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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

A Doctoral Dissertation

ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE
INFLUENCE OF THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC
ON THEIR PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Melissa Gibson-Steiner

College of Education & Behavioral Sciences
Department of Leadership, Policy, and Development

May 2023

This Dissertation by: Melissa Gibson-Steiner

Entitled: *Elementary Principals' Perceptions of the Influence of the Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19) on Their Professional Identities.*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Education in the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in the Department of Leadership, Policy and Development.

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ABSTRACT

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In the spring of 2020, the coronavirus (COVID-19) triggered a pandemic, caused schools to close, and created a crisis for school leaders. They led during unprecedented times and negotiated an unfamiliar environment. School principals managed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their schools for nearly two years. As principals led through the pandemic, the question arose as to what influence this experience had on their professional identity. Scholars such as Burke and Stets (2009) identified that changes in professional identity are generally gradual over time. However, when a situation does not match how an individual identifies as a leader, distress may be created, and a leader may adjust their professional identity to reduce distress.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a worldwide event, and each principal had their own experience based on the context of their school and community. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand elementary school principals' perceptions of the influence that the COVID-19 pandemic had on their professional identities within the context of their school and community. Six elementary principals from Colorado were interviewed on two separate occasions. Principals represented four community types, rural, town, suburban, and city. The findings from the interviews were compared to the scholarly literature on leading during a crisis and professional identity change.

This study found that principals relied on existing professional identities, recognized an increase in the ethic of care, and shifted toward shared leadership. During the pandemic, principals relied on existing strategies, beliefs, and values to move their schools forward. As principals spent additional time caring for staff and communicating transparently, they adapted their practices for extending care. Also, when principals faced unknown situations, they demonstrated vulnerability and engaged staff collaborative leadership to problem solve. Their professional identities may have shifted as they found value in these new practices.

The findings from this study may support new and existing leaders to understand they may rely on existing professional identities during uncertain times and that their identities may evolve. Leadership development programs can assist new leaders in understanding that their professional identities may shift and the importance of establishing reflective practices. Policymakers may benefit from the knowledge that individual school leaders need the flexibility to respond to their community's and school's specific needs during a crisis or uncertain times.

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Completing this dissertation journey is something I did not believe was possible for a long time. Thank you to my children, Marc, Matthew, and Michael, as well as Dr. Laura Summers, for believing in me. Through your eyes, I gained the confidence to engage in this journey.

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PREFACE

As I reflected on my experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, the feeling of distress returned. Through this dissertation journey, I began to understand that my distress was related to a significant disconnect between my professional identity and my responsibilities at the time. To help you understand, I take you back to my childhood and growing up in a small town. My father and grandfather ran a local gas station and provided fuel to farmers. My grandfather and great uncle started a small business in 1924. The work ethic my father and grandfather modeled was considered strong because they did what was needed to meet their customers' needs. That meant my father worked six days a week and answered calls from farmers in the evening. If farmers needed fuel to plant or harvest, my father delivered; otherwise, the farmers would take their business elsewhere. Our friends were also local business owners operating six days a week to serve their customers. People needed groceries, pharmaceuticals, and other services on Saturday. In my small town, only churches and a coffee shop were open on Sundays. Other friends were farmers who worked seven days a week, especially during planting and harvest seasons. I was surrounded by dedicated, hard-working people who strived to serve customers and provide for their families. Through this childhood experience, I developed a deep value for working hard and doing my best to serve that later became a foundation for my professional identity.

I became an educator to be a part of a purpose bigger than myself. My heart and drive were to help make a difference for all children. I never hesitated to put in the extra work to ensure my students had the best experiences that I knew how to provide. Becoming a leader provided a way to serve more students and support other educators as they offered their best.

By the spring of 2020, I was in my fourth year as an assistant principal and my second year in my new school district. Relationships were blossoming. I supported two different elementary schools as an assistant principal. In one school, I helped students to problem solve, learn from mistakes, and develop new skills as a part of behavior and discipline management. For my second school, I supported teachers in monitoring student progress through Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and other special assignments. I had just learned I would be assigned to the first school for the following year and was excited to be able to deepen my level of support. I saw a strong alignment between the position, the school, and my professional identity of being a servant leader and being able to make a difference. I was in a good place professionally.

That changed drastically in March of 2020. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, our spring break plans were canceled, and our time off was extended to two weeks. Over those two weeks, the city shut down. Our superintendent announced that we would not be returning to the classrooms. Instead, we began remote learning. Staff began learning new platforms to connect with students. At one point, I dressed in the school's mascot costume as our staff handed out school supplies and cheered on families as they drove through the school's parking lot.

For me, discipline ended, professional learning communities ended, meetings to discuss student progress ended, and staff evaluations were canceled. While my work was mostly eliminated, I hoped I could continue supporting our teachers. I knew the platforms, and I had taught various online classes. I was ready to serve.

During remote learning, in one school, I had the pleasure of working with four teachers from kindergarten and first-grade and helped guide their remote learning. We met weekly for an hour, which became my work week's highlight. The teachers shared their plans to connect with

students and continue providing academic learning opportunities. We discussed ways to make the experiences meaningful and supportive. The counselor and I began an online spirit week challenge. Families sent photos of forts, playing outside, and enjoying their families. In the second school, I organized Friday afternoon staff connections. We played virtual bingo and other social games. My service time between the two schools consumed less than 5 hours of my time. For the remaining time, I was lost. I was no longer a part of something bigger than myself. In my eyes, my help appeared unnecessary, and my professional identity was in a crisis. I watched administrators, instructional coaches, and teachers work endless hours. I offered support and asked how I could help, but I had little to do.

Over the summer of 2020, various people from our school district, schools, and community worked together to create our district plan to return to school. Since I was not a part of this planning, I was curious to learn about the decisions. Our school district returned to in-person learning in the fall 2020-21 school year with various new safety measures. Due to staff changes and decreased enrollment, my job assignment changed. I was assigned to the second elementary school and was provided the opportunity to oversee the preschool program. While not my first choice, I was grateful to continue to serve and learn a new program.

As I returned to school in the fall of 2020, I discovered the only preschool plan put in place was they would attend in person. There were no contingency plans or expectations should they need to return to online instruction due to quarantine or an outbreak of COVID-19. The preschool staff was classified, and there was no funding to pay them to help build a plan. I quickly put together an online plan based on the Colorado Department of Education's guidance for preschool. Unfortunately, since the effort was not collaborative among the different preschools, it was not an effective document. As the sites experienced quarantines, each site

provided different learning experiences, creating inequitable learning opportunities among the various sites. Our students who qualified for the Colorado Preschool Program and our English learners were impacted the most. I had always viewed myself as a collaborative leader, and this experience deepened the value of working together to develop the best path forward. It also highlighted the need to ensure the right people, including teachers, are included to provide students with access to the best learning opportunities.

As we returned to in-person learning, I was not fearful of becoming ill. However, the fear of causing someone to become sick was real. I recalled counting the days after I covered a classroom, worried that I would cause children to have to quarantine and lose out on the opportunity to learn in school. Under the strict guidance of my supervisor, we closed our doors and logged into virtual meetings even though our offices were only a few steps away. Collaborating meant handing off papers and returning to the office to talk virtually. Observing classrooms and students meant standing at the doorway to avoid exposing someone. Education is a relationship business, and I found it challenging to build and maintain relationships with staff and students. Everything was so abbreviated, and genuine connections were missing. Building relationships with the preschool staff was extremely challenging within this environment.

A highlight of the safety protocols was the opportunity to spend every day with one second-grade class. I truly got to know the students. I saw relationships between the students blossom as they learned to navigate their different personalities and interests. Two years later, I saw students in the hall as I visited their school, and their hellos and hugs warmed my heart. Authentic relationships are valuable in education and take time to cultivate and nurture. These experiences influenced my professional identity of being a relational leader as I became more intentional about building relationships with everyone — staff, students, and families.

As I reflected on how I identified as a professional before the pandemic compared to who I am now, two professional identities stood out to me. I developed a deeper belief in educator-family relationships, and I became an educator who believes children need more time for play and family. As teachers shared their stories during remote learning, they seemed to have established more profound relationships with their students' families. Teachers shared stories such as having multiple kids from one family joining virtual sessions so they could make connections or parents trying to work remotely, take care of their family, and educate their children. Our teachers, who were also parents, searched to find a new balance between being an educator and a parent. In my view, teachers appeared to develop a deeper appreciation for families' challenges as they balanced work and family in this unfamiliar context. Hearing the families' and teachers' stories deepened my understanding of the importance of listening to understand the experiences of others and how this contributes to building relationships. Now, I do not hesitate to pick up the phone and talk with families or to seek out staff members and talk in person. I value other people's perspectives and situations even more.

As families shared pictures of their children playing and being creative and connecting with their families, I thought about the importance of balance between school, family, and being a child. Children need time to be kids, especially elementary children. They develop socially and emotionally through play and need to play with friends and families. As an educator focused on instruction, I believe our time in the classroom needs to be intentional and provide hands-on opportunities. A school's influence on how a family spends time together should encompass family time and freedom, not more academics. How can educators be more effective in engaging students in education? How can we ensure academic learning is accomplished at school? I

continue to grapple with these questions. As a leader, I now place a higher value on family time and learning through play.

The values and beliefs instilled in me as a child continue to be a part of me. I remain a hard-working servant leader who does the best I know. The distress from being disconnected did not change that. However, through my dissertation journey, I developed an understanding that when an assigned meaning of a professional identity and a situation do not match, a person experiences distress and uncertainty, and the greater the disconnect, the greater the emotions (Burke & Stets, 2009). I am grateful for this new understanding and the ability to explain the cause of distress. What has changed is my perspective. If I am experiencing distress because my professional identity and situation do not align, what can I do? Can I change the situation? Can I grow from the experience? How might I serve instead if my time and talents are not a good match?

Being an educational leader during the pandemic was a different experience. Throughout the 2020-21 school year, I watched principals and district leaders lead endlessly to the point of exhaustion from stress and non-stop work. As I reflected on my journey and developed an understanding that one's experiences may influence a person's professional identity, I wondered if leading through the pandemic may have influenced how others identified as leaders.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

In 2020, the COVID-19 virus spread worldwide and triggered a pandemic affecting nations, communities, economies, and society. The COVID-19 pandemic caused schools, businesses, transportation, and country borders to close. Millions became ill or died (World Health Organization, 2021). Suddenly, learning was interrupted. Children were home from school and deprived of opportunities for growth and development (UNESCO, 2021). Many no longer had access to free or discounted meals (UNESCO, 2021). Concerns for young people's mental health surfaced as they potentially experienced increased stress and social isolation (Harris & Jones, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). Unprepared, schools quickly implemented distance learning, and families found ways to support distance learning and homeschooling (UNESCO, 2021). Many families experienced gaps in necessary childcare (UNESCO, 2021). These educational shifts also highlighted inequities that affected those in society who have the least (Harris & Jones, 2020).

As schools changed instruction, district and school leaders responded to situations they had little control over. They juggled coordination and communication and met changing regulations (Bailey & Hess, 2020; Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020). Reliant on guidance from health departments, leaders made decisions about instructional models and implemented additional safety measures so students could return to learning (Harris & Jones, 2020). Due to the pandemic, district and school leadership faced numerous challenges in a time of uncertainty while under continuous public scrutiny (Harris & Jones, 2020). If a person perceives little control

over a situation, such as a pandemic, a professional identity may be redefined (Burke & Stets, 2009). A professional identity is a set of internalized meanings an individual assigns to their professional role (Burke & Stets, 2009; Robertson, 2017b).

Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Schools

By mid-April 2020, 84.5% of enrolled students worldwide were no longer in school (UNESCO, 2021). In the United States, nearly every state either ordered or recommended schools to close in early March, and most remained closed for the remainder of the 2019–2020 school year (Education Week, 2020). At its peak, 55.1 million students in 124,000 US public and private schools were affected (Education Week, 2020). In Colorado, the state ordered schools to close on March 25, 2020, and to remain closed for the remainder of the school year on April 20, 2020 (Education Week, 2020). Colorado's school closure affected 1888 public schools and around 905,000 students (Colorado Department of Education [CDE], 2020). Suddenly with schools closed, educators responded by continuing children's education through various forms of distance learning.

District and school leaders quickly established new expectations for distance learning. Nearly 93% of households with school-age children reported some form of distance learning during the initial COVID-19 outbreak (McElrath, 2020). Leaders overcame numerous challenges. Teachers expressed difficulties communicating with families and students, concerns about families not having access to the necessary technology and internet service, and concerns about students not participating (Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020). Students felt disconnected from their teachers, struggled to adjust to online learning, and lacked the necessary resources (Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020). Families struggled to find time to assist their children and solve technical problems, and they felt the need to re-learn skills and academic concepts that they had not used

in a long time (Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020). A disparity in educational opportunities became more prevalent as lower-income households were likely to have fewer resources for learning at home (McElrath, 2020). The way children learn changed, and school leaders had to respond to this different context.

Disparities in Education During the Coronavirus Pandemic

During the initial school closures at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone faced numerous unknowns and fears associated with the virus. Many children living in poverty no longer had access to some of their basic needs (Anderson et al., 2020). Schools provide children access to food, a refuge from homelessness, a sense of security, and mental health support (Anderson et al., 2020; Magnani et al., 2021). Children develop socially through interactions with peers (Anderson et al., 2020), and making friendships is an essential part of children's lives (Larsen et al., 2021). When schools were closed, this social support system was not available. Children who missed their friends reported needing more emotional support (Larsen et al., 2021). Also, death rates from COVID-19 were generally higher in impoverished areas, adding stress to children who lost loved ones (Blundell et al., 2020). These added stressors can impact a child's mental and physical health and concentration abilities (Larsen et al., 2021; Magnani et al., 2021).

As families struggled with meeting basic needs and needing emotional support, states called for a pivot to distance learning. Schools scrambled to provide distance learning opportunities ranging from paper packets to online instruction (McElrath, 2020). Inequities between socioeconomic statuses became more visible (Andrew et al., 2020; Bailey & Hess, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020; McElrath, 2020; Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). Before the pandemic, there may have been a false assumption that online resources were more

available for students, regardless of socioeconomic status (de los Santo & Rosser, 2021). However, it became evident that not all families had devices or internet access. Students camped out in business parking lots to complete schoolwork using free internet services (Bloch, 2020). For these families, the cost of internet services was not a part of the family budget (Bloch, 2020). Families struggled with sluggish internet, especially when more than one family member needed simultaneous access (Mansfield & Conlon, 2020). In some rural areas, internet service was not available for families to access (Kaul et al., 2020). Families shared devices, and work took priority (Kaul et al., 2020). In response, public school districts scrambled to provide devices and internet service so students could engage in learning (Carpenter & Dunn, 2020).

In contrast, families with more means, generally two-parent households and those with higher education and income levels, may not have experienced the same burdens (Carpenter & Dunn, 2020). These families already had access to high-speed internet and multiple devices (Carpenter & Dunn, 2020). Also, schools in high-income areas had existing infrastructures to support the switch to online distance learning (Kaul et al., 2020). With one-to-one device to student ratios, made possible through family donations (Kaul et al., 2020; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021), and programs based on competency-based student progressions, inquiry, and project-based learning, students were already comfortable with greater self-agency and self-directed work (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021).

At the end of May 2020, McElrath (2020) reported that 80% of people living with children in distance learning were using online resources. High-income families reported using online resources at higher rates than those in lower-income families (McElrath, 2020). Their children were more likely to be provided with more engaging and innovative online classes and access to teachers through videoconferencing (Andrew et al., 2020; Blundell et al., 2020;

Carpenter & Dunn, 2020). When schools provided online support and teacher interaction, families allocated more time to learning (Bansak & Starr, 2021). The other 20% of families, generally from low-income households, used paper packets sent home by the school and had less access to teachers' support (McElrath, 2020). With less school-provided help and access to teachers, children were less likely to spend time learning independently (Bansak & Starr, 2021). Some children were learning at the same low rate as children whose schools canceled all classes and did not offer any form of distance learning (Bansak & Starr, 2021).

As school leaders and teachers scrambled to develop distance learning opportunities, families assumed more responsibility for educating their children (Blundell et al., 2020). Homeschooling and full-time virtual schooling require substantial adult involvement (Blundell et al., 2020; Horn & Staker, 2011). Many adults struggled to support children with home learning (Andrew et al., 2020). Impoverished children often live in homes with less access to resources positively associated with learning, such as dedicated study spaces, books, and technology (Andrew et al., 2020; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021).

Adult time to help children learn varied based on household characteristics (Bansak & Starr, 2021). Regardless of socioeconomic status, adults who continued to work had less time to support their children in learning (Bansak & Starr, 2021). Lower-income families who could continue working were less likely to work from home (Blundell et al., 2020). They not only had to find childcare but had less time to support their children. Single-family households reported spending less time helping their children, which is consistent with the idea that they have the same household responsibilities with fewer adults to manage them (Bansak & Starr, 2021; Bloch, 2020). Other families had to balance working from home and supporting the education of multiple children (Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020).

In contrast, households with at least one adult not working reported having more time to help their children regardless of their socioeconomic status (Bansak & Starr, 2021). Households in which adults lost employment due to the pandemic reported more time helping their children (Bansak & Starr, 2021). Children who received support from their families had fewer emotional struggles and did better in distance learning (Larsen et al., 2021).

Students with Disabilities During the Pandemic

During the initial outbreak, the closing of schools often resulted in suspension or a reduction in services provided to students with disabilities (Grant, 2020; Jeste et al., 2020). Service providers such as special education teachers, physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech and language pathologists, and psychologists enable students to achieve their academic, functional, and social goals (Grant, 2020). Seventy-four percent of U.S. caregivers and 78% of caregivers outside the U.S. reported their child was no longer receiving at least one therapy or special education service (Jeste et al., 2020). For the families who continued to receive at least one service, caregivers reported challenges such as lack of clear guidelines, work at unacceptable levels or not differentiated, lack of access to resources, poor internet access, or in-home distractions (Greenway & Eaton-Thomas, 2020). In addition, caregivers expressed concern about support for their child's psychological needs, such as a lack of social interaction, a lack of routines, and the return to the structures and expectations of school (Greenway & Eaton-Thomas, 2020; Jeste et al., 2020). Caregivers also struggled with combining the demands of homeschooling their child with at least one disability with balancing existing commitments such as work or caring for others (Greenway & Eaton-Thomas, 2020; Jeste et al., 2020). These struggles caused feelings of anxiety, guilt, inadequacy, and exhaustion by the caregiver (Greenway & Eaton-Thomas, 2020).

Challenges Faced by Teachers

The closure of schools and numerous unknowns quickly disrupted the lives of teachers and staff. Teachers and staff struggled with changes in expectations and schedules, with not being able to reach children or had poor participation in online events, and with the impact of the virus on their families, friends, and community (Anderson et al., 2020). Some teachers and staff members also dealt directly with the illness (Anderson et al., 2020). Feeling isolated, teachers missed face-to-face interactions with their students and colleagues and worried about their most vulnerable students (EdWeek Research Center, 2020; Elgart, 2021; Kim & Ashbury, 2020). Overwhelmed by the situation, teachers and staff dealt with increased stress from social isolation, balancing work with their personal lives, and worrying about the children they could not reach (Anderson et al., 2020; Elgart, 2021).

On top of the stress brought by the disruption, the swift shift to distance learning brought immediate challenges as teachers quickly adapted lessons and learning activities for the new distance learning environment (Elgart, 2021). Teachers who moved online learned to utilize technology to connect with students and families and provide learning opportunities (EdWeek Research Center, 2020; Elgart, 2021). Throughout the initial shutdown of schools, teachers reported that the shift was demanding and required additional preparation time (EdWeek Research Center, 2020; Elgart, 2021). Between the time needed for teachers to learn new technology and their concerns with available family support, there may have been a tendency to reduce academic rigor so students could complete it independently (Elgart, 2021). Both families and teachers worried about learning loss and if the children would be ready for the next grade level (Andrew et al., 2020; Bloch, 2020; Elgart, 2021).

However, there were positives in the shift to online learning. Through technology, teachers found new ways to connect with students and their families (EdWeek Research Center, 2020; Elgart, 2021). According to Elgart (2021), as teachers connected, they developed more robust relationships and a better understanding of the diverse lives of their students. He said this experience made teachers more empathetic and concerned for the whole child. Teachers ensured they checked in with students and provided opportunities to visit and connect with their peers (EdWeek Research Center, 2020; Elgart, 2021).

During the lockdown and school closures due to the pandemic, teachers had extreme disruptions to their daily jobs, schedules, and presence in students' lives (Anderson et al., 2020). They struggled to shift to a remote learning environment that required new skills (Elgart, 2021). According to Elgart (2021), teachers reported feeling isolated and disconnected from their colleagues. Throughout this experience, teachers looked to school leadership for support, guidance, and direction (Anderson et al., 2020).

School Leaders' Response at the Beginning of the Coronavirus Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic brought an unprecedented crisis to schools, and school leaders responded. School leaders' first response focused on the health and well-being of their students, families, staff, and community (Anderson et al., 2020; Kaul et al., 2020). Concerned for their students' physical and socio-emotional well-being, school leaders, especially in high-poverty areas, felt responsible for their students, staff, and families (Anderson et al., 2020). They found themselves advocating for resources to ensure families had access to essential basic needs such as food and shelter (Anderson et al., 2020; Kaul et al., 2020). To reduce the impact of social isolation, school leaders found ways to increase connections and communication with families through phone calls, texts, social media, and video conferencing (Anderson et al., 2020).

However, caregiving did not stop with students and families. School leaders also supported overwhelmed and isolated teachers and staff by reaching out and checking in on them (Anderson et al., 2020). School leaders prioritized staff well-being in order to continue serving students and avoid staff burnout (Kim & Ashbury, 2020).

As school leaders met basic physical and psychological needs, their focus shifted to providing learning opportunities. Responses from districts varied and drove the type of work school leaders did (Hubbard et al., 2020). Influenced by available resources and the skills and knowledge of people, some school leaders worked collaboratively with district officials to provide access to technology and professional development for teachers (Hubbard et al., 2020). However, school leaders in districts with fewer resources found themselves working with businesses to obtain discounted and free devices and internet access for students and staff (Hubbard et al., 2020). Unfortunately, district and school leaders' quick decisions on home-learning activities may have exacerbated educational disparities between the impoverished and more affluent students during the lockdown (Andrew et al., 2020; Hubbard et al., 2020). Whether it was a decision to provide low-level cognitive paper packets or to delay the distribution of resources until enough devices were available for all children, district and school leaders may have unknowingly contributed to a gap in learning during the learning lockdown (Andrew et al., 2020; Hubbard et al., 2020; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021).

Frequent communication was essential with so many unknowns and rapidly changing information (Kaul et al., 2020; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). Consistent communication through various modalities became a critical responsibility for school leaders. Starting with existing systems and structures for reaching families and staff, school leaders quickly added new communication resources such as social media, YouTube videos, and radio (Kaul et al., 2020;

McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). Keeping everyone informed with the most current information was critical, so school leaders went to great lengths to prioritize communication (Kaul et al., 2020; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021).

