And then you have to be in a place to give people grace and go slow again, but your reserves are zero. And now you're starting something new.

For Chase, resilience required a shift of attitude for himself and his staff to adjust to the constantly changing circumstances:

> It's a shift of attitude and shift of approach. What can you control? I say this to my folks, "Greatness starts with you." You have to control you. I have 40 staff members with 40 different personalities and 40 different ways of doing things. Okay, how can you capitalize on being who you are in the current circumstances of what we have?

Research Question #4: How can licensure programs and school districts better equip their school leaders to handle crises?

This question sought to inform professional learning for leaders to build capacity for handling crises. Findings can support future leaders within licensure programs and current leaders with professional development. The two most prominent themes that emerged from the

focus group and interviews were supporting leaders in developing adaptability and feedback

processes (Table 14).

Table 14

Research Question #4 Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme(s)
Develop Adaptability	None
Feedback Processes	None

Develop Adaptability

In this study, develop adaptability refers to gaining the skill of adjusting through different

circumstances and situations. The need for adaptability was clearly represented throughout the

focus group and interviews. Bobby noted the importance of letting licensure candidates just

"figure it out":

> In my admin program, the various assignments, activities, or tasks that we had didn't
> always come with clear, definite directions on how to accomplish them. COVID was the
> perfect moment to look back on that and be like, "Oh, this is what they were talking
> about. We don't know what we're doing, and we're all trying to figure it out together."
> This is a highly absorbable skill.

> Megan discussed the need for adapting to the priority of situations by "moving between

urgent, critical, and important. I think just evaluating that and how it's a sliding scale, always, in

one day."

Chase put thought into more meaningful teacher and administrator preparation programs

and how they could address teacher and administrator recruitment and retention issues:

> I'll go back to the adaptability piece. I think prep programs should get potential teachers
> and administrators into schools sooner. You'll learn a lot in our world with on-the-job
> training. One of the things I would like to see in the future, particularly because of the
> teacher shortage, is finding ways to pay interns when they do their student teaching. I'll
> go back to just as much exposure as possible, because whether it's a pandemic or dealing

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with student discipline, because student discipline could be a crisis, right, the more exposure you have, the more prepared you are.

Feedback Processes

In this study, feedback processes refers to feedback given and received in pursuit of continuous improvement. The process of giving and receiving feedback was another topic of discussion. Megan noted how she is still working to develop this skill and thinks it should be included in preparation programs:

> Giving and receiving feedback. I feel like I'm still working that out. I'll have a debrief with a teacher, and they'll walk out, and I'm like, "Why didn't I say this or this?" And then I reflect on it. So I just think that would be huge for any kind of program.

Josh also discussed the need to coach leaders on giving feedback in a way that does not take away a teacher's power or ownership of a situation:

> When giving a strategy to a teacher, how do you do that so that you empower a teacher without them feeling like it's an attack or that you think they are not holding kids accountable? Admins need that skill so they can support teachers with the tools to empower kids.

Summary

Each of the leaders interviewed had different experiences throughout the pandemic. However, numerous commonalities contributed to their various successes in handling emergent issues during the crisis. The personal competencies of each leader often supported them during each challenge.

Adaptability, which was necessary in many contexts, was the cornerstone of each administrator's successful experiences. Leaders realized the need to be adaptable within their personal and professional circumstances; with staff, student, and community needs; with their communication skills; and with the pandemic's evolving, politicized, and polarized nature.

Clear, concise, and consistent communication is another crucial piece for leader success. When leaders understood the purpose of the communication, they had an easier time communicating the message. However, when leaders did not understand the purpose of the communication, or they did not own their voice and "chickened out," they felt they failed with their communication.

Based on their reflections on successes and missteps during the pandemic, the group had many ideas about what licensure programs can do to better prepare educators and administrators for crises. These ideas are further discussed in Chapter 5, which considers the implications of this study.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to give voice to seven leaders as they reflected on their lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. These seven leaders were chosen from Colorado State University's School Leadership Institute based on their availability to participate in this study and contingent on their consent. With the pandemic continuing to impact school communities, it has become important to understand the successes and difficulties of school leaders' experiences to better support current and future school leaders as they continue to deal with the lasting effects of the pandemic and future crises.

To capture the lived experiences of these school leaders in this study, I chose a qualitative approach. I used a constructivist epistemology and phenomenological methodology in the research design, focusing on hermeneutic phenomenology. The ontological and epistemological assumptions best fit with the approach to this study: lived experiences are an interpretive process, and the observer is part of the world and not entirely free of bias.

This study began with an in-depth literature review, which considered crisis-related theories and frameworks. The literature review uncovered emerging themes that served leaders well or could have better supported them as they navigated the pandemic. The five themes were prioritizing communication, promoting self/staff/community care and compassion, connecting to the community, integrating planning and collaboration, and using personal competencies.

After the literature review, I focused on four questions to guide the work of this study:

1. What skills did school leaders use to navigate the issues of the COVID-19 pandemic successfully?

2. What lessons did school leaders learn from the difficulties of the pandemic?

3. As the pandemic has continued, what shifts have leaders made to remain successful in managing the continued crisis?

4. How can licensure programs and school districts better equip their school leaders to handle crises?

This chapter will focus on the connections among the findings, the emerging themes, and the analyzed frameworks. The chapter will then discuss implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

Since education is always a hot-button issue, and with COVID-19 being highly polarized, the complexity each leader faced was heterogeneous. With heterogeneous external conditions affecting each school, school leaders need personal competencies, such as the abilities to adapt, communicate, and learn, to navigate crises. Leaders must have the processes in place for reflection and subsequent self-awareness to take on these challenges.

Discussion of Findings

To assist with understanding the findings, this discussion is organized by each research question, connected to the emerging themes, and analyzed frameworks that supported the development of this study. Figure 11 details the various aspects of the six crisis-related frameworks explored during the literature review. Aspects connecting to the findings, as discussed in this chapter, are filled in with a green background in the figure. The Crisis Leadership and Self-Care frameworks have the most thorough connections to the findings. The Sensemaking, Turbulence, and Meta-Leadership frameworks all have aspects connecting to the findings but still have room for further research. As the Crisis Management framework was not used for this study outside of the literature review, its components are filled in with a grey background.
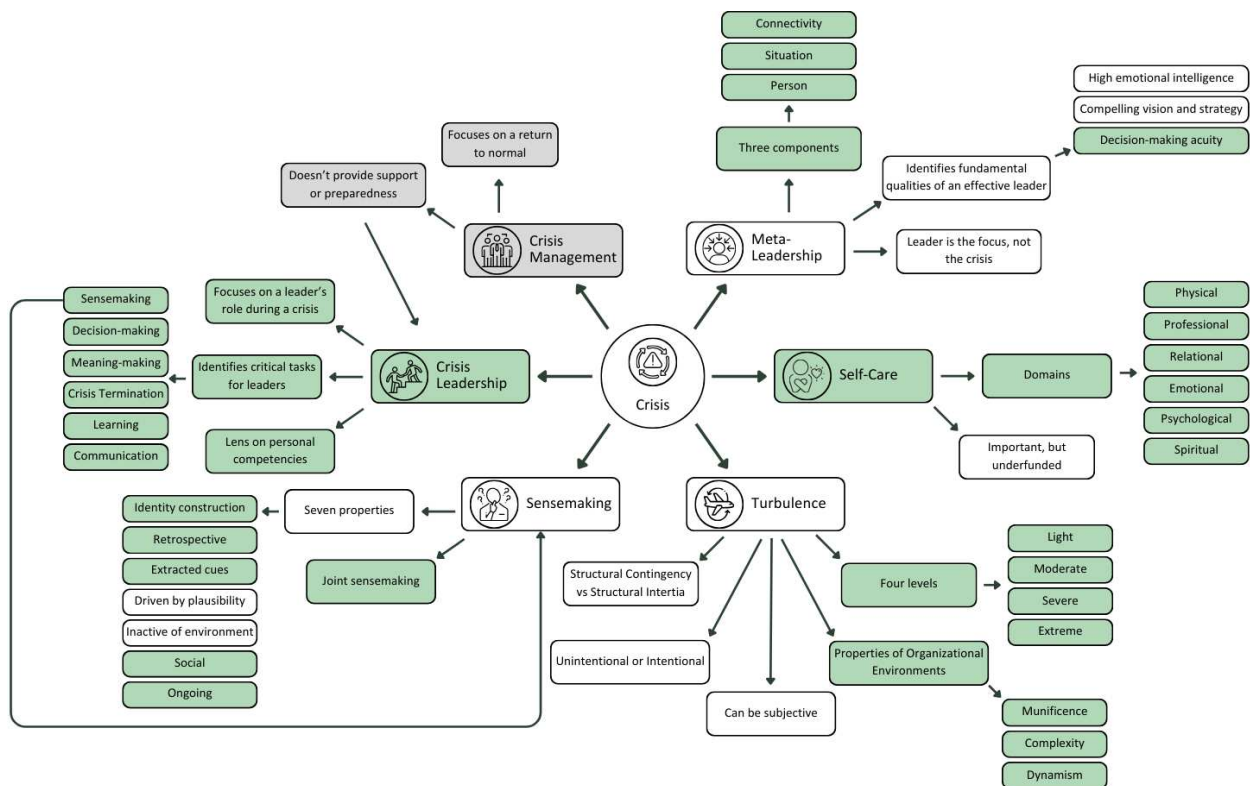
Figure 11. Connections Between the Findings and Crisis-Related Frameworks.

Research Question #1: What skills did school leaders use to navigate the issues of the COVID-19 pandemic successfully?

During the focus group and individual interviews, participants described many skills that supported their navigation of the pandemic and its effects. The major themes were adaptability, consistently clear communication, decision-making, resource allocation, self-care, and staff communication and connections. Within adaptability, a subtheme of learning appeared. Within decision-making, a subtheme of community support appeared.

Adaptability. School leaders and staff constantly need to innovate to adapt to needs, even outside of the pandemic. When I was a teacher, I served almost 200 students with differing needs and a limited classroom budget. While adaptability has always been essential to education, leaders were being asked to adapt in ways they could never have imagined because of this

pervasive, politicized, and polarized crisis. The leaders I spoke with were able to navigate the needs of their communities because they already had the skill of adaptability.

During our interview, Chase focused on the need to innovate in the early days of the pandemic. His staff needed to embrace technology and grapple with the difficulties of internet access, one-to-one devices, and other rural issues. Without even a semblance of a system in place, it required unusual innovation for Chase to support his staff, students, and community through the challenges created by COVID-19 regulations. While many school districts across the country needed to be creative, Chase was also up against the polarized nature of the pandemic in his rural community: they did not want to wear masks or keep their kids out of school. In a way, Chase was adapting to both the repercussions of the pandemic and his community.

Chase's reflections suggest he was able to handle the balancing act between the needs of students, staff, and the community with local, state, and federal guidelines regarding the pandemic. Chase brought previous experience with blended learning to his staff's adaptation process during the pandemic. If Chase hadn't been able to use his experience to help guide staff through that process, the outcome could have been very different.

However, since I was working on administration tasks and teaching during the height of the pandemic, it was frustrating to have to appease community members instead of just doing the best we could do for students in the context of the situation. Understanding the complexities of the situation suggests a reduction in competing external pressures may have improved adaptation at the school level.