As a decision-maker with ever-changing information, a communicator, and taking responsibility for others' well-being, the workload for school leaders was relentless during the pandemic lockdown (Anderson et al., 2020). As a result, school leaders reported feeling heightened stress levels as they faced the pressures of leading during a time of uncertainty (Anderson et al., 2020). Caring for and supporting families and staff while working from home and managing their own home and work-life balance was a never-ending responsibility (Anderson et al., 2020). School leaders engaged in crisis leadership during the pandemic for an extended time.

Reopening Schools During the Coronavirus Pandemic

After schools closed, district and school leaders began making decisions about reopening schools. They had to determine how to provide a learning environment that reduced the risk of exposure to the virus. Students and staff experienced an unprecedented event, and social, emotional, and academic needs varied based upon individual experiences (Minkos & Gelbar, 2021). School leaders determined how to return to learning by prioritizing students' and staff's health and safety, supporting students' social, emotional, and mental health, and identifying strategies for addressing any learning gaps that developed (Minkos & Gelbar, 2021).

As U.S. public schools returned to school in the fall of 2020, classroom instruction was either entirely in-person, hybrid, a combination of in-person and online learning, or entirely online. Given the complexity of education, community needs and preferences, and outbreak levels, district leaders had to weigh the benefits of in-person learning versus the risk of spreading

the COVID-19 virus in the school and community (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020). District and school leaders made decisions about instructional models, necessary changes to the structure of the school day, and how to adapt instructional practices (Schwartz et al., 2021).

District and school leaders had to consider school operations and the well-being of children and school personnel as they planned to return to in-person learning (Bailey & Hess, 2020). Preparing school operations included adapting to the evolving public health information and guidelines. Guidelines covered topics such as social distancing, suspending nonessential activities, hosting virtual meetings, cleaning, providing personal protective equipment, and accommodating families who decided to keep their children home (Bailey & Hess, 2020). Schools are essential for supplying students with meals, and district and school leaders had to ensure children had access to food, including those who chose to stay home (Bailey & Hess, 2020). District and school leaders also carefully coordinated, planned, and prepared to follow recommended mitigation strategies such as masks, social distancing, hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, cleaning, disinfecting, and contact tracing (CDC, 2020). Knowing schools could not prevent the COVID-19 virus, district and school leaders also expected and planned for COVID-19 cases and how to respond and mitigate further spread of the virus (CDC, 2020).

District and school leaders had to consider that each student and family experienced the pandemic differently. Students may have experienced trauma, social isolation, insecurity over family members losing jobs, the death of a loved one, or more. While supporting students dealing with these additional stressors is a shared responsibility with the community, school leaders needed to build social-emotional learning options and mental health support (Bailey & Hess, 2020). In addition to students' well-being, district and school leaders had to consider the

well-being of school personnel. There would be personnel more susceptible to the virus or in a high-risk category (Bailey & Hess, 2020). As certified teachers decided to retire or leave, replacements were hired (Bailey & Hess, 2020). Some districts had to consider and work within the constraints of collective bargaining agreements (Bailey & Hess, 2020).

With all these considerations, an estimated 38% of U.S. K–12 public school students returned to school in-person in the fall of 2020 (Roche, 2020). Schools in small towns and rural areas were more likely to return in-person, and public schools in urban areas were more likely to be fully online (Meckler, 2021; National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], 2021). The different offerings by community type and decisions by families highlighted a racial gap in opportunities to return to in-person learning. Black, Hispanic, and Asian students were more likely to be enrolled in online programming than their White counterparts (NAEP, 2021). Black, Hispanic, and Asian families primarily reside in large cities where schools delayed opening or families chose online learning because of the impact in their community (Meckler, 2021; NAEP, 2021). Asian families frequently live in a multigenerational home and were concerned for the health of elderly family members or feared racial harassment due to the virus having an association with China (Meckler, 2021).

By March of 2021, three-quarters of U.S. public schools had returned to in-person learning (NAEP, 2021). As a part of reintegrating students back into the classroom, schools needed to determine their students' academic needs as the disruption in learning created academic challenges for some students (Bailey & Hess, 2020). When planning for academics, school leaders made contingency plans should there be a need to return to online learning due to quarantines, an outbreak, or a rise in community cases (Bailey & Hess, 2020).

At the beginning of the 2021–2022 school year in the United States, the goal was for all schools to return to in-person learning. Approximately 96% of the schools opened for in-person learning, and the remaining schools were either hybrid or fully online (CDC, 2021). Some children had not been in a school environment for over a year.

The pandemic closed schools, increased the need for support, and changed the learning landscape. School leaders coordinated efforts with their district, community, and local health officials to support families and staff, implemented distance learning, and safely reopened schools. The pandemic caused leadership to lead through a crisis for an extended period.

Problem Statement

Throughout the history of public education in the United States, social, political, and environmental contexts have impacted the role of the principal in terms of time, priorities, and practices (Goldring et al., 2008; Lee & Hallinger, 2012). Between the spring of 2020 and through the fall of 2021, schooling was drastically changed for everyone. Principals operated under demanding and chaotic circumstances as they dealt with stopping face-to-face instruction, working in crisis leadership for an extended period, protecting people from potential harm, managing technology, supporting student and staff well-being, and reopening schools (Anderson et al., 2020; Harris, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020). During the pandemic, "the leadership terrain has dramatically and irrecoverably shifted" (Harris, 2020, p. 324). As principals led their schools within such a dramatically shifting environmental context, their understanding of their roles—what scholars across a number of fields call *professional identity* (Burke & Stets, 2009; Robertson, 2017b)—may also have shifted (Harris, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020).

Leadership studies on the impact of the pandemic are currently underway. Many appear to be focused on effective school crisis leadership, leading during disruptive times, and the

effects on specific subgroups (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). Harris (2020) indicated a shift in school leadership practices might be underway because of leading during the pandemic. A principal's leadership practices and decision-making are shaped to a large degree by their professional identity (Burke & Stets, 2009; Hallinger, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2020).

Professional identity influences a person's decisions, commitments, responses, and priorities and explains their choices (Crow & Møller, 2017). Situational experiences can affect a person's professional identity, causing them to change over time (Burke & Stets, 2009).

I contended that the influence of the pandemic on principals' professional identities had not been richly described. Mutch (2015) noted that "12–24 months after the onset of [a crisis seems] to be a useful time to start to review what has happened" (p. 187). The time of this study was the point to capture principals' perceptions of the influence that the pandemic had on their professional identities. There was much to learn about the impact of the pandemic on school leadership.

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to understand elementary school principals' perceptions of the influence that the COVID-19 pandemic had on their professional identities within the context of their school and community. Burke and Stets (2009) contended that a person's definition of their professional identity gradually shifts over time. However, when a situation conflicts with a professional identity, an individual may change the meaning assigned to the professional identity to reduce distress (Burke & Stets, 2009). The pandemic was an unprecedented situation experienced by the world. The research question for this study was as follows:

- Q1 How do elementary principals perceive the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on their professional identities?

Rationale and Significance of the Study

Contributing to the body of literature on the perceived influences the pandemic had on principals' professional identity had several implications. As noted above, the pandemic brought chaotic times to schools and caused principals to respond to different environmental contexts (Harris, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020; McElrath, 2020; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; UNESCO, 2021). Principals experienced the pandemic differently, leading to various perspectives. By understanding the pandemic influences on principals' identity, we gained insight into existing and changed views of school leadership.

I argued that it would be beneficial for school leaders at all levels, educational leadership faculty, and researchers to develop a mutual understanding of existing perspectives of principals' professional identity. With a shared understanding, we created an opportunity to learn from one another and take positive steps toward removing barriers in education. Principals' professional identity is shaped based on their understanding of their social, political, and environmental contexts (Burke & Stets, 2009; Hallinger, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2020). During the pandemic, principals responded differently based on their community's needs. This proposed research offered an opportunity to enhance our understanding of educational leadership, support principals in leading their schools, and potentially remove barriers within education.

Another implication was for educational leadership faculty to design programs to develop the capacities of new principals serving in a post-pandemic era. Harris and Jones (2020) stated that "most school leadership preparation and training programs prior to COVID-19 are likely to be out of step with the challenges facing school leaders today" (p. 245). Programs will need to encompass leadership skills and practices aligned with the post-pandemic era (Harris & Jones, 2020). This research offered an opportunity to provide educational leadership faculty insight into

principals' professional identities that drive decisions, priorities, and the selection of various practices.

A third implication of this proposed study was to inform future research. As insights about school leadership during the pandemic emerged, it would have been beneficial to understand how principals' professional identities may have been influenced (Burke & Stets, 2009; Harris & Jones, 2020). This research had the potential to support further research in understanding the influence a crisis or serious situation may have on professional identities.

Definition of Terms

Identity. "An identity is the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society [role identity], a member of a particular group [social identity], or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person [person identity]" (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 3).

Role. A role is a "set of expectations tied to a social position that guide people's attitudes and behavior" (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 114).

Role identity. Role identity is a set of "internalized meanings of a role that individuals apply to themselves" (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 114).

Professional identity. Professional identity is a set of internalized meanings comprised of a person's values, beliefs, knowledge, understandings, experiences, and wisdom assigned to their professional role (Burke & Stets, 2009; Robertson, 2017b).

City community. Territory that contains the primary population and economic center of a county with a population of more than 50,000 and has one or more adjacent communities that are highly integrated economically (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022a).

Suburb community. Territory with populations more than 50,000 that is near another territory with population greater than 50,000 (NCES, 2022a)

Town community. Territory with populations between 2,500 and 50,000 that is a distance from another territory with populations greater than 50,000 (NCES, 2022a)

Rural community. "Territory outside of an area with less than a population of 2,500 that is also a distance from another territory that has a population of 50,000 or more (NCES, 2022a)

Overview of the Methodology

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological design to investigate the research question. The COVID-19 pandemic was a worldwide event, and each person interpreted and gave meaning to their own lived experience. As such, a phenomenological study allowed me to generate a rich description of elementary principals' perceptions of the influence that the pandemic had on their professional identities. Participants for this phenomenological study were six public elementary principals who served before and during the pandemic and served the school year prior to the interviews.

Data collection for this study occurred through two separate semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with each participant. The first interview collected the primary data to drive the description. The second interview provided an opportunity to understand the participant's perspective further and for the participant to provide clarification and additional insights. During the second interview, the participant shared an artifact representing their professional identity. Also, I shared the initial patterns and themes from that participant's first interview as a method to verify the results. Qualitative data analysis involves making sense of the data to answer a research question (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). For this study, I utilized a thematic approach for analyzing the data to understand the participants' lived experiences.

Chapter Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has led school principals to lead under a different context for an extended period. This environmental context was not within their control and may have influenced their professional identity (Burke & Stets, 2009). This study aimed to contribute to the body of research on the influences the pandemic had on principals' professional identities. Chapter II reviews the literature by looking at the historical role of a school principal, crisis leadership, leading during the pandemic, and the nature of role identity. Chapter III outlines a research methodology for conducting this study. Chapter IV presents the findings from the interviews, and Chapter V discusses the findings and presents the conclusions of this study.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Chapter Overview

A literature review is needed to understand the influence a crisis may have on principals' professional identities. The literature review identified, analyzed, and synthesized relevant studies to develop a sharper and more insightful question (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The purpose of this study was to understand elementary school principals' perceptions of the influence that the COVID-19 pandemic had on their professional identities within the context of their school and community. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the following research question:

- Q1 How do elementary principals perceive the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on their professional identities?

This chapter begins by describing the method for conducting the literature review and is followed by a historical review of social and political influences on a principal's role and changes in diversity within the U.S. student population. A review of the available research regarding leading during a crisis, leading during the pandemic, the nature of role identity, identity construction and change, and adapting professional identity when leading in different contexts follows. Finally, a gap in the literature was identified. The literature presented in this chapter sought to illustrate the influences on principals' roles and identify a gap in the empirical literature to explain a need for further research in this area.

Literature Review Methods

Relevant studies for this literature review were identified by searching academic databases such as Sage, ERIC, and ProQuest using the University of Northern Colorado's Summon and Google Scholar search engines. Search terms were used within the databases to locate empirical studies and other literature related to the topic. Various combinations of the following terms were searched: professional identity, identity theory, crisis in school, crisis leadership, crisis management, school leadership during crisis, pandemic, COVID-19, H1N1 influenza pandemic, school leadership, and history of principals. Journal articles with a peer-review process were prioritized. I also examined the reference lists in articles and books, which led to original studies and additional research related to this topic.

Historical Look at Social, Governmental, and Community Influences

Social, political, and environmental contexts have influenced education in the United States since the late 19th century (Hallinger, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2020; Rousmaniere, 2013). Therefore, it is beneficial to conduct a brief historical review of a principal's role in the United States to understand how social, political, and environmental contexts have influenced their roles and responsibilities (Clayton, 2011; Goldring et al., 2008; Hallinger, 2016; Lee & Hallinger, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2020; Mutch, 2015; Pollock & Briscoe, 2020; Rousmaniere, 2013). Governmental policies determined which educational outcomes were considered the highest priority (Hallinger, 2016; Rousmaniere, 2013). Family and community involvement in schools and local economic status drove needs, resources, constraints, and opportunities (Hallinger, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2020; Rousmaniere, 2013).

School districts assumed responsibility for schools from the late 19th to the early 20th century as communities grew (Rousmaniere, 2013). Principals ensured teachers met district and

community expectations (Rousmaniere, 2013). While, in theory, a principal managed teachers within their school, each school district office and school board had their vision for distributing responsibilities (Rousmaniere, 2013). Principals' primary duties were maintaining order and discipline (Rousmaniere, 2013). As school districts began imposing expectations around standardized curriculum and teaching practices, principals ensured teachers met district expectations (Rousmaniere, 2013).

After World War II, communities expected principals to be civically responsible for upholding and maintaining community norms, civic obedience, social order, and social conformity by enforcing rules on students' and teachers' behavior (Rousmaniere, 2013). A school district's and community's expectations defined principals' roles and responsibilities as an authoritarian supervisory role emphasizing compliance and building management through the mid-20th century (Rousmaniere, 2013).

By the mid-1950s, social change and new government requirements began to influence change in the principal's role in the United States (Goodwin et al., 2005). The Civil Rights movement, government influences, and student activism changed the context in which principals operated (Goodwin et al., 2005; Rousmaniere, 2013). With new civil rights policies such as desegregation, principals became responsible for the "translation of civil rights policy into civil rights practice" (Rousmaniere, 2013, p. 115). Principals were responsible for racial integration as student populations diversified through desegregation after the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision by the United States Supreme Court (Goodwin et al., 2005; Rousmaniere, 2013). As principals integrated new racial and ethnic groups and cultures into their schools, they may have experienced resistance from school norms, staff attitudes, and particular families or community groups (Rousmaniere, 2013; Theoharis, 2008). Diversified enrollment and

community expectations made consensus and trust more difficult to achieve, increased conflicts, and impacted the success or failure of racial integration within schools (Rousmaniere, 2013).

Students engaged in activism and protests associated with civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements during this era, and new cultural norms were established (Rousmaniere, 2013). Increased protests and boycotts on school grounds required principals to plan for and address conflict within schools (Rousmaniere, 2013). Principals prepared for emergencies, managed public relations, and communicated with students, staff, and families (Rousmaniere, 2013). At the same time, the community expected principals to address teen pregnancy, drug usage, and an increased view of disrespectful behaviors (Rousmaniere, 2013). With changing times and increased scrutiny from families, students, and administration, the perception was principals were both responsible for causing disorderly schools and capable of solving social problems by fixing the school (Rousmaniere, 2013; Steeves et al., 2009).

As principals managed racial integration, activism, protests, and changing cultural norms, the United States entered the space race with the Soviet Union. In response to the Soviet Union's first satellite, *Sputnik*, society developed a fear that public schools were academically insufficient, particularly in math and science (Steeves et al., 2009). The shared belief was that the Soviet Union beat the United States to space because of better schools (Steeves et al., 2009). Fear of failed schools started a paradigm shift for increased federal involvement through education policy (Steeves et al., 2009). The National Defense Education Act of 1958 increased federal involvement by funding science and technology, foreign language education, and other subjects to improve the American military and economic strength (Rousmaniere, 2013). Principals became involved in the expenditure of funds to purchase new equipment and training teachers (Goodwin et al., 2005).

Since then, federal and state policies have driven the expectations and work of school principals. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 provided Title I funding to ensure children of low-income families had a fair and equitable opportunity to access high-quality education (CDE, 2021). This law challenged school leaders to develop programming to meet the needs of their students (Wolfe, 1965). Next, Education Amendments of 1972 forbid discrimination based on gender in schools and education facilities that receive federal money (Essex, 2011; Fins, 1974). Principals were expected to ensure their school was free from gender discrimination in areas that included admissions, hiring, access to courses, curriculum materials, employment, awards, and extracurricular activities (Fins, 1974). In 1975, Congress enacted the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Essex, 2011; Goodwin et al., 2005). This act has been amended several times and has become known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990. IDEA provided free and appropriate public education for children with disabilities, increased parent rights, and allowed families to sue school districts (Essex, 2011). Principals were now responsible for ensuring that students with disabilities received the required programming as outlined in each child's Individual Education Program. Principals took on a program manager role as they managed the implementation and compliance of federally sponsored, funded, and mandated legislation (Hallinger, 1992).

The 1980s brought another shift in principal roles. Principals became viewed as influential and responsible for improving schools, and their role grew to include instructional leadership (Goodwin et al., 2005; Hallinger, 1992). Hallinger (1992) described instructional leadership as having high expectations for teachers and students, providing supervision of classroom instruction, coordinating the school's curriculum, and closely monitoring student

progress. Principals were expected to be knowledgeable about curriculum and instruction and make instructional improvements by intervening with teachers (Hallinger, 1992).

In 1983, *A Nation at Risk*, a federal report, triggered a shift from civil rights to a focus on school performance (Rousmaniere, 2013). *A Nation at Risk* created a connection between education and economic success by describing the purpose of education in economic terms and as an essential part of the international economic competition (Mehta, 2013). Economic success was described as dependent on the quality of human capital, and schools were responsible for improving human capital (Mehta, 2013). In addition, the report described a perceived problem that schools were mediocre and, therefore, a national economic risk (Mehta, 2013; Rousmaniere, 2013). As a result of *A Nation at Risk*, the belief that schools should be accountable to the public for student performance because they are publicly funded entities intensified (Gosnell-Lamb et al., 2013).

As the United States discussed *A Nation at Risk*, a declining public view of education developed and became the foundation for future legislation that drove new policies and legislation (Mehta, 2013). The federal government continued to influence education through The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (Rousmaniere, 2013). NCLB replaced the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Rousmaniere, 2013). While Title I funding for disadvantaged students remained, this legislation focused on improving the performance of all students through higher standards (Mehta, 2013). High-stakes testing in reading and math and penalties for schools that failed to meet Adequate Yearly Progress became a part of education (Gosnell-Lamb et al., 2013; Rousmaniere, 2013), and the concept of school accountability spread across the United States (Mehta, 2013). For states to receive federal funding and schools to remain under local control, school districts and states were required to meet federal mandates

(Gosnell-Lamb et al., 2013). While previously, schools were accountable to local school boards, NCLB shifted accountability to the state level (Mehta, 2013).

As a result of NCLB and state accountability policies, principals took on different roles and responsibilities as they navigated through this different context. School leaders became responsible for addressing the performance of all students on standardized tests (Mehta, 2013). In response to this responsibility, principals reshaped school culture based on standards reform and assessment (Rousmaniere, 2013). According to a study by Gosnell-Lamb et al. (2013), before NCLB, principals reported focusing on leadership activities that promoted excellence through teacher support and serving as instructional leaders (Gosnell-Lamb et al., 2013). However, after NCLB, principals reported spending more time on managerial tasks associated with student achievement, test scores, compliance, and state standards (Gosnell-Lamb et al., 2013). Many schools moved toward test preparation and district-wide curriculum, which required principals to manage the fidelity of curriculum implementation (Rousmaniere, 2013). However, community and teacher expectations restricted or limited principals' actions (Lytle, 2012; Rousmaniere, 2013), leaving principals to serve as an intermediary between the community, district office, and the classroom teachers (Spillane et al., 2002).

Federal involvement in education did not stop. In 2009, the Obama administration introduced the Race to the Top program (Viteritti, 2012). Race to the Top aimed to improve education through revised testing and standards, modified teacher evaluations, and increased choice by removing limits on charter schools (Viteritti, 2012). Teacher evaluation systems were redesigned in response to the changing national and state policies (Assunção Flores & Derrington, 2017). According to a study by Assunção Flores and Derrington (2017), principals expressed a challenge of balancing the conflicting roles of maintaining a positive, collaborative

culture and complying with the state-mandated teacher evaluation system. As principals integrated the new evaluation system, they may have relied on positive relationships with teachers as they guided this mandated change (Assunção Flores & Derrington, 2017). However, principals expressed concerns that the new evaluation system was driven by evaluation and judgment and reduced their professional, supportive leadership roles (Wieczorek et al., 2018). Once again, principals shifted their school cultures as they responded to changes in policy (Lee & Lee, 2020). They relied on relationships with teachers to influence, persuade, and gain cooperation (Lytle, 2012).

As the federal and state governments became more involved in education and public views of education deteriorated, principals found themselves taking on new roles. They found themselves concerned with school rankings, performance frameworks, finding additional funds through grants, promoting their schools, and monitoring enrollment (Anderson & Cohen, 2015; Cohen, 2014). Principals found themselves pressured to promote their school and manage their community's impressions as they counteract negative perceptions and competition for student enrollment through school choice programs (Cohen, 2014). Between 1970 and the early 2000s, principals' roles centered around meeting the "demands from multiple constituencies outside of their building" (Rousmaniere, 2013, p. 151). They faced "increased expectations for school improvement, demanding social pressures, and conflict between the roles of instructional leader, organizational leader, community leader, and strategic leader" (Goodwin et al., 2005, p. 7).

Before the pandemic, principals navigated their way through social, political, and environmental contexts and focused on positioning a school for the future (Smith & Riley, 2012). Principals were expected to influence the quality of education by supporting and empowering staff to pursue teaching and learning excellence and were considered vital to school

improvement efforts (Leithwood et al., 2020; Smith & Riley, 2012). Established leadership practices may have included direction setting, building relationships, developing people, developing the organization to support desired instructional practices, and improving instructional programming (Leithwood et al., 2020). Principals strove to improve learning indirectly through staff motivation, increasing staff ability, and improving working conditions (Leithwood et al., 2020). School leaders may have used a distributed leadership model either formally or informally to engage the expertise of their staff (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Increasing Diversity in Student Population

Governmental and community contexts were not the only influences on educational leadership. Over time, diversity among student populations increased, and principals recognized the need to support all student groups (Pollock & Briscoe, 2020). Educational diversity has been defined as the differences between individuals or groups of people from a social and educational perspective (Pollock & Briscoe, 2020). In education, diversity is frequently viewed as differences in ethnicity, race, and culture (Pollock & Briscoe, 2020). However, differences between individuals or groups of people expand further, including gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status (Pollock & Briscoe, 2020). While any one of these differences may have changed the context of the school and a principal's responsibilities, students with low socioeconomic status were more likely to perform lower academically than their peers with a higher socioeconomic status (Clayton, 2011).