Zachary was in a nuanced situation: he was supporting the opening of a new school and building during two years of the pandemic. For Zachary, building a strong network within his staff and community was crucial to support the constant adaptation necessary throughout the

crisis. When starting up a new school, many processes must occur before doors can even open, such as construction, nutrition services, bussing, furniture, and staffing. With systems in flux, Zachary had a difficult time securing some of the processes, and his staff needed to adapt, which they were able to do because of their strong connections and flexibility.

Connection Between Adaptability and the Literature. The strongest connection between adaptability and the literature is that of the critical task of learning within the Crisis Leadership framework (Figure 12). Adaptability requires a different kind of learning since the need to adapt occurs at a faster pace than reflective learning. Many of the participant leaders started this learning during the height of the pandemic, when they were essentially forced to improve their strategies through reflection. Since the literature notes that learning influences reform initiatives, it was important for leaders to engage in learning while adapting to positively influence the constant reform the pandemic seemed to demand (Boin et al., 2005).

Figure 12. Connection Between Adaptability and Learning and the Literature.

Zachary's position in helping to start a new school heightened the need for reflection and iterative improvement. Chase was able to draw on previous experiences with blended and online learning to help inform the remote and hybrid learning structures his school was implementing. Without that opportunity to reflect on his previous experiences, his staff might not have felt as successful with the changes as he reports they did.

Learning. While learning emerged as a subtheme of adaptability, it carries its own weight of importance. Nick needed to adapt to the new ways of learning he was experiencing with his staff. In his words, there was "a lot of new for everybody." He needed to pause during the rapid-fire adaptation, step out of the "war room," and take stock of what learning needed to occur. Being able to process this need and do what needed to be done in order to learn what needed to be learned was crucial for perceived success in handling the changing needs of the pandemic. Schools across the world were being asked to adapt at a moment's notice, which required rapid and often on-the-fly learning.

Connection Between Learning and the Literature. The strongest connection with the literature for the subtheme of learning was the critical task of Learning within the Crisis Leadership framework (Figure 12). While these two items carry the same name of "Learning," they do not mean the same thing in the context of this study. The subtheme of learning that emerged from the theme of adaptability refers to learning a new skill, new content, or both. The critical task of Learning with the Crisis Leadership framework refers to a more reflective process in which learning creates an opportunity for change. When Nick took the time to learn new skills and content needed to adjust for hybrid and remote learning, and provided his staff with those same opportunities, he created an opportunity for change. Granted, this change needed to occur so staff could serve students during lockdown, but it was not a change that every school or leader embraced.

Consistently Clear Communication. Communication was necessary throughout every juncture of the pandemic. As the participants in this study would learn, consistently clear, purpose-guided communication was essential. Unfortunately, many leaders, not just the ones in this study, were receiving conflicting information from their districts, and the communication at

the national level was also polarized and, in some cases, simply misinformation. It was hard for leaders to balance the need to quickly disseminate information to their communities with the time it was taking to validate the trustworthiness of their information.

Connection Between Consistently Clear Communication and the Literature. When considering the literature from Chapter 2, the critical tasks of communication and meaning-making from the Crisis Leadership framework, and the property of social from the Sensemaking framework relate the most to consistently clear communication (Figure 13). Interestingly enough, sensemaking began as a critical task within the Crisis Leadership framework before evolving into its own framework. Those two connections validate its importance as an aspect of crisis management. As Boin et al. note, communication with various stakeholders needs to be efficient, concise, and empathetic to best support communities.
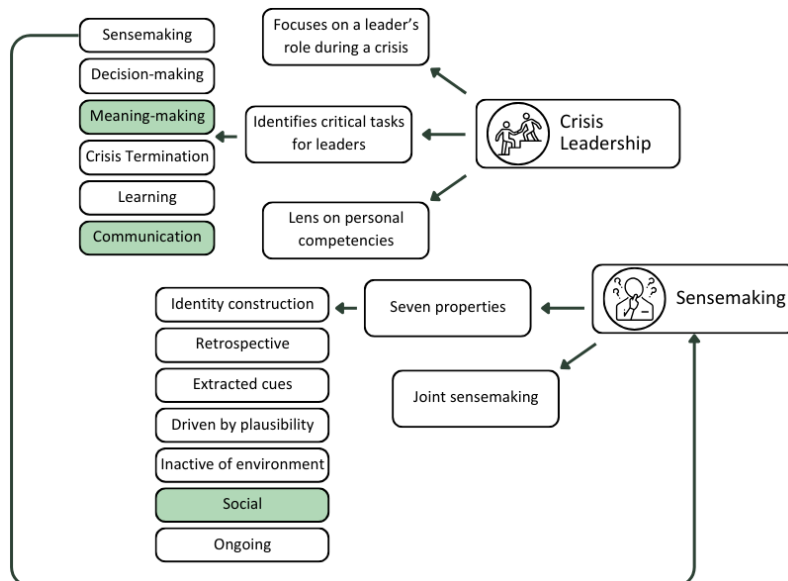

Figure 13. Connection Between Consistently Clear Communication and the Literature.

Meaning-making's focus on crisis management as political communication connected with how school leaders of this study experienced aspects of their own communication. Josh felt

concerned that, because of the polarization of COVID-19, almost any communication risked

turning even unintentionally politicized.

For Chase, some of the communications he was posting on social media, even for

normally uncontroversial content such as supporting local businesses, seemed to carry some

level of disapproval from community members. He found that community members were open

with their disapproval of half of what he posted, but appreciated the communication overall

despite this. Matthew felt as though the community believed every communication he sent out

was political and that half of his community always disagreed with what he was saying.

Decision-making. Participants had to effectively make decisions through various

situations that arose due to and as byproducts of the pandemic. The scope of the pandemic was

unlike anything school leaders had ever experienced, so the learning curve and fear of missteps

led to a more deliberative decision-making process. Josh and his staff felt the need to have

intense deliberation, so they were not just making any decision, even when that deliberation went

late into the evening. Bobby knew that he needed to support his staff through that deliberative

process by being transparent about the purpose behind decisions and how they were trying to

figure out the answers along the way.

Connection Between Decision-making and the Literature. The two connections to the

literature relate to decision-making in different ways (Figure 14). Within Crisis Leadership,

decision-making refers to making and implementing critical choices. In the Meta-Leadership

framework, decision-making acuity focuses on how well leaders make decisions. Decision-

making as a whole is even more essential during times of crisis. It is much easier to have solid

decision-making acuity when a leader is not in a crisis and potentially in flight or fight mode.

However, retaining solid decision-making acuity when in the middle of a crisis may not be

feasible to teach in licensure or professional development courses. Leaders can improve their decision-making acuity in times of crisis by cultivating self-awareness about how they will respond to challenges and work with others in those times. This notion will be further discussed when considering research question #4 and the implications for a licensure program.
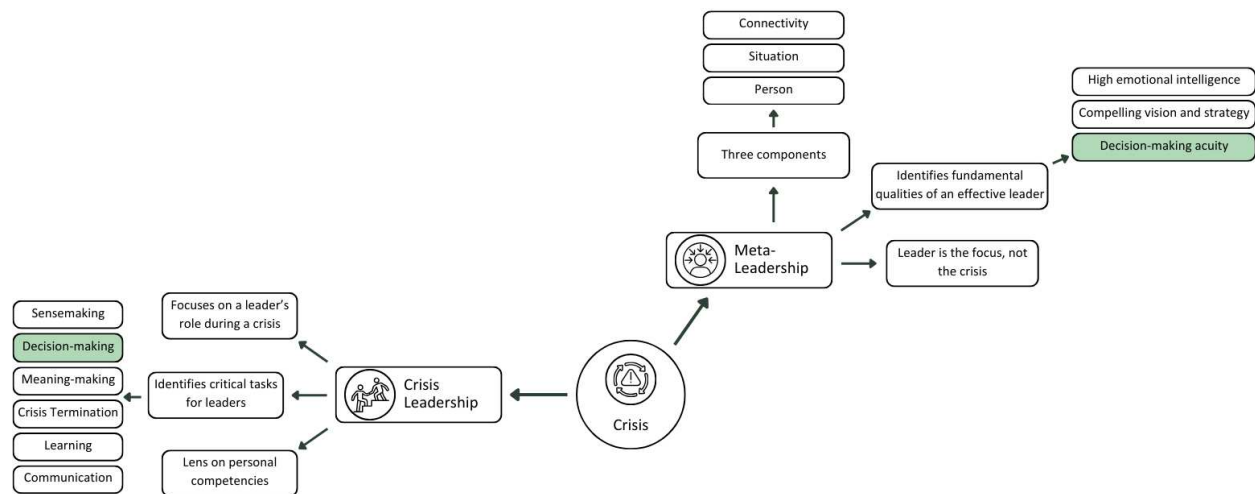

Figure 14. Connection Between Decision-making and the Literature.

The decision-making ability was critical for leaders as they faced constant dilemmas, opportunities, and change. Multiple participants observed that sometimes, "you need to go slow to go fast." Despite the immense pressure that some of these leaders were facing, they chose to be deliberative, whether on their own or with a team. Josh likened it to "generals on the battlefield," with intense deliberation that allowed his team to make a decision. For Bobby, part of that deliberative process was to make the purpose clear to his staff so they understood why decisions were being made the way they were and the timeline for the process.

Community Support. Within the theme of "Decision-making," a subtheme of community support emerged. Chase used his decision-making ability to enable his community to support local businesses that were struggling due to COVID-19 closures and supply chain issues. Many school leaders are also seen as community leaders, and especially in rural districts like

Chase's, the schools themselves can be seen as community hubs. While Chase could have focused on simply supporting his school, staff, and students, he chose to use some of this time and effort to bring the community together in support of local businesses.

Connection Between Community Support and the Literature. Chase's ability to provide community support through decision-making connects to the connectivity component of the Meta-Leadership framework (Figure 15). Connectivity refers to the network of people, entities, and assets leaders link and leverage to create a positive outcome. In a rural community like Chase's, it was important for community members to support each other on a personal level, but also on a professional level: many of the local businesses are owned by community members and serve key roles in supporting the local economy. Chase sought to provide positive outcomes for his community, and this included the local economy.
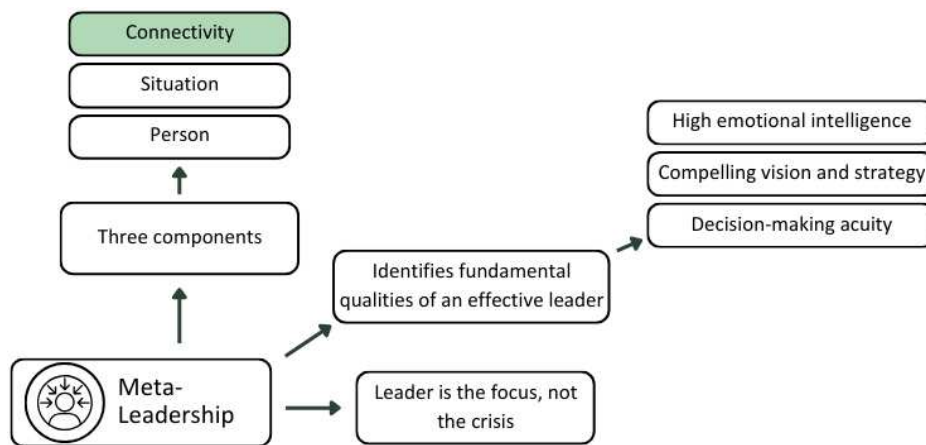

Figure 15. Connection Between Community Support and the Literature.