In 2019, the U.S. child poverty rate was 15.7% and increased to 17.5% in 2020 (Chen & Thomson, 2021), leaving more children at risk. Students living in poverty are less likely to be school-ready and have an increased risk of poor academic achievement and school failure

(Ainscow, 2016; Clayton, 2011; Ferguson et al., 2007). With the potential negative impact on learning that poverty brings to students, Pollock and Briscoe (2020) reported that principals may be taking a more active role in some low-economic communities and dedicating more time to support students and families. They help their schools provide students and families access to free meals, community resources, and professional services (Pollock & Briscoe, 2020). In addition, according to Woods and Martin (2016), principals may take on roles that support educating the whole child and building a synergy of expectations when working in high-poverty areas.

For example, as a part of educating the whole child, a principal may ensure their school provides resources to meet basic needs, extends academic time and access to intervention, emphasizes reading, and builds relationships between students and teachers (Woods & Martin, 2016). The principal may establish consistent student expectations, increase staff accountability, and boost community involvement to build synergy in expectations (Woods & Martin, 2016). For schools to provide additional academic and non-academic supports, principals connected, coordinated, and managed resources beyond the instruction and academic learning (Pollock & Briscoe, 2020). As the number of students living in poverty increased during the early 21st century, students' ethnic and racial diversity also shifted.

Between 2010 and 2019, children in the United States became more racially and ethnically diverse (United States Census Bureau, 2021). According to the 2000 Census, the number of births to families who identify with a non-White race exceeded the number of White births, and immigration increased (Clayton, 2011). As diversity within a student population increases, principals are challenged to meet the various cultural and ethnic student needs and support potential shifts in school culture (Clayton, 2011; Thijs & Verkuyten, 2014). Principals

continued the work of integrating multicultural education, building inclusive school identities, and developing different student-teacher relationships (Thijs & Verkuyten, 2014). Unfortunately, poverty has been frequently intertwined with ethnic and racial diversity creating even more challenges for principals to overcome (Pollock & Briscoe, 2020).

Another aspect of diversity to consider is physical and intellectual ability. Principals' perspectives of special education impact students with disabilities (Cobb, 2015). Through legislation such as IDEA and increased accountability systems during the late 1900s and early 2000s, a principal's special education role became multifaceted and required increased time and energy (Cobb, 2015). To integrate a system of academic and social support, principals expected to take on various responsibilities to ensure students with disabilities were appropriately educated (Cobb, 2015; DiPaola et al., 2004). Some of the responsibilities may have been to develop an inclusive program, a collaborative culture, and family partnerships (Cobb, 2015; DiPaola et al., 2004). Principals were expected to serve as visionaries, advocates, and organizers to develop an inclusive culture where all students could succeed (Cobb, 2015; DiPaola et al., 2004). Some principals utilized a collaborative leadership style to facilitate and model for staff an environment that fostered inclusive special education programming (Cobb, 2015). Principals who saw themselves as visionaries, partners, and coaches strived to develop positive, open climates that nurtured teachers and created partnerships among teachers and support staff (Cobb, 2015; DiPaola et al., 2004). Through day-to-day activities, principals were expected to establish a presence in the school to signal accessibility and availability to students, teachers, and support staff (Sider et al., 2017). Engaging families of students with disabilities as partners was another responsibility principals may have taken on. Through listening, encouraging collaboration, and

negotiation, principals could create opportunities for shared decision-making about programming and placement (Cobb, 2015).

School diversity encompasses a complicated interrelationship between a broad range of principal roles and responsibilities balanced with their community's needs and beliefs. Also, families and the community may scrutinize and challenge principals to lead their schools in specific ways (Pollock & Briscoe, 2020). In response, principals make sense of diversity within their school environment and community context to lead in potential equitable and inclusive ways (Leithwood et al., 2020; Pollock & Briscoe, 2020). Their priorities and beliefs about barriers and available resources influence their leadership practices and the work of their staff (Ainscow, 2016; Pollock & Briscoe, 2020).

Leading During a Crisis

Another influence on school leadership is crises. Crises that close schools are not new to the K–12 education system in the United States. Most urban K–12 schools in the United States closed for an extended period during the 1918–19 influenza pandemic (Stern et al., 2009). In 1999, Columbine High School closed for the remainder of the school year after a mass shooting (K12 Academics, 2021). Hurricane Katrina impacted over 90,000 square miles in 2005, damaged or destroyed homes and schools, and left children and teachers vulnerable (Ward & Shelley, 2008). In May of 2009, 726 U.S. schools closed for several weeks due to a new strain of influenza (A/H1N1) (Stern et al., 2009).

A crisis is defined as "an urgent situation that requires immediate and decisive action by an organization and, in particular, by the organization's leaders" (Smith & Riley, 2012, p. 58). As an urgent situation, a crisis is unexpected and possibly unprecedented (Smith & Riley, 2012). There is little time to respond, and principals must take decisive actions (Wang, 2008). While a

low probability of a specific crisis occurring exists, there is a potentially high impact on the organization and stakeholders (Wang, 2008). The pandemic was an example of a world crisis impacting education. A world pandemic in a global economy was unprecedented and required decisive actions that impacted educators, students, families, and stakeholders.

Smith and Riley (2012) studied the attributes and skills of school leadership necessary during a crisis. In an emergency, the context of school leadership changes from planning for the future to a focus on current events, assessing students, staff, and family needs, and anticipating potential consequences (Potter et al., 2021; Smith & Riley, 2012). Even though school leaders are subject to the same physiological responses as others within the community, they are expected to remain in control and respond rationally (Mutch, 2015). School leaders need to be sensitive to vague, ambivalent, and contradictory data and respond without information (Smith & Riley, 2012). During the 2009 H1N1 outbreak in Australia, school leaders relied on instructions from the local health officials due to leaders' limited prior experience and knowledge (Braunack-Mayer et al., 2013). When the two groups worked together closely to prepare information and delivery, results were more effective (Braunack-Mayer et al., 2013). However, families were confused when the two groups did not work together closely (Braunack-Mayer et al., 2013). Students, families, and staff viewed Australian school leadership teams as authoritative information sources despite not being infectious disease experts (Braunack-Mayer et al., 2013).

Smith and Riley (2012) reported that school leaders need to adapt quickly and make clear and decisive decisions as the latest information becomes available. School leaders also need to consider communities' views as decisions are made (Braunack-Mayer et al., 2013). Smith and Riley stated that "clear, open, and timely communication" (p. 64) reduced confusion, rumors, and misinformation. When the media became aware of a school closing in Australia before the

principal, staff, and students, considerable confusion resulted (Braunack-Mayer et al., 2013). The principal had to divide their attention, creating more work (Braunack-Mayer et al., 2013). Crisis leadership requires communication skills to ensure all stakeholders receive "clear, concise, relevant, accurate, and timely information" (Smith & Riley, 2012, p. 68).

A school's values and its leader's values become evident during a crisis (Smith & Riley, 2012). According to Braunack-Mayer et al. (2013), trust and a duty to care for and protect the community are essential values during a crisis. A leader needs to demonstrate concern for the welfare of their students, staff, and community (Smith & Riley, 2012). During the H1N1 virus outbreak in New Zealand, trust was an underlying value that supported smooth and effective school closures (Braunack-Mayer et al., 2013). When a student's death occurred at a school event in New Zealand, the established trust, respect, and relationships carried the school through the tragic time (Mutch, 2015). When the Christchurch earthquake occurred, teachers and support staff automatically looked after children and comforted them until they reunited with their families (Mutch, 2015). The focus was on people (Mutch, 2015). A crisis can bring a sense of community by responding to shared experiences (Stuart et al., 2013).

Unfortunately, crises also can exacerbate vulnerabilities for some groups or communities (Stuart et al., 2013). Whether it is not having current contact information or family's inflexible work schedules and need for childcare, school leaders need to reflect on ways a crisis may exacerbate social isolation (Stuart et al., 2013). According to Stuart et al. (2013), during a crisis, principals' legal requirements, their knowledge and understanding of their school community, and the nature of the event itself contextualize their decision-making (Stuart et al., 2013). Even with planning, principals' decision-making and communication skills are critical in a time of crisis (Stuart et al., 2013).

Leading During the Coronavirus Pandemic

Research on principal leadership during the pandemic was starting to be conducted at the time of this study. In an early report, Longmuir (2021) identified four responsibilities that school principals took on during the pandemic lockdown: (a) connecting to the community, (b) decision-making and communicating, (c) prioritizing care and compassion, and (d) looking for the possibilities and potentials. Principals developed a heightened understanding of the importance of connecting to the community (Longmuir, 2021). They found the need to support students, teachers, and families during that ambiguous and unprecedented situation (Longmuir, 2021). Principals demonstrated resilience by being available, being a stable and calm source, and offering a positive attitude (Longmuir, 2021). During the lockdown, some principals identified stronger relationships between their schools and communities (Longmuir, 2021).

A shift in principals' communication roles also occurred during the pandemic (Longmuir, 2021; Thornton, 2021). Before the pandemic, principals may have utilized a consultive process and sought input before making decisions (Longmuir, 2021). However, during the pandemic lockdown, this role shifted to an independent decision-maker in order to act as quickly as possible (Longmuir, 2021; Thornton, 2021). Principals had to be willing to put out their messages and change them as the latest information became available (Longmuir, 2021). Communication had to be frequent and clear to establish transparency and maintain trust (Thornton, 2021). In addition, principals sought different communication methods for connecting with students, families, and staff, such as social media, radio, virtual meetings, and recorded messages (Thornton, 2021). As the pandemic wore on, principals found a balance between independent decision making, when decisions needed to be made quickly, and utilizing distributed leadership (Thornton, 2021). Principals used a distributed model, when possible, to

build trust among staff and the community (Thornton, 2021). For some principals, their communication included a message that we are all in this together to help build a school-community connection (Longmuir, 2021).

Care and compassion for staff and students became a priority (Longmuir, 2021; Thornton, 2021). Principals demonstrated empathy by proactively checking in with staff, listening, and acknowledging teachers' challenges (Longmuir, 2021; Thornton, 2021). Connecting students and staff also helped boost morale (Thornton, 2021). In addition, principals helped meet the community's foundational needs, such as access to free meals and technology (Thornton, 2021). Longmuir (2021) described it as a return to "humanizing the purpose of education" (p. 11).

As principals planned to re-open schools, they recognized there were possibilities and potential transformations for education based on the experience of using different approaches that worked. For some, this led to a sense of optimism and enthusiasm based on staff and a community's willingness to accept new and diverse ways of learning (Longmuir, 2021; Thornton, 2021). Thornton (2021) found that leading through the lockdown required flexibility and adaptability for quick changes and developed an optimism for transforming education based on new skills, resources, and information.

Nature of Role Identity

As elementary principals lead through the pandemic, the question arose as to what influence this experience may have had on their professional identity. This study focused primarily on a principal's role (professional) identity rather than their social (member of a particular group) or person identity (characteristics that identify them as a unique person, Burke & Stets, 2009). A role is defined by "social expectations that guide a person's attitudes and

behaviors" (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 114). People take on various roles in their daily life such as a parent, child, athlete, artist, home-keeper, etc. According to Burke and Stets (2009), individuals create their role identity by using social expectations to "internalize meanings of a role" (p. 114) and "apply them to themselves" (p. 114). Since identity is based upon an individual's meaning, role identities have many meanings (Burke & Stets, 2009). One individual may describe the nature of a role identity one way, while others would explain the same role identity differently (Burke & Stets, 2009).

Professional identity is a subset of role identity focused on a person's profession. A professional identity is a set of internalized meanings comprised of a person's values, beliefs, knowledge, understandings, experiences, and wisdom assigned to their professional role (Burke & Stets, 2009; Robertson, 2017b). Principals take on different professional roles as they engage in daily activities because they work with various people in different contexts throughout the day (Burke & Stets, 2009; Ryan, 2007; Scribner & Crow, 2012). For example, a principal may self-identify as a teacher at heart, role model, disciplinarian, mentor, salesperson, or mediator (Scribner & Crow, 2012). As a role model for children, a principal may take responsibility for demonstrating integrity, work ethic, leadership, and what it means to be an adult (Scribner & Crow, 2012). Hence, children may see that "school can help them become contributing members of society" (Scribner & Crow, 2012, p. 258).

Since individuals take on different professional roles with different audiences and social contexts, the nature of their professional identity is influenced by their past and current selves (Ryan, 2007). For example, while a principal may see themselves as a teacher in one setting and a student in another environment, their identity will be linked to their past experiences (Ryan, 2007). Professional identity is complex and frequently related to a person's other role, social, and

person identities (Burke & Stets, 2009). For example, a principal may connect to their role as a parent, teacher, and taxpayer. While this study will focus on the meaning that elementary principals assign to their professional identity as a principal, one must remember that an individual exists within the context of their social structure, creating a link between the two (Burke & Stets, 2009).

Identity Construction and Change

The construction of one's professional identity is an emotional, cognitive, and values-informed process that is influenced by a person's efforts, past, present, as well as national and local cultural and policy contexts (Crow et al., 2017). Principals define their professional identity within the "context of their school communities, personal backgrounds, and historical settings" (Crow et al., 2017, p. 273). Their professional identities are "affirmed, rejected, negotiated, or even revised through interactions with others" (Crow et al., 2017, p. 273). While professional identity is embedded in personal and social culture, it is a continuous work in progress (Crow et al., 2017). One's professional identity evolves through self-negotiation based on the different contexts in which one lives, works, and plays (Crow & Møller, 2017; Crow et al., 2017). For example, principals may evolve their professional identity definition based on their experiences with teachers, families, students, administration, and, while more distant, policymakers (Crow et al., 2017). However, this does not mean that professional identity is in a constant state of fluctuation (Burke & Stets, 2009). Since there is constancy within one's social life around groups and networks, there is a relatively organized nature to professional identity (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

According to Burke and Stets (2009), changes in professional identities are gradual, cumulate over time, and typically are not noticeable except over long periods such as weeks,

months, or even years. They reported that identity might change because of one of four conditions. These are (a) changes in the situation, (b) conflict between two identities held by an individual, (c) conflict between the meanings of an individual's behavior and the meanings in their identity standard, and (d) negotiation and the presence of others (Burke & Stets, 2009). This study will focus primarily on changes in the situation. When an assigned meaning of professional identity and a situation does not match, a person experiences distress and uncertainty (Burke & Stets, 2009). Usually, one would attempt to change the situation to confirm or verify their identity (Burke & Stets, 2009). However, when a situation cannot be changed, such as in a traumatic experience, the meaning assigned to the identity needs to change to reduce distress (Burke & Stets, 2009). Change in a situation may have profound effects and alter people's behavior patterns (Burke & Stets, 2009). Examples of changes in a situation include living in New Orleans when it was devastated by a hurricane, losing a home (Burke & Stets, 2009), or a worldwide lockdown due to a global pandemic. A person may assign a new meaning to an identity under a different context (Burke & Stets, 2009).

Adapting Professional Identity when Leading in Different Contexts

Research studies regarding school leaders' professional identities primarily focus on the evolution of principals' professional identities. While research regarding a crisis influencing professional identities could not be located, it is beneficial to review the literature of principals' professional identities being affected as they adapt to their school and community's social context or a situation.

Cruz-González et al. (2020) examined the factors that influenced the construction of a principal's leadership identity over time. Through a biographical narrative approach, Cruz-González et al. told the story of a female principal who related some of her vital life experiences

and how they influenced her professional identity. As a child, the participant's family was committed to her education (Cruz-González et al., 2020). She attributed her values of responsibility, respect, and solidarity to her family. However, she grew up in a patriarchal society that educated children based on their gender (Cruz-González et al., 2020). Through this experience, she also recognized discrepancies and developed a conscience toward social injustices (Cruz-González et al., 2020). Later, she was challenged to open an adult education center that served a culturally diverse population that had experienced inequalities in education (Cruz-González et al., 2020). She "reconstructed her professional teaching identity and assumed a role oriented towards social justice" (Cruz-González et al., 2020, p. 400). Later in her career, while serving in a union role, she experienced gender discrimination and renegotiated her professional identity to consolidate her values of democracy, social justice, and professional commitment (Cruz-González et al., 2020). This discrimination experience is an example of not changing the situation, so she redefined her professional identity based upon the situation. Her new leadership identity was based on empathy and community (Cruz-González et al., 2020). Cruz-González et al. reported that challenging contexts influenced her professional identities.

In another study, Robertson (2018) sought to understand a principal's perceptions of identity and change. Through this case study, Robertson "illustrated the tension that can result when identity and values are challenged in the face of change" (p. 37). The participant perceived challenges with her changing role as principal because of New Zealand's Tomorrow's Schools initiative (Robertson, 2018). When feeling overwhelmed, she utilized her autonomy to find a middle ground to work and promoted her values and a culture of teamwork and collaboration (Robertson, 2018). As the participant's role changed, she thought more strategically, managed her emotions, and developed confidence (Robertson, 2018). The participant's professional

identity evolved through new experiences and reflective practices (Robertson, 2018). According to Robertson, by engaging in professional practices, a person's professional identity "continues to develop and change even for experienced principals" (p. 44).

A Gap in the Literature

Crow et al. (2002) contend that a principal's role reshapes through tensions between stability and change within a situation. This reshaping may result from demands within the school environment or outside the school (Crow et al., 2002). The pandemic brought external environmental challenges to schools (Harris & Jones, 2020). As principals responded to the context of the pandemic, their roles and professional identities were potentially influenced. I contend that elementary school principals' perceptions of the influence of the pandemic on their professional identities within the context of their school and community have not been richly described. We have much to learn about the impact of the pandemic on school leadership.

Chapter Summary

The literature review looked at various social, governmental, and environmental influences on a school principal's role and the nature of professional identity. The COVID-19 pandemic began impacting leaders in March 2020. There was a gap in the literature to understand how this impact may have influenced a principal's professional identity. This qualitative study aimed to understand elementary school principals' perceptions of the influence that the COVID-19 pandemic had on their professional identities within the context of their school and community.

CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY
Chapter Overview

This chapter describes the methodology I used for this study and the rationale behind my decisions for the design. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand elementary school principals' perceptions of the influence that the COVID-19 pandemic had on their professional identities within the context of their school and community. The pandemic was a worldwide event, and each person had their own experience. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret and assign meaning to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A phenomenological study allowed for a deeper understanding of how principals interpreted and constructed meaning to their lived experiences during the pandemic that may have influenced their professional identity. The research question I investigated through this phenomenological study was as follows:

Q1 How do elementary principals perceive the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on their professional identities?

This chapter begins by describing the research design that includes the epistemological view, theoretical perspective, and an in-depth explanation of the phenomenological approach within the context of this study. The setting, participants, data collection, and data analysis are presented. This chapter concludes with a discussion of ethics, trustworthiness, limitations, and my positionality.

Research Design

As described in the introduction, schools responded in diverse ways as the world faced the pandemic. Principals experienced the pandemic differently, and their individual experiences may have influenced their professional identity (Burke & Stets, 2009; Hallinger, 2016; Harris, 2020; Leithwood et al., 2020). I utilized a phenomenological study to make meaning out of principals' lived experiences and the perceived influence on their professional identities due to the pandemic. The overall purpose of qualitative research is to understand how people make sense of their lives, explain their process for making meaning, and describe how people interpret their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

This study was based on the epistemological perspective of social constructivism. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe social constructivism as a way that "individuals seek to understand the world in which they live and work" (p. 34). This philosophical perspective is rooted in the idea that historical and social perspectives influence individuals' abilities to make sense of their world (Crotty, 1998). Through social interactions, individuals develop subjective meanings of their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study sought to draw out principals' perceived understanding of the influences the COVID-19 pandemic had on their lived experiences through conversations and reflection. Through the lens of social constructivism, a researcher's role is to understand the complexity of the participants' views and help make meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

For this study, interpretivism was the theoretical perspective. This theoretical perspective is primarily connected to the social sciences because it is an approach that aims to understand and potentially explain (Crotty, 1998). Crotty (1998) described the interpretivist approach as one that "looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world"

(p. 67). In interpretivism, social reality results from individuals interpreting the meaning of actions and situations in their world (Crotty, 1998). This study sought to understand principals' perceptions of the influences that the pandemic had on their professional identity. This study assumed that principals' interpretations of the COVID-19 pandemic were influenced by the various personal, educational, social, and political contexts in which they experienced the pandemic.

I used a phenomenological study to investigate the research question. Phenomenology explores one's lived experience to understand the interpretation and make sense of its assigned meaning (Crotty, 1998). A phenomenological study looks for and describes potential common meanings people have given to their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, the phenomenon was professional identity as influenced by leading a school during the pandemic. A phenomenological study is appropriate as principals had a common experience leading during the pandemic.

In phenomenology, the researcher explores their own experiences to become aware of personal prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions and sets them aside (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crotty, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this study, I used the bridling strategy instead of traditional bracketing. Self-exploration allows the researcher to focus on the participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crotty, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Since principals had individual experiences that were influenced based on their school and community context, interviews were utilized to develop an understanding of the essence of their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crotty, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this study, participants were public elementary school principals who served before and during the pandemic and continued to serve in this role in a Colorado school in the 2021-22 school year.

Research Setting

When selecting participants, balance and variety are essential for creating a rich description (Stake, 1995). The setting for this study was public elementary schools. A public school was defined as operating with public funds and being open to all students. Over 88% of U.S. students attended a public school (NCES, 2019a), and public schools served a wider diversity of students (NCES, 2019b). Between the fall of 2000 and 2015, public schools served an increasing number of students who identified as Hispanic, Black, Asian, and with two or more races (NCES, 2019b). In this same period, the number of students who identified as White decreased (NCES, 2019b).

According to a study by Tomasik et al. (2020), elementary-age students' learning appeared to have slowed during the lockdown. While distance learning seemed to have been a valid alternative during the pandemic, not all elementary students may have benefited at the same level (Tomasik et al., 2020). There may have been several contributing factors for children this age, such as levels of family support, needs for scaffolding, development of executive functions and self-regulation, or cognitive, motivational, and social-emotional factors (Tomasik et al., 2020). In their study, secondary students appeared to fare better. Given the potential differences between elementary and secondary experiences, this study focused on elementary principals' perspectives.

According to a report by Schwartz et al. (2021), there appeared to be a difference in learning experiences between rural and city schools during the 2020–2021 school year. Rural districts were more likely to offer entirely in-person learning, and district leadership perceived a higher rate of family and teacher support for in-person learning (Schwartz et al., 2021). However, city districts were more likely to use online learning, and district leadership perceived

a lower rate of family and teacher support for in-person learning (Schwartz et al., 2021). According to their study, districts that provided hybrid or online learning were more likely to "shorten the school day, cut instructional time, and cut some non-core courses" (p. 20). Since city schools were more likely to use online learning, they were more likely to have less instructional time than in-person districts (Schwartz et al., 2021). Suburban districts fell somewhere between rural and city districts with their use of in-person versus hybrid or online (Schwartz et al., 2021). Since the pandemic played out differently in rural, town, suburban, and city contexts, it was beneficial to understand principals' perceptions within these different contexts. While city educators may not identify with examples from rural schools and vice versa, many educators find situational commonalities (Stake, 1995). They are surprised to find their challenges in the lives of others (Stake, 1995). The setting for this study included rural, town, suburban, and city communities in Colorado.