Resource Allocation. Resource allocation came in many forms for leaders throughout the pandemic. Matthew worked throughout the first year of the pandemic to ensure his staff were getting the resources they needed to support students. With everyone in the world experiencing this crisis, many of the same resources were being sourced by other schools, creating shortages of certain goods and services. Leaders had to quickly recognize what staff needed and act on it.

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The struggle to get masks is a key example: there seemed to be a shortage of personal protective equipment earlier in the pandemic, so people began to improvise. For example, some teachers started sewing masks for staff and their families.

Resource allocation also entails the need to ensure students have what they need to be successful. Josh recalled spending what he perceived as a lot of money on what students needed, such as books, and dropping materials off at students' houses. Josh felt an obligation to secure equal access to certain educational goods for all his students. Bobby's community had to use decision-making skills to support resource allocation in terms of WiFi and one-to-one devices. His school district did not have one-to-one devices, and not all students had adequate or even existing access to the internet. There was a clear digital divide in his community, which required a district-level intervention when students needed to shift to remote and hybrid learning. Bobby's school district subsequently reported that all students had a solution in place.

Community support was discussed in conjunction with resource allocation. Chase felt a responsibility to ensure students were being fed. As previously noted, food insecurity is a common issue, and many students get one to two meals at school. When Chase's district was figuring out how to deal with the digital divide, they were also including food security in their problem-solving. Megan described the clarity and unity across her school district in terms of resource allocation, which was required to send a consistent message to the broader community. With this communication in place, it was easy to coordinate across schools, neighborhoods, and services.

Connection Between Resource Allocation and the Literature. The critical task of decision-making within the Crisis Leadership framework and the component of munificence within the Turbulence framework support the level of consideration around resource allocation

(Figure 16). It became essential for leaders to weigh the needs of their students, staff, and community against munificence to effectively make decisions to the best of their abilities.
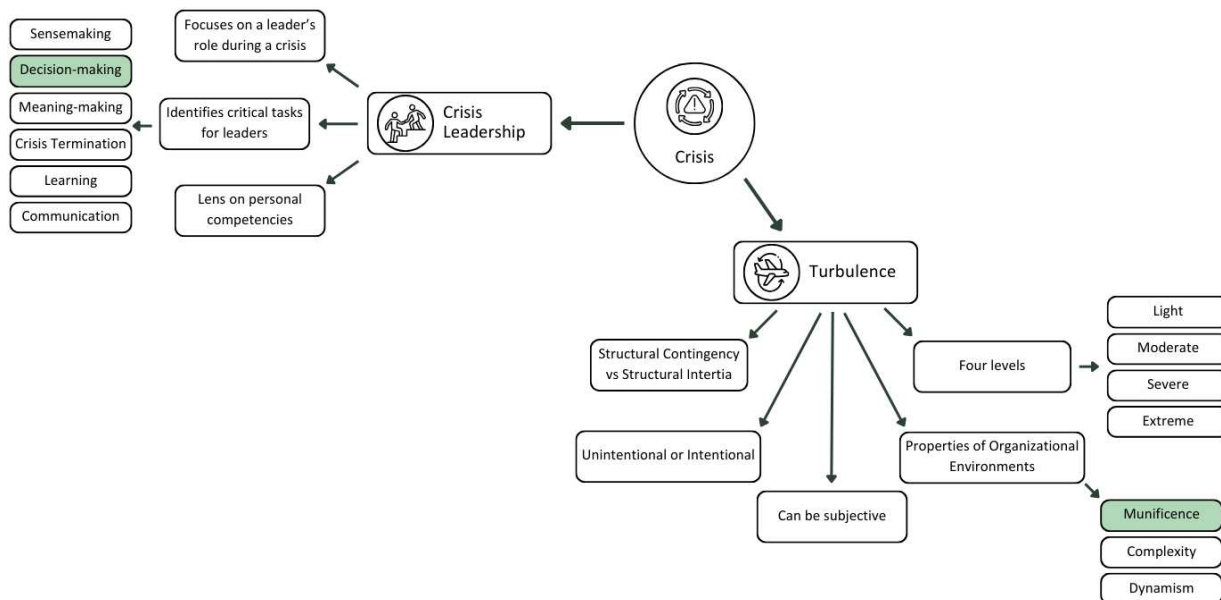

Figure 16. Connection Between Resource Allocation and the Literature.

Education, even when not in crisis, is already a sector that faces many issues with munificence. Munificence also impacts the subjective nature of the attributed level of turbulence. While the world experienced the adverse effects of COVID-19 and pandemic responses in different ways, different communities had different experiences due to munificence, and schools were no different. The level of economic advantage among a school, district, or community influences how community members perceive turbulence severity. Schools that don't have to allocate their budgets toward feeding their communities may be able to invest extra funds in supplemental technology. The delay of federal funds exacerbated problems in this area.

Self-Care. Self-care is an important aspect of leadership due to the impossibility of "pouring from an empty bucket." Participants all promoted self-care, but did so in different ways. Chase used physical activity to handle the stress he was experiencing. He knew exercise would help him show up as his best self for his family and community. Even when Chase was

constantly problem-solving on the phone or Zoom, or working 18-hour days, he still

incorporated exercise into his daily routine. For other leaders in this study, self-care came in the

form of taking advantage of extra time with their families, forming online game groups or happy

hours, or simply taking time to decompress in a room by themselves. However, during our

conversations, the participants noted a collective yet unusual advantage: they each had the

School Leadership Institute to rely on for support, which reminded them to take time for self-

care.

Connection Between Self-Care and the Literature. The theme of self-care is directly

related to the Self-Care framework and its six domains—physical, professional, relational,

emotional, psychological, and spiritual (Figure 17). While some participants, such as Chase,

focused on specific domains of self-care, participants collectively demonstrated many of the

themes and subthemes related to research question #2. It is also important to consider how these

aspects of self-care affected leaders in their personal lives and how they affected leaders as they

showed up to work in a professional capacity. While there is a specific professional domain

within the Self-Care framework, the other domains can impact a school leader as they navigate
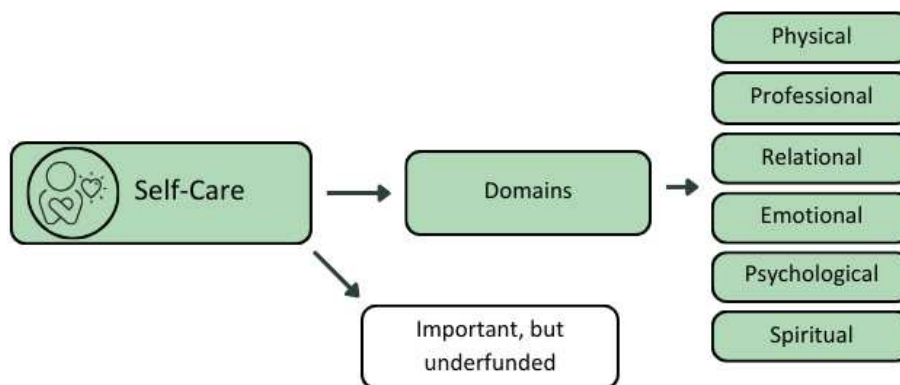
their day-to-day experiences at work.

Figure 17. Connection Between Self-Care and the Literature.

Although four of the participants selected their religion as "Christianity," none described addressing their spiritual domain of self-care in a religious context. There are many potential explanations for this: perhaps it was simply not a focus for the leaders in this study, or the research questions were structured in a way that did not solicit this type of answer, or the participants were uncomfortable describing their spiritual care in the presence of others. This area could potentially benefit from further research.

Staff Communication and Connections. School leaders acknowledged the particularly critical role of staff in navigating the effects of the pandemic and realized the need for communication and connection with their staff. Schools cannot be successful without a strong staff at any time, let alone in a crisis situation. In my school alone, we had seven out of 40 teachers who did not return for the 2020-2021 school year, when there is typically only a one-to-two staff member turnover. One teacher chose to retire early, two teachers had previously accepted positions at other schools for personal reasons, and four teachers chose to teach at the fully virtual school the district created to support families who were concerned about sending their children back into a building. The new staff members hired to replace the teachers who left required us to form new bonds as a staff to support each other.

Megan's leadership team focused on building deep connections with each staff member so everyone felt they could come to a member of her team with concerns. The three members of her leadership team split the list of staff in thirds and took turns making personal phone calls and building those connections. In the end, Megan's staff felt more supported and knew which leader to turn to whenever they needed a problem-solving partner, resources, or just someone to talk to.

Nick knew there was a necessary level of self-care and care for others to keep his staff feeling supported, which would keep him ready to support them. Considering the fast-moving

pace of the first few months of the pandemic and the urgency to address emerging problems, it would have been easy to ignore the human aspects of connection. Nick made it a point to start each meeting with a check-in for each staff member present. While Nick got a little less done in each meeting, he believes every team member deserves to feel seen and heard, and he believes the check-in helped them feel less alone.

Chase encouraged a positive attitude among his staff and attributed the retention of most of his staff to this attitude shift. The pandemic led to widespread emotional hardship, leaving one to wonder if Chase's staff genuinely felt the positive attitude shift or if they were compartmentalizing their feelings instead of bringing them to work. Either way, Chase believes the approach helped him retain staff during a critical time.

Bobby focused on listening to build connections with staff. He noted the importance of being willing to listen even if a staff member was just talking at him for a while because it was something they needed to get off their minds. By building that trust, Bobby could focus on reflective cognitive coaching to more effectively guide and problem-solve with a staff member.

Connection Between Staff Communication and Connections and the Literature. The two main connections to the literature are seen with the critical task of communication within the Crisis Leadership framework and the social property of the Sensemaking framework (Figure 18). Participants felt the empathic nature of communication within Crisis Leadership was important for staff to feel supported throughout the pandemic. Among other reasons, this allowed adjustment for individual variance in turbulence. One staff member might have felt devastated by the pandemic, with death seeming to surround them, while another might have considered pandemic fears overblown. Regardless of which side of the spectrum the school staff were on, participants still wanted them to feel supported through the process.
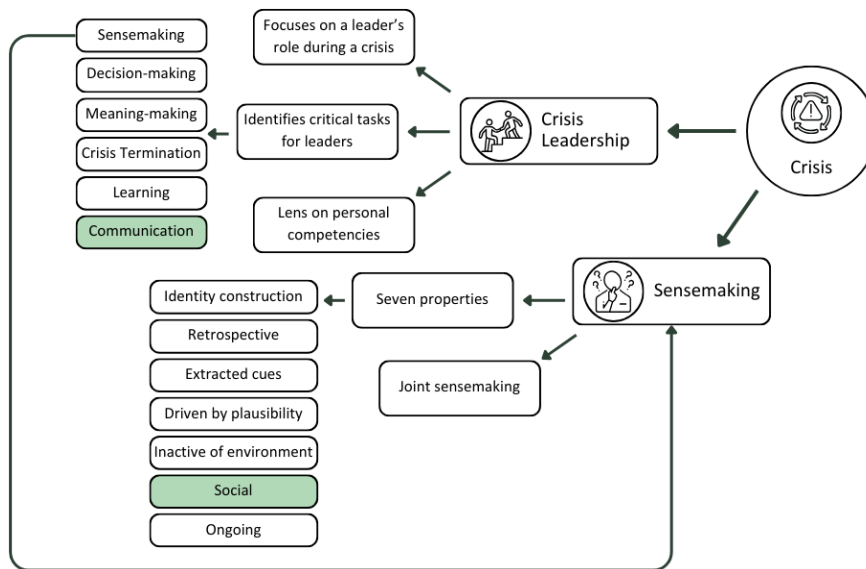
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Figure 18. Connection Between Staff Communication and Connections and the Literature.

The social property within the Sensemaking framework points to the need for community as part of meaning-making. Since staff were interacting with a school's rules, routines, and language to make sense of their own experiences, school leaders got looped into this process, partly because they were staff members themselves.

Research Question #2: What lessons did school leaders learn from the difficulties of the pandemic?

During the focus group and individual interviews, participants reflected on lessons they learned from the difficulties of the pandemic. The major themes were focus on the students, lasting ramifications and guilt, mental health matters, own your voice, supporting teachers, and vulnerability. Within mental health matters, participants discussed a subtheme of looking for the positive. Participants discussed a subtheme of politicization and concerns within the theme of own your voice.

Focus on the Students. School leaders constantly solved problems during the pandemic: preparing educational spaces for COVID-19 safety, problem-solving equity, and community

support issues like food insecurity and technological access, emotionally supporting staff, and many others. Many leaders feel that not enough was done to take care of students and their education. Because teachers were completely adjusting their teaching styles and curriculum to meet the demand of online learning, the system created inconsistency, even within the same department at a school. Nick feels like different tracks of kids were created at his school. Nick specifically reflected on the tug-of-war he felt between taking care of the adults in his building and doing what was right for the kids, and how he felt that they did not always hit the mark.

Zachary, who was opening a new school during the height of the pandemic, faced unusual challenges. Despite having certain contracts in place to secure services for things like building furniture and nutrition services, supply chain issues and reprioritized needs caused confusion among his team. Greater reflection on the end goal of supporting students could have potentially supported Zachary and his team.

Connection Between Focus on the Students and the Literature. Many aspects of the analyzed literature relate to a focus on students. The domains of relational and professional of the Self-Care framework address the sentiments participants expressed during the focus group and individual interviews (Figure 19). The relational domain focuses on interpersonal connection to others. The professional domain considers managing or preventing work-related stress and stressors, which encompasses reducing the risk and mitigating the effects of burnout. The chaotic nature of the pandemic exacerbated the risk of burnout. Since leaders focused on relational and professional aspects of the Self-Care framework, their focus was shifted to their peers and staff, which may have sometimes been to the detriment of the students.
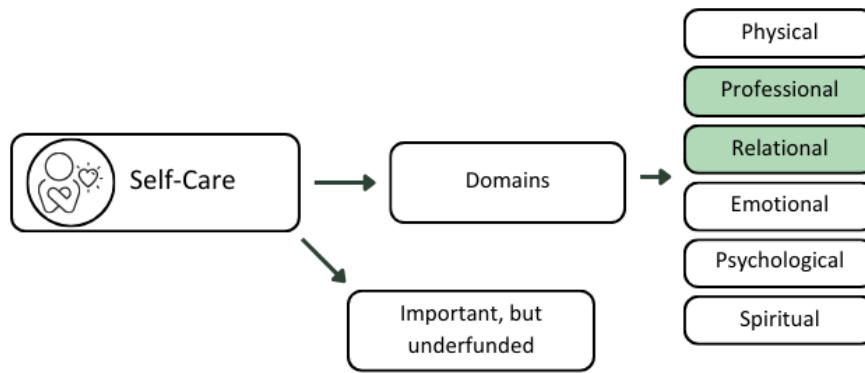
Figure 19. Connection Between Focus on the Students and the Literature.

With my personal lens through my licensure internship, I needed to consider the needs of 70 adult staff members, many of which were valid, but it made it harder to prioritize students. I acknowledge that the fear of losing staff members during an already chaotic time drove many of my decisions. This challenge connects directly to the next theme of lasting ramifications and guilt: like the participants, I wonder what I could have done better to ensure students got what they needed.

Lasting Ramifications and Guilt. Regardless of the efforts made to ensure positive outcomes during the pandemic, every single leader I spoke to within the scope of this study feels guilt over the lasting ramifications of the pandemic on student outcomes. Just as Zachary noted, Bobby does not feel that enough was done to support students. Many schools had a similar approach to Bobby's: they were focusing on taking care of teachers and adults so they could have the capacity to take care of the students. However, the impacts on student education and behavior are a direct consequence of this approach. Students will need extensive support to recover from the learning gaps that have emerged from the pandemic. Chase had a similar concern, adding that the learning loss extends not just to classroom subjects, but also to social-emotional competencies lost during online learning. Chase stressed that we are not fully returning to normal, and he does not even think the term new normal encompasses the necessary

adaptation to meet emerging student needs. In his words, we need to find the "next practices" that will eventually become best practices to best support our students, staff, and community.

Megan felt more disconnected from students during the pandemic than she had at any other time throughout her career. Because there were so many competing priorities, she felt she did not have the time to build the personal connections with students that she normally prioritizes. Throughout my role as a classroom teacher during the 2020-2021 school year, seeing my students every other day, I felt disconnected from them. With half of my students in the building and wearing masks and the other half online—some with their cameras on and some without—I did not feel my usual connection with my students. I did not realize how different it was until the 2021-2022 school year, when I supported student registration and several students stopped by my table to say hello. I did not recognize them until they told me their names. I have always prided myself on connecting with students, so it was a disheartening moment for me. I will carry a lot of guilt with me, both from things that occurred during my internship and in the classroom, despite the fact that I was giving my very best effort with the information I knew at the time.

Connection Between Lasting Ramifications and Guilt and the Literature. The strongest connections to the literature are seen within the Self-Care framework and the emotional and professional domains (Figure 20). There was such an emphasis on attending to the professional domain of self-care that a lot of guilt has emerged from the potential and seen ramifications of the pandemic. Focusing on taking care of adults—both professionally and emotionally—the natural circumstances that resulted from the pandemic, and the combative nature of how many adults handled the pandemic, led to consequences falling upon students. We have yet to fully understand the full impacts of this global catastrophe, and only a fraction of

those implications will affect the world of education. Still, it is already clear many educators will live with lasting guilt.
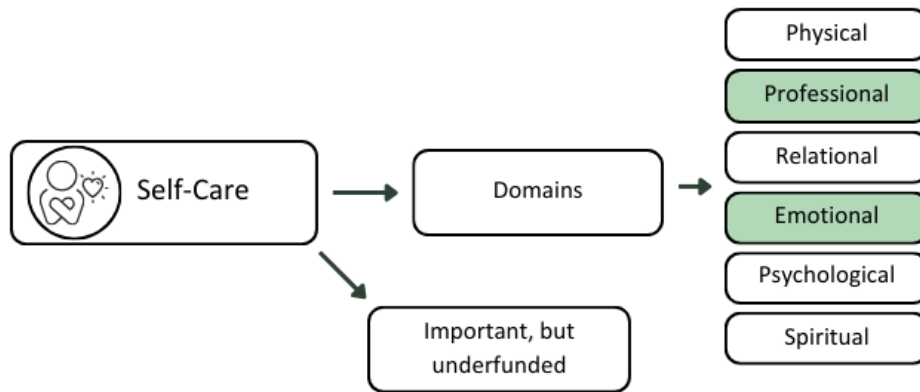

Figure 20. Connection Between Lasting Ramifications and Guilt and the Literature.

Mental Health Matters. There is still a stigma in the United States when it comes to attending to mental health. Chase realizes he was not expecting to support staff with their mental health as much as he ended up needing to. He felt that schools could have probably done a better job up front in supporting staff mental health, but that they eventually "got there." Megan also reflected on how her mental health affected the other adults around her. She feels bad about how she might have negatively impacted her team when she was not at her best. I can relate to Megan's concerns because, with all of the personal crises I was experiencing on top of the ones happening at work, I sometimes struggled to put my best foot forward. This relates to my lasting guilt: I wonder if my students were affected by my struggles.

Connection Between Mental Health Matters and the Literature. The theme of mental health matters, like many of the themes and subthemes in relation to research question #2, connects to the emotional domain of the Self-Care framework (Figure 21). The emotional domain focuses on the practices one engages in to safeguard against or address negative emotional experiences to maintain their wellbeing. This is clearly related to mental health, but its connection to the professional domain within the Self-Care framework is also notable. This

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domain considers how to manage or prevent work-related stress and stressors and mitigate burnout. Megan considered how a leader's mental health could impact the work-related stressors for other staff.
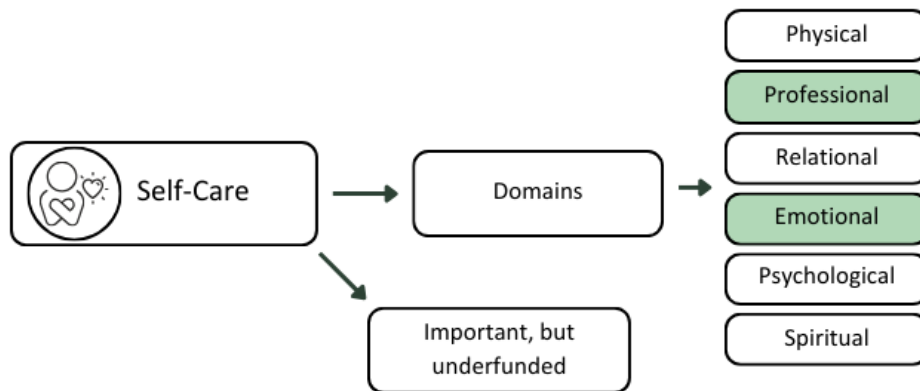

Figure 21. Connection Between Mental Health Matters and the Literature.

Looking for the Positive. As a subtheme within the mental health matters theme, many participants found looking for the positive important. Bobby values his role as an Assistant Principal/Athletic Director at his school. While he initially mourned the loss of many sports during the beginning of the pandemic, he admits that he might not have made it through that year if sports had not been shut down. Something that was at first a loss for him turned into a positive once he was able to reflect because it gave him the time he needed to attend to other aspects of his personal and professional life.

Matthew reflected on the positives of working from home once he adjusted to the difference. He was also grateful for the grace everyone seemed to extend to each other when traditional expectations of professionalism were temporarily abandoned. He could have kids on his lap during meetings and dogs on camera, and he was not held to previous standards of composure. I, for one, hope we maintain some of these aspects as we move forward. I look back to the days before the pandemic when I was taking an online, doctorate-level course at Colorado State University. Complete professionalism was expected, and a dog barking in the background,

even off-screen, was seen as rude to other classmates. I found it unreasonable that we were

expected to pretend we did not have everyday human lives outside of Zoom.