Colorado's school districts represented four community types, rural, town, suburban, and city. One hundred forty-nine districts were classified as town or rural and comprised 16% of the student enrollment (CDE, 2022). Sixteen districts were classified as suburban and represented 28% of the 2020–21 student enrollment, and 15 districts were in cities and represented 55% of the 2020-21 student enrollment (CDE, 2022). While the number of students enrolled in Colorado schools increased between 1993 and 2021, Colorado saw a change in the racial makeup of students. The percentage of students who identified as Asian, Hispanic, or as two or more races increased, and the percentage of students who identified as Black or White decreased (CDE, 2022). In addition to demographic considerations, reopening decisions were made at the individual district level (Education Week, 2021). Districts utilized a variety of plans for returning to school for the 2020–21 school year, including online, hybrid, and in-person (Pawl & Bitler,

2020). The diversity of this setting allowed for rich descriptions to develop and provided insight into perceived influences on principals' professional identity.

Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants for this phenomenological study and involved intentionally selecting individuals to learn and understand the central phenomenon (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The first step in purposeful sampling was identifying the selection criteria based on attributes that assisted in answering the research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018). For this study, it was crucial to identify participants who could provide in-depth reflections on their experience of leading during the pandemic. The criterion for participating in this study included being a public elementary principal who served before and during the pandemic and continued to serve in this role through the 2021-22 school year. These criteria allowed participants to reflect on the influences that the pandemic had on their professional identity.

Once the criteria were established, participants were identified (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this study, snowball sampling was utilized. Snowball sampling is when initial participants are asked to recommend other participants (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Using my professional network, I contacted potential participants. The recruitment email is in Appendix A. Additional members of my professional network were asked to make an introduction to individuals who met the criteria and may be willing to participate.

In qualitative research a small sample is used to understand the phenomenon in depth to achieve transferability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommend an adequate number of participants to answer the posted research question. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested between 3 to 15 participants when exploring a phenomenon. Since the settings

represented four different community types, rural, town, suburban, and city, it was essential to ensure participants represented each community type. Yin (2018) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) agree that the more participants examined, the more in-depth analysis can be conducted; thus, a minimum number of two participants should be selected. A total of six participants were included in this study, one from a rural school district, one from a school district in a town setting, two from suburban school districts, and two from school districts located in cities.

Data Collection

Phenomenology is a "first-person exercise" (Crotty, 1998, p. 84). Individuals must explore their own experiences, as others cannot reflect on events on behalf of someone else (Crotty, 1998). To understand the participants' experiences and assigned meaning, interviewing was the method utilized for data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crotty, 1998). For this research, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews collected the primary source of data. Interviews were an essential source of evidence as they obtained descriptions and interpretations of the participants' perceptions and their assigned meaning (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions allowed participants an opportunity to voice their opinions and experiences (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) and allowed me to understand as much about the participant and their situation as possible. In addition, semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility to inquire deeper into an individual's response (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Each principal had a unique experience with their own stories, which could be captured through one-on-one interviews using open-ended questions in a semi-structured format (Stake, 1995). Interviewing multiple principals developed a detailed and in-depth collection of data to understand the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Each participant participated in two interviews. The first interview collected the primary data that drove an understanding of the participant's lived experience of leading during the pandemic. Questions for this interview focused on gathering data that described each participant's professional identity and their perspective on how the pandemic may have influenced this identity. Examples of questions included

- Think back to the spring of 2020, it was the beginning of the pandemic, and schools had closed. Tell me how you saw yourself as a school leader at that time.
- When you think about being a school leader last year, 2020-21, tell me how you saw yourself as a school leader last year.
- It is now two years since the pandemic began. Tell me how you see yourself as a school leader now.
- When you think back to who you were as a school leader before the pandemic and compare it to who you are now, tell me what stands out to you.

A short demographic survey was administered at the conclusion of the first interview to collect specific demographic data such as gender, age, education, and work experience. Since this study was about identity, there was a concern that talking about demographic identities, such as gender identity, at the start of the interview may have influenced a principal's responses. Therefore, specific demographic data that may help to understand the essence of one's experience was collected at the conclusion of the first interview. The first interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

Participants were asked to bring a meaningful item or two representing their professional identity to the second interview. Artifacts usually represent material culture and some form of meaning to the participant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While the artifact alone did not provide

insight into the participant's professional identity, the participants were asked to describe the meaning, why it was representative, and if they would have brought a different item before the pandemic. Additional questions for the second interview were developed based on the analysis of the transcripts from the first interview. The second interview also allowed the participants to provide additional thoughts and insights on how the pandemic might have influenced their professional identity. During the second interview, I shared the initial patterns I identified from analyzing their first interview transcripts. The participants verified the findings and clarified them as necessary. This time allowed everyone to corroborate their first interview's interpretation and served as a step in triangulating the data (Yin, 2018). Occasionally, participants expanded on their responses after listening to the summary. The second interview lasted about 60 minutes. To best serve the participants' demanding schedules, interviews were scheduled at a time convenient to the participants' schedules, in a format of their choice (in-person or virtually), and outside of their contract hours.

Semi-structured interviews utilize an interview protocol consisting of a standard script (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). An interview script reflects an actual line of inquiry to provide consistency of questioning between interviews and ensured proper consent was obtained (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The first and second interview protocols, the demographic survey, and the participant-specific questions for the second interview are included in Appendix B. I took brief notes focused on impressions and observations during the interview. With permission from the participants, interviews were audio-recorded for an accurate record of the conversation and transcribed to support data analysis. After each interview, I gathered my thoughts and observations through reflective field notes. Reflective field notes consolidate a

researcher's thoughts on their insights, hunches, or broad ideas that emerged through an interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Utilizing multiple data sources helps build the context of the study (Yin, 2018). I searched for pertinent documents that were publicly available. The intent of these documents, such as school newsletters, news articles, and social media postings, was to understand the context of the pandemic better. Limited information was gained. The documents did clarify details about programming structures such as in-person, hybrid, and online programming and timelines.

Because of the vast amount of data collected in qualitative research, organizing the data enabled data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In preparation, I created a file naming system. After each interview, I transcribed the audio recording with the support of transcription software and checked it for accuracy by comparing the audio recording to the transcription. Comparing the audio recording to the transcript allowed me to become familiar with the data. At that point, pseudonyms were substituted for actual names to protect the participants', schools', and school districts' privacy. Original audio recordings were destroyed once transcribed and verified. All electronic data were stored on a password-protected personal computer. Any printed materials from the study were kept in a notebook and secured in a locked file cabinet. The only individuals with access to the data were my university research advisor and me.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis involves making sense of data to answer research questions (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). When people experience a common phenomenon, a researcher can examine their narratives for common themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The first step in exploring the initial data entailed reading and trying to make sense of it as a

whole while searching for patterns, insights, or promising concepts (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). As mentioned above, I listened to each recording two or more times while reading the transcript. Once the transcript was verified, I read and explored the data. Initially, I coded each interview transcript independently using in vivo coding. In vivo codes utilize a participant's words describing a segment of text or an image (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). I also noted short phrases, ideas, concepts, and hunches that stood out to me as memos. Memos help build credibility by tracking the development of ideas through the data analysis process and creating a trail of evidence (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). During the exploration phase of the first interview, I discovered a need to clarify or obtain more data from the participants. This need was the foundation for the questions for the second interview.

After becoming familiar with the data, I looked at the data more in-depth. Based on the in vivo codes, I created a list of common codes and re-coded the transcripts as separate entities using the common list of codes. I continued to note ideas, concepts, and hunches that stood out to me. This second coding served as the foundation for creating subcategories. The transcripts were then coded using subcategories. During this time, I made a list of significant statements from the transcripts on how participants experienced the influence of the pandemic on their professional identities (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Each statement was considered equal worth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The significant statements were then grouped into broader categories as the foundation for interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The themes arose from the data and were not imposed upon the data (Crotty, 1998). To reduce the influence of my biases, I utilized a peer reviewer to check the grouping of significant statements, development of broader themes, and interpretation. A fellow doctorate candidate of education who was employed as the director of student support services volunteered to serve in this role. She reviewed large

portions of the transcripts and compared them to the findings in chapter 4. She corroborated that the quotes accurately represented the participants' interviews and were appropriately grouped into themes. Using a peer reviewer helps to ensure internal validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The themes were then used to create a description of participants' experiences with the phenomenon and included verbatim examples (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Verbatim examples support the claim that the themes were found within the data (Crotty, 1998). Finally, a composite description was written to capture the essence of the experiences and represent the culminating aspect of the phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This data analysis aimed to capture the essence of the participants' perspectives on the influence of the pandemic on their professional identities.

Ethics

The "validity and reliability of a study depends upon the ethics of the investigator" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This phenomenological study sought to understand the essence of any influence the pandemic had on elementary principals' professional identities. A sufficient level of trust needed to be established for the participants to share their thoughts, ideas, and stories necessary to create a rich description (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In qualitative research, ethical issues are likely to surface during data collection and reporting of the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Planning reduces the risk of problems developing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To begin, I obtained IRB approval from the University of Northern Colorado before collecting data. The IRB is in Appendix C. To protect the participants, I was sensitive to how this study might impact them. I worked collaboratively with participants by sharing the purpose of this study, obtaining their consent, sharing their data with them, and utilizing pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

Appendix D contains the consent form. The goal was to reduce the risk of ethical issues developing by using ethical interview practices and respecting the participants and their sites (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data were stored in the University of Northern Colorado's OneDrive password-protected account and only shared with my university research advisor. As I wrote the report, I ensured the findings accurately reflected the participants' viewpoints, any information shared maintained confidentiality and did not harm the participants, and researchers were credited (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A researcher is ethically responsible for creating trustworthiness within the study while protecting the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Trustworthiness

A researcher builds trustworthiness throughout a qualitative study to ensure that the data is correctly collected and analyzed so that the findings accurately represent what was studied (Yin, 2018). Trustworthiness was achieved through careful conceptualization and design of data collection, analysis, interpretation, and presentation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Creswell and Poth (2018) described three lenses to consider when selecting strategies to build trustworthiness and recommended selecting strategies from at least two different lenses. The three lenses are the researcher's, the participant's, and the reader's (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

From the researcher's lens, I used two different strategies. First, I built trustworthiness through bridling. Before collecting data, it was essential to understand and recognize my personal beliefs, theories, and other assumptions that could mislead my understanding of the meaning of the phenomenon and limit research openness (Dahlberg, 2006). Bridling is a reflective practice that helps researchers loosen their firm intentional beliefs to understand the phenomena and its meaning (Dahlberg, 2006). Bridling is a continuous self-reflection and investigation of one's point of view and presuppositions (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2019). Through

this heightened self-awareness, one can be more attentive to the phenomenon under investigation, be more patient with the phenomenon, and allow its meaning to show itself (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2019).

Creating a reflexive journal and describing my personal experiences with the influence of the pandemic on my professional identity was the first step to recognizing my biases, values, and beliefs. To begin, I responded to five questions by Vagle et al. (2009).