Megan, Matthew, and Josh reflected on their positive experiences with family and

friends, which they might not have experienced under the status quo. Megan had more time to

spend with her family and spent more time with her friends via Zoom happy hours. Matthew saw

his family more during the height of the pandemic thanks to online game nights with his siblings.

Josh also had online happy hours with friends and driveway beers with his neighbors.

Participants noted these opportunities were available because the outside world and its

obligations were not fully available. Participants have seen a decrease or full stop to these

activities as the outside world competes for attention.

Connection Between Looking for the Positive and the Literature. Especially during

the lockdown in March 2020, attending to the relational domain within the Self-Care framework
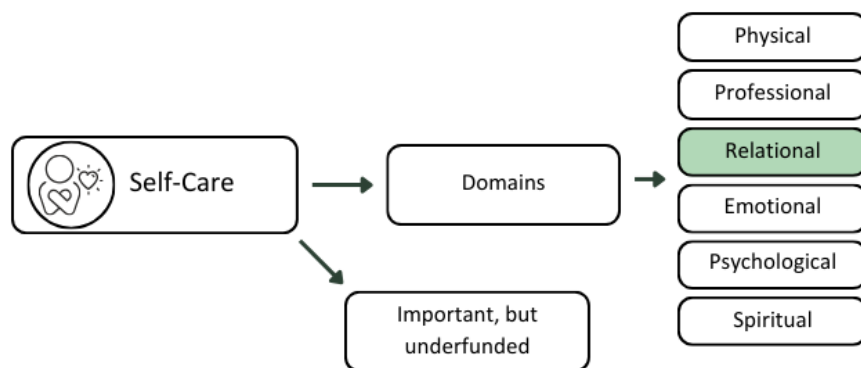
was important to participants (Figure 22).

Figure 22. Connection Between Looking for the Positive and the Literature.

As a single dad who only had his kids 50% of the time, Josh sometimes felt extremely

lonely. While I had a husband at home, our strained relationship and subsequent divorce also left

me feeling extremely lonely. Just from these two anecdotes, and knowing how social human

beings are in general, the relational domain of the Self-Care framework seems particularly

important. These aspects, taken out of context, do not seem directly related to how leaders navigated the pandemic, but mental health affected how leaders showed up every day in their buildings, both figuratively and literally.

Own Your Voice. In many communities, the pandemic was not just a political phenomenon but a polarized one, divisive even at the local level. Many leaders, including the ones in this study, felt disinclined to firmly speak up due to the risk of backlash. Both Josh and Megan used the phrase "chickened out" when reflecting on moments when they felt like they should have spoken up. They both felt a sense of anxiety and exhaustion around the fight to speak up. Matthew wondered if speaking out was even worth it because of the potential backlash and the risk that district leadership would not even consider what he had to say. When Matthew suggested that it was almost as if the district was asking for leadership opinion so they could check off a box and do what they wanted anyway, every focus group participant agreed.

Connection Between Own Your Voice and the Literature. While there are many reasons participants did not always feel comfortable speaking up, this relates to the situation component of the Meta-Leadership framework (Figure 23).
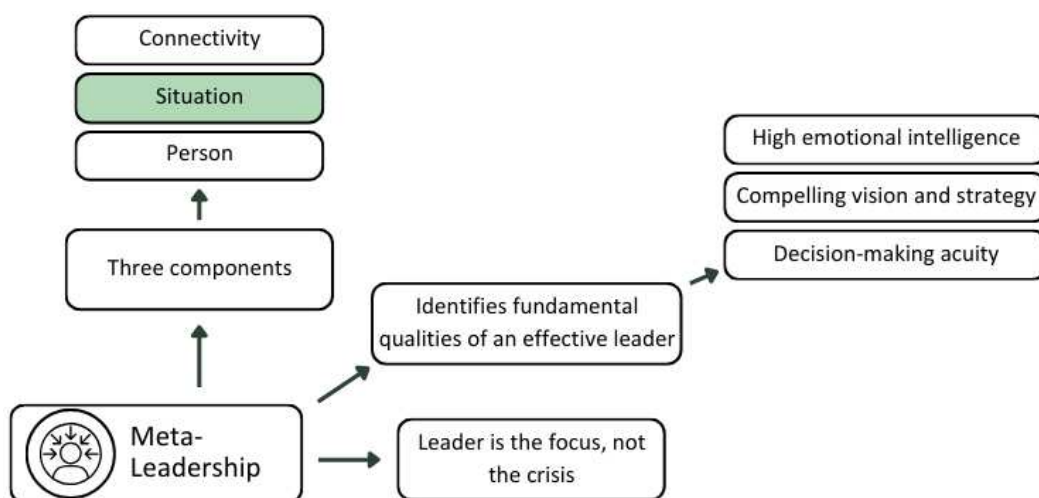

Figure 23. Connection Between Own Your Voice and the Literature.

Situation refers to the context in which the person is leading, and the context does not always support advocacy. Open, honest communication was even more necessary since there was a lot of conflicting information, especially in the first few months of the pandemic. However, limits on transparency limited open communication among school leaders and staff.

Politicization and Concerns. The subtheme of politicization and concerns and its implications depended on the context of each participant's community. Chase used social media to support communication in his community and did so without worrying about the polarization that might occur because of his messaging. He thought the community receiving the message was more important than potential backlash. In the end, Chase's decision paid off: his community thanked him for the communication, even if they did not always agree with what he was saying.

Matthew and Bobby expected a divisive response regardless of what they actually said. This subtheme of politicization and concerns was possibly the one that affected me most personally. During my licensure internship hours and in the classroom, I carefully planned and reviewed every communication I sent out to students, parents, and the community. Never in my career did I have such a focus on having others read and approve my communication—whether it was a classroom update, a response to a simple parent email, or updating families on a safety measure, I worried over every word and punctuation mark. This worry was my personal response to the fear of backlash but was also separately encouraged by leadership. I found myself reading other teachers' communications, too. Risk-mitigating over analysis created a sense of paralysis, leaving me to wonder how much more effective we could have been if less time was spent agonizing over an email that went through many rounds of revisions and hands instead of taking five minutes to craft.

Connection Between Politicization and Concerns and the Literature. The subtheme of politicization concerns the property of complexity and the idea of perturbance from the Turbulence framework (Figure 24). Complexity addresses the external conditions that affect an organization, which, in the context of the pandemic, were extremely heterogeneous.
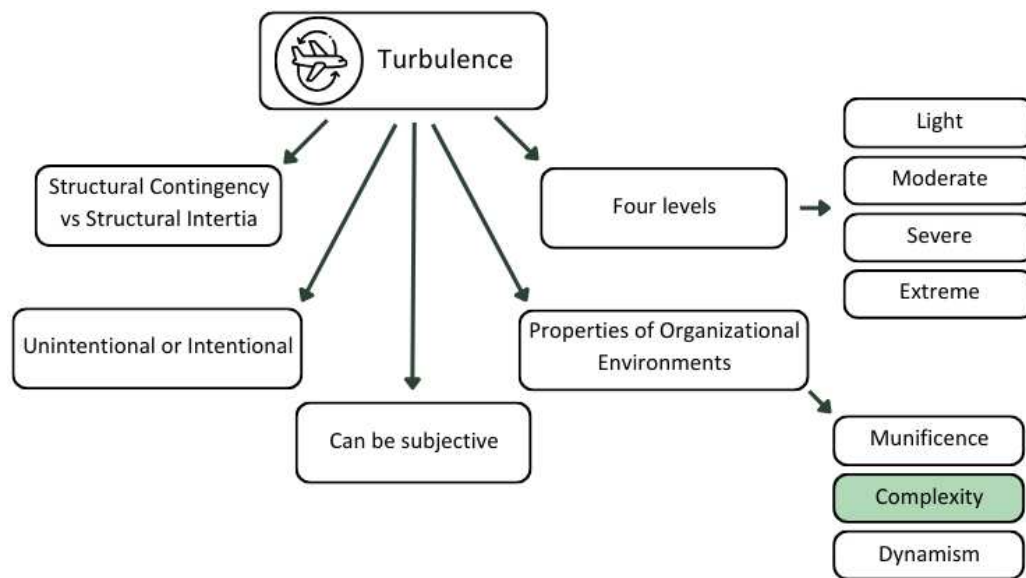

Figure 24. Connection Between Politicization and Concerns and the Literature.

As previously noted in Chapter 2, perturbance doesn't always exist when there is turbulence in an organization. However, it is almost given that perturbance will exist in the context of a crisis within education. Since students are typically most affected by turbulence in a school, it makes sense for parents and community members to consider the organizational practices of their schools. Combined, these factors explain why school leaders felt pressure throughout their communications.

Supporting Teachers. Bobby, Nick, and Matthew have reflected on the implications of their practices on their staff. Bobby had a few teachers who have left the profession since the start of COVID-19, and he wonders if there was anything he could have done to support, encourage, build trust with, and develop the skills of his staff. Nick found himself more

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concerned with filling immediate vacancies than thinking long-term and feels he could have better supported these new hires because they did not always stay. Matthew found that most of his turnover occurred when restrictions started to be lifted, and teachers were held responsible for learning gaps and student behavior that resulted from the circumstances of the pandemic. Matthew felt that teachers were pressured to solve problems that may have been beyond their capacity.

Overall, burnout has become an increasing problem for educators, and specifically teachers. Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al. (2023) found that teachers are reporting burnout at a rate of 52%, which was higher than studies conducted prior to the pandemic. Surprisingly, this number is even higher than the rates of "healthcare professionals overall of 21% and for nurses of 34.1%" (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2023). Given the prevalence of news coverage and studies looking at the mental health of healthcare workers, it comes as a shock that educators are reporting higher rates of burnout. Since burnout can affect the quality of education teachers provide students with, it is imperative to further support teachers' mental health and prevention of burnout.

While not directly related to those pressures, I did find myself leaving the profession for a career in education research during the summer between the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years. This position outside of the classroom was a unique opportunity that I became excited about, but I wonder whether, in a world with no pandemic, I would have stayed in education in a leadership role, which I had previously been considering.

Connection Between Supporting Teachers and the Literature. Within the Self-Care framework, the domains of relational and professional connect the most to the theme of supporting teachers (Figure 25). Supporting teachers has a relational aspect: interpersonal

connections can support professional coaching. Because the professional domain considers ways to reduce the risk of or mitigate the effects of burnout, it is particularly important for school leaders to consider in light of the educator retention crisis.
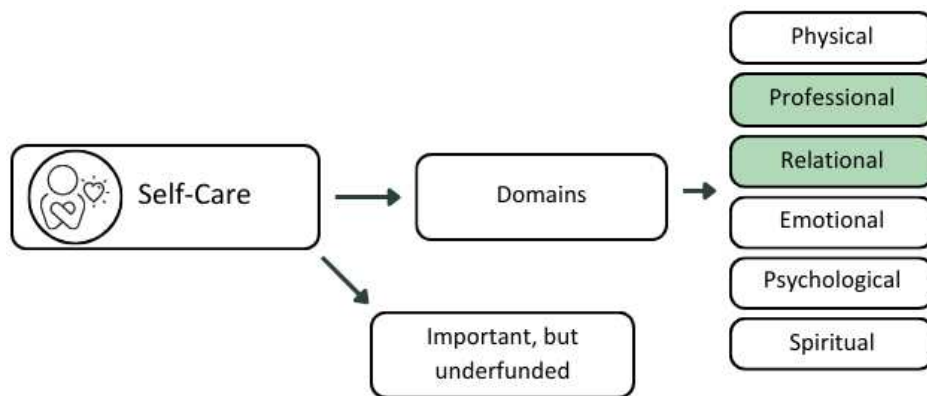

Figure 25. Connection Between Supporting Teachers and the Literature.

Vulnerability. In normal circumstances, it is hard to be vulnerable. Participants acknowledged that they wished they had been more vulnerable and that during instances when they let their guard down, they found it humbling. Matthew attributed his struggles with owning his voice and speaking up to a fear of being vulnerable. He worried about potential negative feedback from being more communicative with his community.

Josh found an opportunity to be vulnerable when, after a major outburst, he apologized to his staff and peers. While the culmination of stress, a lack of sleep, and immense pressure caused this outburst, Josh acknowledges that he should not have gone on an angry rant during a meeting. Reflecting on the circumstances and taking a vulnerable moment to apologize to the group allowed him to regain his peers' trust. However, he noted that those peers will never forget his behavior, which he feels will impact his career. If Josh's team had taken the time to establish norms where vulnerability and speaking up were encouraged, the whole situation could potentially have been avoided.

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Connection Between Vulnerability and the Literature. To varying degrees, the entire framework of Self-Care can influence the reflections and connections with the theme of vulnerability (Figure 26). The physical domain explains how a lack of attention to the physical can create stressors that impact other areas of our lives. The professional, relational, and emotional domains impact our ability to be vulnerable due to the risks of negative impacts on these domains. The psychological domain needs attention to ensure we have the space to be sufficiently vulnerable for reflection and processing. The spiritual domain is important to understand our inner needs, and as such, it, too, requires vulnerability.
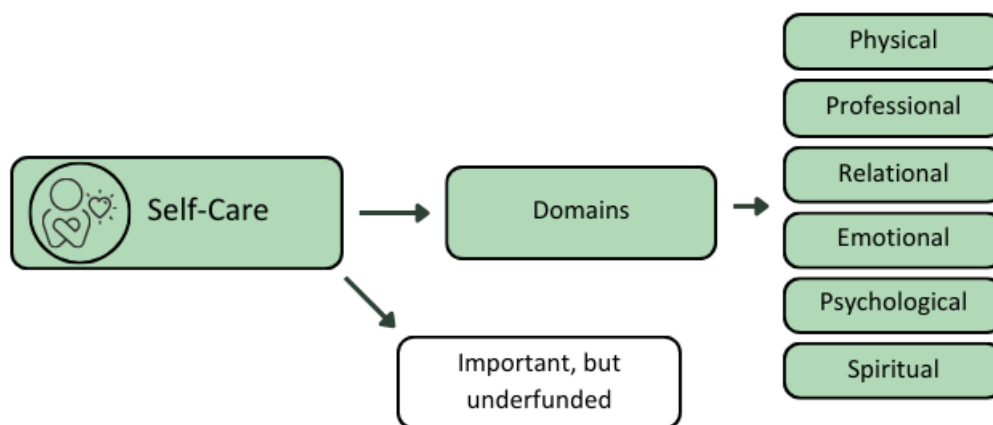

Figure 26. Connection Between Vulnerability and the Literature.

Research Question #3: As the pandemic has continued, what shifts have leaders made to remain successful in managing the continued crisis?

Within the scope of this study, school leaders identified certain shifts they have made to retain a perceived level of success. The major themes were continued staff care and self-care, reflection, and resilience. The subthemes within reflection were self-awareness, slow down, and unearthed/increased attention on inequities.

Continued Staff Care and Self-Care. Matthew and Nick reflected on forging connections with staff as a way to continue staff self-care. On a personal level, Matthew had

frequent happy hours with his staff to build those connections and let staff know that he cared about their wellbeing. Now that the competing priorities of life have reemerged, Matthew has struggled to maintain that level of connection with every staff member. Participating in this study allowed him to reflect on that concern, and he felt motivated to restart more social opportunities for staff.

For Nick, the reflections of focus group participants reaffirmed his practice of putting people first. He repeated the importance of recognizing kids and adults as people first versus students and teachers first. This will be especially important as we see the pandemic's long-term impacts on mental health, learning, and behaviors. We must consider each individual person, especially if any feelings of frustration emerge in coordination with the impacts of the pandemic.

Connection Between Continued Staff Care and Self-Care and the Literature. The importance of continued staff care and self-care relates to the professional and relational domains of the Self-Care framework and the ongoing property of sensemaking (Figure 27).
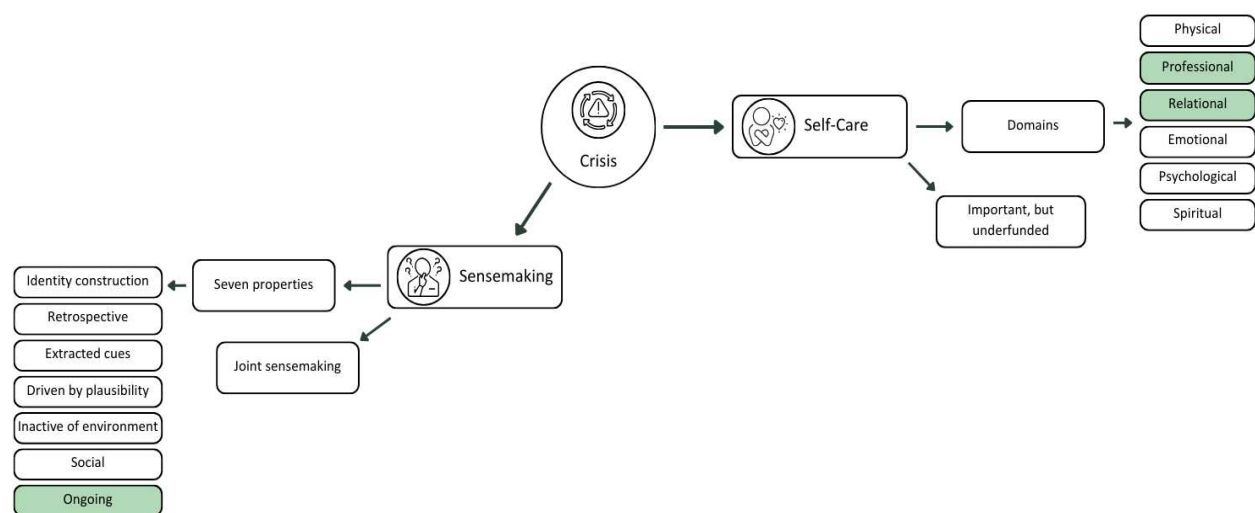

Figure 27. Connection Between Continued Staff Care and Self-Care and the Literature.

The professional domain relates to reducing the risk of burnout, which is an essential aspect of a school leader's role. The relational domain relates to maintaining and enhancing

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interpersonal connections. As Matthew realized, these connections are important to maintaining good mental health. The ongoing property of sensemaking refers to the cyclical nature of sensemaking, even at a subconscious level. Since the pandemic's impacts are still emerging, school leaders would benefit from engaging in ongoing sensemaking to maintain and strengthen their connections with and support of staff.

Reflection. Throughout the study, participants were tasked with reflecting in different ways: through the demographic survey, the focus group, and individual interviews. Reflection is also a key type of learning in the Crisis Leadership framework. The focus group and interviews allowed for the seven school leaders in this study to reflect in a structured way. Since the subthemes of self-awareness, slow down, and unearthed/increased attention on inequities are so interconnected, the analysis of the connection to the literature will happen after the initial discussion of each subtheme's finding.

Self-Awareness. While not an easy personal competency to learn, self-awareness is particularly important for leaders. The education system values continuous improvement, which is why educators are offered many professional development courses, and continuous education credits are required for re-licensure. Nick noted that self-awareness helped him understand how he might respond in a crisis situation, which supports decision-making and meaning-making. Megan considers self-awareness a necessary complement to a growth mindset. She noted a growth mindset is essential for continuous improvement and that it is impossible to pursue growth without being able to identify areas for growth.

Slow Down. Throughout the reflective process, participants mentioned the need to slow down to support their best reflective efforts, repeatedly mentioning the word "pause."

Participants distinguished between an intentional pause for reflection before decision-making leading to forward movement and less intentional forms of decision paralysis.

Unearthed/Increased Attention to Inequities. Matthew and Josh both discussed inequities that the pandemic highlighted for them. Matthew saw the clear inequities within his community when driving around to bring resources to his students. Students in the same neighborhood boundary lived drastically different lifestyles with staggering economic differences. Josh gained firsthand experience with educational inequities when he saw his son, who normally struggled with school, thrive during remote learning.

Inequities have always existed and, unfortunately, will likely continue to exist in some form. However, the pandemic supported communities in spurring into action to provide resources to one another, fighting inequity in new ways, such as taking on the digital divide. Between a lack of access to technology, shared access to technology, unstable WiFi, or a total lack of WiFi, and other issues in many households, leaders needed to take quick action to keep kids in school while at home.

Connection Between Reflection, Self-Awareness, Slow Down, and Unearthed/Increased Attention on Inequities and the Literature. The theme of reflection and its subthemes of self-awareness, slow down, and unearthed/increased attention on inequities relate to many aspects of the literature (Figure 28). Decision-making, a critical part of the Crisis Leadership framework, connects to this theme and its subthemes. Within sensemaking, there is a relation to the following properties: grounded in identity construction, retrospective, focused on and by extracted cues, and social. The Meta-Leadership component of person also supports reflective work.

School leaders can use the ability to slow down and reflect to support their decision-making process. Since decision-making is a critical task of crisis leadership, leaders must reach a successful level of decision-making acuity, which connects to the fundamental qualities of an effective leader laid out by the Meta-Leadership framework. The subtheme of self-awareness leaves leaders to consider their identity construction and understand how that process shapes their views and behaviors.
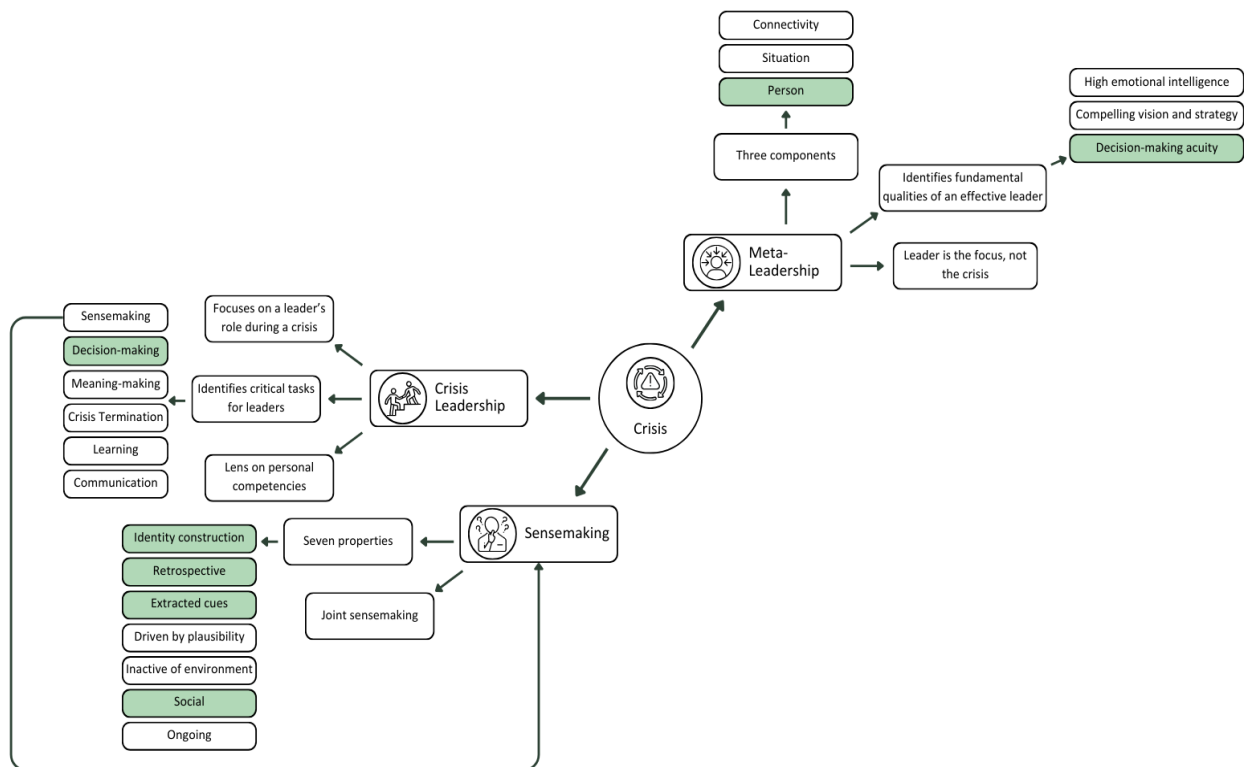
Figure 28. Connection Between Reflection, Self-Awareness, Slow Down, and Unearthed/Increased Attention on Inequities and the Literature.

The retrospective nature of reflection, and the way a leader can focus on sensemaking from a crisis, also constitute important parts of the reflective process. However, as noted in Chapter 2, confirmation bias affects the reflective process. The component of person within the Meta-Leadership framework refers to the leader who is experiencing the crisis and who the reflection is centered on.

Resilience. Megan and Chase noted that continued resilience and grace will need to be extended to everyone as we experience the lasting ramifications of the pandemic. Matthew knew his community needed resilience throughout the height of the pandemic and as other crises continued to plague his community. For example, much of Colorado was covered in ash and smoke when the wildfires went on for almost six months, which reignited feelings of crisis and, with them, the need for resilience.

Connection Between Resilience and the Literature. Like the theme of reflection, the theme of resilience connects to many aspects of the literature. Connectivity within Meta-Leadership, Munificence, Complexity, and Dynamism within Turbulence all relate to the theme of resilience (Figure 29). The component of connectivity refers to the network of people, entities, and assets a leader links and leverages to create a positive outcome and contribute to resilience. As a leader, leveraging every opportunity to successfully navigate a crisis is crucial.

The three properties of organizational environments—munificence, complexity, and dynamism—also contribute to resilience. Munificence is the economic resources an organization has at its disposal. Complexity refers to the heterogeneity or homogeneity of the external conditions that affect an organization. Dynamism is the change over time in munificence and complexity. The combination of these three properties and the aspect of connectivity from the Meta-Leadership framework requires resilience, as these components can fluctuate across various crises and may also contribute to building future resilience capacity. This all explains why Matthew and his staff needed to be resilient, as they were plagued by the crisis of the fires while still experiencing the ramifications of the pandemic.
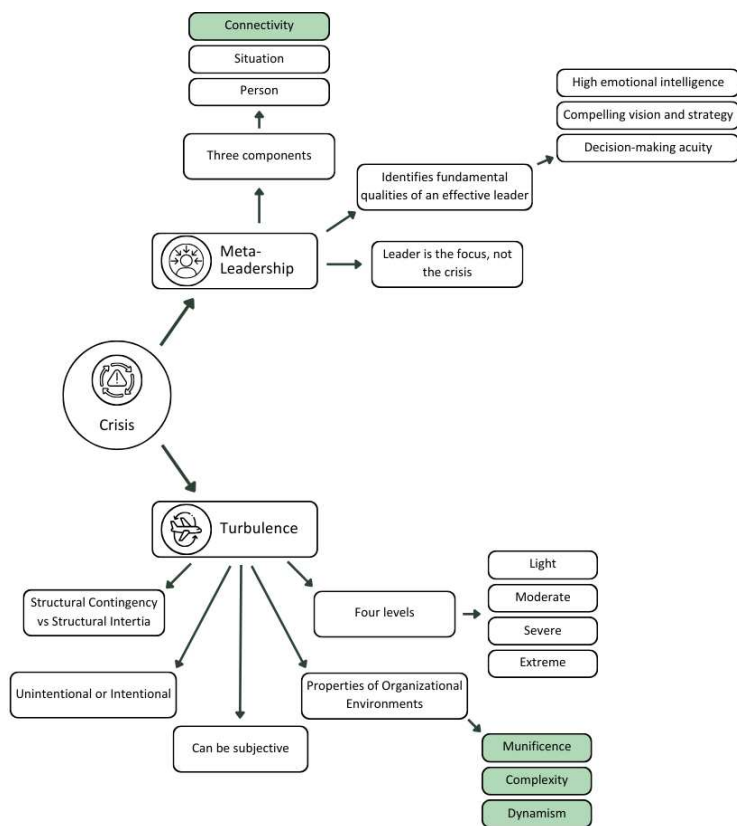
Figure 29. Connection Between Resilience and the Literature.

Research Question #4: How can licensure programs and school districts better equip their school leaders to handle crises?

Licensure programs and professional development courses can more effectively equip current and future leaders to navigate crises. While no curriculum can truly prepare leaders to navigate a crisis, two skills could better prepare them: adaptability and the ability to effectively give and receive feedback.

Develop Adaptability. Bobby described how licensure programs and professional development courses can support leaders in developing adaptability by reducing the amount of direction in their assignments. The sense of instability within assignments made Bobby feel more supported when he was thrown into the instability of problem-solving within the scope of the pandemic.

Megan discussed the importance of re-prioritizing and moving between the urgency of various situations. This understanding and readjustment is another important, teachable skill. Chase also thought about how adaptability can support teacher and administrator recruitment and retention and mitigate potential burnout, which drives people out of education.

Feedback Processes. Licensure programs and professional development courses can support the process of giving and receiving feedback. Even though Megan has been in education for many years, she still works to improve her feedback process. She wonders if she could have better supported teachers during the pandemic if she had been more forthcoming with some feedback instead of focusing on not hurting the teacher's feelings. Josh shared Megan's hesitation since leaders do not want a teacher to feel like they're losing ownership of a situation. For school leaders and staff, increased trust in the feedback process could improve school functioning.

Other Important Considerations

Some considerations did not necessarily rise to the level of a theme or subtheme but are still worth discussing within the scope of this study.

Crisis Termination. Unfortunately, while the immediacy of the pandemic has been resolved, the crisis has yet to be terminated, mainly due to emerging long-term consequences on student development. Due to its pervasive nature, and how issues can compound in education, every participant acknowledged there is still much work to be done to support students, staff, and the education sector as a whole.

However, leaders must continue to reassure their communities that while the full effects of the pandemic are yet to be seen, we are past the immediacy of the crisis, and schools are

regaining control of the situation. Because most families trust school staff with the safety and education of students, school staff should appropriately and truthfully be able to reassure them.

Joint Sensemaking. The focus group created a space for joint sensemaking, which differs from the collaborative sensemaking that each school leader conducted with their teams. Due to the subjective nature of turbulence within a crisis, conducting a focus group in addition to individual interviews was important. It was interesting to see how school leaders in the same institute, with some in the same school district, have different perceptions of the pandemic and its impacts on their personal and professional lives, their schools, and education as a whole.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study include many potential practical implications for educators, policymakers, licensure programs, and professional development courses. One potential implementation is re-evaluating the coursework and internship requirements for teacher and administrator licensure programs. Having the opportunity for educators to work through struggles and gain a better sense of adaptability could help them navigate crises. Participants agreed that internship hours should be focused on getting as much experience in a school building with as many aspects of leadership as possible. As an active principal, it might seem easier to coach a licensure candidate when things are calmer during a school day. However, the calm days do not always provide the best training for the reality of education.

Educator professional development courses could also work on developing curricula to support educators where they feel they have current deficits. One way to revamp professional development courses could be to support leaders in understanding their personal competencies and what they can leverage to be better leaders. While weakness-based development can be

helpful, the best approach to continuous development is to build and leverage areas of strength. The various services offered within the Gallup portfolio support this approach.

This study also reiterates the need to close educational gaps that exist due to inequities. Food insecurity is a particularly urgent problem. While the education system cannot solve this problem all on its own, it can support breakfast and lunch, as it did with various expanded food programs during the pandemic. When students do not have proper nutrition, it can be difficult for them to focus and, therefore, learn. The gap created by the digital divide was also even more evident during the pandemic. With the full effects of the pandemic still to be seen as it relates to learning and developmental loss, the digital divide must be addressed, especially if schools were ever to need to go remote again.

Further investment is necessary in the areas of mental health and self-care. While participants perceived they did a good job of supporting themselves mentally and in other aspects of the self-care domain, they did not always feel equipped to support staff, students, and the community with their mental health and self-care. This burden should not rest on the shoulders of already overworked school leaders. Mental health and self-care initiatives chosen for investment should be deployed via specialized mental health professionals, and more must be done to de-stigmatize mental health.

Another implication that emerged from this study is the need to focus more directly on the purpose of education: the students. Student needs were, in some ways, pushed to the side because of the polarized nature of the pandemic. It raises bigger questions about how the media portrays crises, the implications of that portrayal, and how to better support our most vulnerable populations—which include children.

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Recommendations for Future Research

Consequences will continue to emerge as a result of the pandemic, regulations during the pandemic, and disruptions related to the pandemic. We must continue researching the effects of crises on school leaders and how adjustments in licensure programs and professional development can best prepare school leaders to navigate crises.

One potential option for future research is to continue interviewing school leaders about their lived experiences during the pandemic. More rigor could be added to the research by interviewing a larger sample of school leaders, including leaders from diverse backgrounds, and conducting more interviews over a longer period of time. Research within different geographical, economic, and political areas could help us understand the different experiences that can occur when these aspects come into play.

As discussed during the section on Crisis Leadership, decision-making is an important skill for leaders. Within the Meta-Leadership framework, this skill centers around leaders being able to pivot from initial panic into productive action. Whether a leader made decisions well during the pandemic is still mostly subjective, but the ramifications of their actions will be seen for years to come. Due to the longevity of effects, conducting a long-term study with select leaders could also be important to understand how those ramifications create ripple effects and how leaders influence and interact with those effects.

When considering the intersection of the six frameworks considered during the literature review, there are many connections to the findings of this study. As previously shown, Figure 11 showcases the aspects of the frameworks that are directly connected to the themes and subthemes as detailed in this discussion. However, some aspects of the frameworks were not covered by the findings from the focus group and interviews of this study. These aspects, such as the "driven by

plausibility" and "inactive of the environment" properties of the Sensemaking framework, could benefit from further exploration as they connect to school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, another area of research to consider would be that of equity, how it is thought of in education, and what aspects of equity were affected by the pandemic that are not related to resources as covered in this study. While it is certainly important to consider the resources every student and teacher has to perform at high levels, it is also important to consider other barriers to an equitable education, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, political views, and more.

Conclusion

The experiences of school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic have been both challenging and enlightening. The school leaders in this study demonstrated remarkable adaptability, continuously learning and honing their skills, and communicating clearly in the face of uncertainty. They made difficult decisions, rallied community support, allocated resources wisely, and prioritized the wellbeing of their staff and themselves. This crisis revealed the importance of fostering connections among staff and embracing vulnerability as a leader.

From this extraordinary period, school leaders gleaned invaluable lessons. They realized the central focus must always be on the students, considering the lasting ramifications and grappling with feelings of guilt. The pandemic underscored the critical importance of mental health, a positive outlook, and maintaining one's voice amidst politicization and concerns. It also highlighted the need to support teachers more substantially.

As we move forward, school leaders must continue to prioritize the care of their staff and their own wellbeing, fostering self-awareness and a reflective approach. Slowing down and addressing inequities that have been brought to the forefront during the pandemic will be

essential for progress and resilience in education. There is a clear need for practitioners, leaders, school districts, and licensure programs to provide more robust support for teachers and school leaders, recognizing the unique challenges they face.

Furthermore, the pandemic has underlined the urgency of closing educational gaps and ensuring equitable access to quality education. It is a call to action to address systemic inequalities and disparities in education. Looking ahead, there is a wealth of opportunities for further research. Ongoing studies can delve into the enduring effects of the pandemic on education and the continued efforts to advance equity within the system. As school leaders continue to navigate this complex landscape, they will serve as key agents of change and progress in the world of education.

This research has been a reflective process for me, having been an educator during the pandemic. Supporting these seven school leaders through their reflective journey was an honor and a privilege. There is more work to be done across education as a whole in order to close the gaps created by systemic inequities, and these problems cannot be solved with a simple, easy, or quick solution. I implore my colleagues, policymakers, and communities as a whole to consider the needs within education to better support our teachers and students. In the meantime, school leaders, licensure programs, and professional development courses can focus on the support needed for leaders to show up as their best selves every day, which adds value on the easy days, and becomes essential in times of need.

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Appendix A

Participant Demographics Survey

Thank you so much for participating in my focus group during the SLI in Estes, CO.

Please fill out the following survey so I can gather demographic information to help with the analysis of your responses. All information will be kept confidential, and pseudonyms will be used to replace any identifying information in any written work.

* Required

1. First and Last Name *

2. Age *

3. What gender do you identify as? * *Check all that apply.*
   - ☐ Male
   - ☐ Female
   - ☐ Transgender
   - ☐ Non-binary
   - ☐ Prefer not to answer
   - ☐ Other

4. Which category best describes you? * *Check all that apply.*
   - ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native (e.g., Navajo Nation, Blackfeet tribe, Mayan, Aztec, Native Village or Barrow Inupiat Traditional Government, Nome Eskimo Community, etc.)
   - ☐ Asian (e.g., Chinese, Filipino, Asian Indian, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, etc.)
   - ☐ Black or African American (e.g., African American, Jamaican, Haitian, Nigerian, Ethiopian, Somalian, etc.)
   - ☐ Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin (e.g., Mexican or Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Salvadoran, Dominican, Colombian, etc.)
   - ☐ Middle Eastern or North African (e.g., Lebanese, Iranian, Egyptian, Syrian, Moroccan, Algerian, etc.)
   - ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (e.g., Native Hawaiian, Samoan, Chamorro, Tongan, Fijian, etc.)
   - ☐ White (e.g., German, Irish, English, Italian, Polish, French, etc.)
   - ☐ Another race, ethnicity, or origin not listed here

5. What is your sexual orientation? * *Mark only one.*
   - ☐ Heterosexual/Straight
   - ☐ Homosexual/Gay or Lesbian
   - ☐ Bisexual
   - ☐ Other
   - ☐ Prefer Not to Answer

6. What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed? * *Mark only one.*
   - ☐ Bachelor's Degree
   - ☐ Master's Degree
   - ☐ Ph.D. or higher

7. How would you describe your political views? * *Mark only one.*
   - ☐ Very Liberal
   - ☐ Slightly Liberal
   - ☐ Neither Liberal nor Conservative
   - ☐ Slightly Conservative
   - ☐ Very Conservative
   - ☐ Prefer not to say

8. If applicable, please specify your religion. * *Mark only one.*
   - ☐ Catholicism
   - ☐ Christianity
   - ☐ Judaism
   - ☐ Islam
   - ☐ Buddhism
   - ☐ Hinduism
   - ☐ Other
   - ☐ Prefer not to say
   - ☐ Not applicable

9. Do you have a disability as defined under the Disability Discrimination Act? * *Mark only one.*
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No
   - ☐ Prefer not to say

10. Number of years in education *

11. Number of years in an admin role *

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12. Are you or anyone in your family immunocompromised? * *Mark only one.*
    - ☐ Yes
    - ☐ No

13. Did you or anyone in your family experience COVID-19? * *Mark only one.*
    - ☐ Yes
    - ☐ No

14. If you answered yes to the previous question, what was the severity of COVID-19? *Mark only one.*
    - ☐ Mild
    - ☐ Moderate
    - ☐ Severe

Answer the following questions for the 2019-2020 school year.

15. Title/Position *

16. Location (including geographic information) *

17. Relationship Status * *Mark only one.*
    - ☐ Single (never married)
    - ☐ Married, or in a domestic partnership
    - ☐ Widowed
    - ☐ Divorced
    - ☐ Separated

18. Members of your household *

19. Household Income * *Mark only one.*
    - ☐ Under $25,000
    - ☐ $25,000 - $49,000
    - ☐ $50,000 - $74,000
    - ☐ $75,000 - $99,000
    - ☐ Over $100,000 Prefer not to say

Answer the following questions for the 2020-2021 school year.

20.   Title/Position *

21.   Location (including geographic information) *

22.   Relationship Status * *Mark only one.*
        ☐ Single (never married)
        ☐ Married, or in a domestic partnership
        ☐ Widowed
        ☐ Divorced
        ☐ Separated

23.   Members of your household *

24.   Household Income * *Mark only one.*
        ☐ Under $25,000
        ☐ $25,000 - $49,000
        ☐ $50,000 - $74,000
        ☐ $75,000 - $99,000
        ☐ Over $100,000 Prefer not to say

Answer the following questions for the 2021-2022 school year.

25.   Title/Position *

26.   Location (including geographic information) *

27.   Relationship Status * *Mark only one.*
        ☐ Single (never married)
        ☐ Married, or in a domestic partnership
        ☐ Widowed
        ☐ Divorced
        ☐ Separated

28.   Members of your household *

29.   Household Income * *Mark only one.*
    ☐ Under $25,000
    ☐ $25,000 - $49,000
    ☐ $50,000 - $74,000
    ☐ $75,000 - $99,000
    ☐ Over $100,000 Prefer not to say

<center>**Appendix B**</center>

This appendix contains a copy of this study's Colorado State University Institutional Review Board Letter of Approval. Following the letter is a script read to each participant before they provided their consent to participate in this study.

PROTOCOL

<center>**The protocol listed below has been approved by the CSU IRB Determinations Fort Collins on Thursday, February 9th, 2023.**</center>

PI: Gines, Donna
Submission Type and ID: Amendment 2957
Title: Colorado State University School Leadership Institute

Approval Date: Thursday, February 9th, 2023

Continuing Review Date: no date provided

Expiration Date: Monday, October 28th, 2024

The CSU IRB (FWA0000647) has completed its review of protocol 2957 Colorado State University School Leadership Institute. In accordance with federal and state requirements, and policies established by the CSU IRB, the committee has approved this protocol under Exempt review.

Any additional comments regarding this approval are included below. If you have additional questions about this, please contact RICRO IRB Staff.

Please note:

This protocol will need to undergo Continuing Review and approval prior to no date provided. Any additional changes to this approved protocol must be obtained prior to implementation of those changes, by submitting an amendment request to the CSU IRB for review/approval.

Good luck in your research endeavors!

Amendment [v5] has been reviewed on February 8, 2023 and determined to not alter the exempt determination. This amendment includes updated procedures to conduct additional focus groups with the same participants from the initial protocol who agreed to be recontacted; and to include a new verbal consent script. The IRB has determined that the risk level remains no more than minimal.

Attachments

eProtocol History   Protocol_19-9521H.zip   1 INITIAL

APPROVAL Recruitment Materials

Cooner.recruitment.docx

Consent Focus Group Consent Form.Cooner.doc

Interview/Focus Group Questions Focus Group Questions.docx

Interview/Focus Group Questions New topics for focus groups.docx

Consent verbal script2.docx

Verbal Script for Focus Groups and Interviews

VERBAL RECRUITMENT/CONSENT TEMPLATE: No Identifiers Collected

In conversational style, …

Hello, my name is Emily Asqueri, and I am a researcher from Colorado State University in the School of Education department. We are conducting a research study on the skills needed for new school leaders. The title of our project is The School Leadership Institute. The Principal Investigator is Dr. Donna Cooner and I am the Co-Principal Investigator, Emily Asqueri.

We would like you to answer a few questions about your experiences in your leadership role. Participation will take approximately 1-1.5 hours. Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time without penalty.

Would you like to participate?

If yes: Proceed.

If no: Thank you for your time.

With your permission, I will audiotape and take notes during the interview. The recording is to accurately record the information you provide and will be used for transcription purposes only. If you choose not to be audiotaped, I will take notes instead. If you agree to be audiotaped but feel uncomfortable or change your mind for any reason during the interview, I can turn off the recorder at your request. If you do not wish to continue, you can stop the interview at any time.

Although you have previously given written consent for the project and for further data collection, we want to remind you of a few things. We will not collect your name or personal identifiers. When we report and share the data with others, we will combine the data from all participants. There are no known risks or direct benefits to you, but we hope to gain more knowledge on the leadership skills required for new leaders.

Participation in a focus group involves some loss of privacy. The researchers will make every effort to ensure that information about you remains confidential but cannot guarantee total confidentiality. Your identity will not be revealed in any publications, presentations, or reports resulting from this research study. While we will ask all group members to keep the information they hear in this group confidential, we cannot guarantee that everyone will do so.

Once identifiers are removed from any identifiable private information, the information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent from the subject or the legally authorized representative.

If you have any further questions, you may contact Dr. Cooner at donna.cooner@colostate.edu or easqueri@rams.colostate.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: CSU_IRB@colostate.edu; 970-491-1553.

This could be verbally or in the form of a study summary sheet/cover letter or contact card.