1. What is my purpose and goal relative to the project as a researcher?
2. Who are the imaginary participants? What is the relationship between the researcher and the participants?
3. What particular preunderstandings and assumptions were brought to the table?
4. How does my positionality influence my field of analysis?
5. Describe my experience.

In addition, I described my professional identity to help me better understand the source of potential connections. I had two significant insights from this experience. First was the reminder that I must use evidence from the interviews when drawing conclusions. Second, I needed to focus carefully on the participant's experiences and perspectives. As a student of leadership, I created an awareness of my desire to learn about school leadership. This awareness helped me stay focused on the purpose of the study as I listened to principals' stories.

Bridling helped to identify my biases, values, and past experiences that could potentially shape the approach and interpretation of this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Throughout the study, I utilized the reflexive journal to scrutinize and reflect upon the meanings as they evolved as a way to remain open to new ideas (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2019; Dahlberg, 2006). The

preface above describes my personal experience as a leader during the pandemic, and I describe my positionality as I entered this study below.

A second strategy I used was constructing a trail of evidence to ensure that reported findings were supported by evidence (Yin, 2018). Each time I read and analyzed a transcript, I annotated my thoughts and attached them to the transcript. After completing a couple of interviews, I identified potential connections between the participants. To prevent them from swaying upcoming interviews, I added my thoughts to my reflexive journal and reminded myself to use evidence from the interviews before drawing conclusions. Once the interviews were complete, I annotated my initial findings by combining the two interviews for each participant. I organized long direct quotes by category as a way to allow the themes to emerge.

Member checking validated the participant's lens. Member checking involves asking the participants to review the data, interpretations, and findings for accuracy and credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I provided the participants with an opportunity to review their specific transcripts. At the end of each interview, I summarized my initial thoughts, and participants were able to clarify, validate, and enhance my initial thinking. This step supported my effort to identify the patterns and themes from the interviews.

Limitations

Each study has limitations that might impact the findings. Limitations may include availability of participants, unanswered questions, or problems during data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this study, one limitation was collecting data through a single view. Conducting interviews with others who interacted with the participants and observations may have better described the principal's professional identity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Unfortunately, restrictions associated with the pandemic continued to be in place in schools and

districts, limiting access at the time of the study. While the focus of this study was on the influences of the pandemic on a principal's professional identity, continuous influences can affect a principal's perspective. For example, continued professional learning, events unrelated to the pandemic, or individual experiences could influence a person's professional identity. This study was dependent on the idea that principals could identify the source of the influence as they described their professional identity.

Positionality of the Researcher

I am an educator with over 18 years of experience, and for six of those years, I have served in different P-6 administration roles. I identify as a white, middle-class female. I have a strong desire to support educational leaders in growing and developing. I am an avid reader of leadership development and am positively biased toward the works of scholars. Reflecting, I recognize my professional identity has evolved in response to various personal, educational, social, and political contexts.

As I conducted this study, I reflected on the influence that the COVID-19 pandemic had on my professional identity. As described in the preface, making a difference during the pandemic looked different. I provided an extra listening ear, recorded a story to help reduce teacher workload, or reached out to families differently. However, serving as an assistant principal during the lockdown, I had less to do. Behavior problems no longer existed, teacher evaluations were canceled, classes did not need coverage, and activities did not need organizing. The feeling of not being needed and being unable to make a difference caused additional stress. I related the increased stress to a disconnect between my assigned role and professional identity.

In the 2020-2021 school year, my elementary school returned to in-person learning, and I recognized additional shifts in my professional identity. The importance of relationships between

students and staff is another professional identity that has evolved. As I listened to teachers tell stories about connecting with kids during the lockdown, I heard a deeper understanding and appreciation for the families. For me, the importance of relationships in education has deepened. Unfortunately, due to restrictions associated with the pandemic, I saw our schools become more siloed as families could not come inside when schools returned to in-person learning.

Also, I have always believed the children we served each had different experiences that created different strengths and needs. However, knowing some of our children missed opportunities to grow socially and academically, I believed the students in front of us may have required different approaches and possibly programming. For example, a child in third grade may have been home since March of their first-grade year and missed the opportunity to learn how to work and communicate with same-age peers. This child may need to develop skills typically developed during the first and second grades. I also believed children could learn missing skills given time and the right opportunities and learning experiences. Unfortunately, time was not considered an option as our school system continued to be built around a child's age.

One more belief that has evolved because of the pandemic is the importance of learning through play, hands-on experiences, and wonder. During the lockdown, families shared pictures of the children playing, creating, and being imaginative. No longer were they expected to be seated and formally learning for six hours a day. The pandemic confirmed my belief that education needs more play, exploration, and wonder, especially in elementary school. There was much to learn about the world outside of the classroom. How might we find a new balance between learning and time to explore and be a child?

Tending to think strategically, I continued to believe in the evolution of education and continuous improvement. I believed then was the time to make changes that benefit all children. As a leader, I had to be careful with this belief as change takes time and effort, not everyone had the same opinion, and educators were exhausted. I still valued collaboration, making a difference, optimism, and self-care. Also, I maintained the importance of being a communicator, a role model, a lead learner, a collaborator, a problem-solver, and demonstrating positivity and graciousness as a part of my professional identity.

While I had little to do with planning the return to school, I watched leaders work extended hours and have every decision challenged. Throughout the 2020–2021 school year, I noticed increased stress levels in educational leaders, and I worried about their health and wellness. As the 2020–2021 school year ended, I saw exhausted leaders who had worked in an unsustainable way for an extended period. These changes raised the question about the possibility that the pandemic may have influenced principals' professional identities.

Chapter Summary

Creswell and Poth (2018) state that phenomenological studies seek to find common meanings of individuals' lived experiences as they experience a phenomenon. The world was still dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, and we just began to understand its impact on education. This phenomenological study aimed to describe the essence of the pandemic's influence on elementary principals' professional identity. By listening to the voices of elementary principals, their perspectives were understood and may inform future decisions and research.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Chapter Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand elementary school principals' perceptions of the influence that the COVID-19 pandemic had on their professional identities within the context of their school and community. To fulfill the purpose of this study, the following research question was investigated:

- Q1 How do elementary principals perceive the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on their professional identities?

This chapter presents the findings from the analysis of interviews with six participants. During the interviews, participants shared their perspectives on the pandemic's influence on their professional identities. The chapter begins with a summary of the participants' profiles. A discussion of the themes follows, and the chapter ends with a summary of the findings and a conclusion.

Participant Demographics

To protect the identities of the participants, pseudonyms are used for identifying information such as names and schools, and demographic information is presented as a general summary. Four women and two men ranging in age between 35 and 64 years old participated. Five participants identified their race as White, and one identified as two or more races. All the participants were elementary principals in public schools in Colorado and had master's degrees in administration and leadership. Participants had served as a principal for between six and 12 years. To obtain perspectives from diverse communities, I verified the community type

associated with each school district through NCES (2022) prior to arranging the interviews. One participant was from a rural community, one participant was from a town, two participants were from suburban communities, and two were from cities (NCES, 2022b). While the student demographics varied between schools, one common characteristic was that the percentage of students receiving special education services ranged between 11% and 15% (CDE, 2022).

The Participants

Each participant is introduced through a profile to help to create a backdrop for understanding this study's themes. Participants are presented in alphabetical order. Table 1 summarizes the participants and school demographic information.

Allison

During the interviews, Allison reflected on what led her to become a principal. She shared her belief that education is about kids and recognized the impact a strong leader could have on students and staff. As a school leader, Allison valued relationships and ensured she made time to connect with people. In the second interview, she shared a yearbook representing all the people and relationships she cherished. Allison worked in education for 25 years and was a principal for nine years. At the time of the interviews, she had completed her third year of principalship at Apple Elementary School.

Apple Elementary School served a suburban community (NCES, 2022b) with between 301 and 350 students (CDE, 2022). Allison described the community as educated and affluent. Students who qualified for free and reduced lunch ranged between 6% and 10% (CDE, 2022). Allison viewed the parents as highly involved in their children's education, and between 11% and 15% of the students qualified for the gifted program (CDE, 2022). Between 21% and 25% of the

Table 1*Summary of Participants and Their School*

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Years as principal		School demographics			Student demographics (CDE, 2022)		
			Current school	Total	Pseudonym	Enrollment (CDE, 2022)	Community type (NCES, 2022b)	Non-White	English learners	Free & reduced
Allison	Female	White	3	9	Apple Elementary	301-350	Suburban	21-25%	≤5%	6-10%
Anthony	Male	White	4	8	Peach Elementary	351-400	City	91-95%	61-65%	91-95%
Daniel	Male	White	6	12	Melon Elementary	301-350	Suburban	21-25%	≤5%	6-10%
Hannah	Female	White	6	6	Berry Elementary	151-200	Rural	16-20%	≤5%	21-25%
Linda	Female	Two or more races	6	6	Cherry Elementary	551-600	City	51-55%	6-10%	31-35%
Mary	Female	White	6	6	Fig Elementary	351-400	Town	41-45%	6-10%	26-30%

students identified as non-White, and fewer than 5% were English learners (CDE, 2022). One of the district's center-based special education programs was also located at Apple Elementary.

Apple Elementary School returned to in-person learning in the fall of 2020 with various new safety requirements. They faced quarantines which caused classrooms to return to online learning for short periods and students to join in-person classes remotely. Allison was also responsible for the new elementary online program that operated only for the 2020-21 school year. She described this period as a "heavy, hard time." She remembered "leaving the building and thinking, oh, my gosh, this is hard. This [leading during the pandemic] is heavy. What am I going to do?" While Allison felt she changed as a leader during the pandemic, "one of the difficult things for me is separating what happened during the pandemic months and years with what's happened this year [2021-22]. And what issues are tied to the pandemic versus" other things like their "adoption of a literacy program." For Allison, the source of influence was challenging to identify.

Anthony

Anthony was looking for a way to engage more students in the joy of learning when he decided to become a principal. He also wanted to support a larger number of students and valued the importance of student relationships when creating learning environments. Anthony served in education for 17 years. He completed his fourth year as the principal at Peach Elementary School and had eight years of experience as a principal. During the second interview, Anthony shared the story of a trophy his students' families had given him one year. He said it reminded him of the importance of "extra time and effort because it's always in service to the kids."

Peach Elementary School is located in a city and enrolled between 351 and 400 students (CDE, 2022). Anthony described Peach Elementary School as educating a high number of

students from Central America as well as students experiencing homelessness. Between 91% and 95% of the students identified as non-White, and between 61% and 65% of students are English learners (CDE, 2022). Students who qualified for free and reduced lunch ranged between 91% and 95% (CDE, 2022). Less than 5% of the students qualified for the gifted program (CDE, 2022).

Peach Elementary School began the 2020-21 school year online. Anthony shared that when his school was online, he found more "work-life balance" and "leaned into exercise." In January 2021, the school moved to hybrid learning with different cohorts. The school experienced several different hybrid models for the remainder of that school year. They returned to in-person learning for the 2021-22 school year. Anthony described that returning to in-person learning brought "a little bit of this excitement. We gotta go back and teach kids in person." However, "we were hit with a brick wall. It's tougher than we thought." Anthony found the flexibility of his day and the work-life balance diminished when his school returned to in-person learning.

Daniel

During Daniel's early career, he recognized how others believed in him and helped to develop his capacities. This experience led him to become a principal so he could develop the capacities of others and still be with students. Relationships, grace, and structure were important to Daniel. He served as a principal for 12 of his 26 years in education and had completed his sixth year at Melon Elementary School. At the end of the 2021-22 school year, Daniel accepted a principal position in a city-based school district, hoping to further his career opportunities. He shared a compass that was given to him when he left his previous school. For him, it was a

reminder to “always stay true to your heart” even when it was “difficult or it goes against the system.”

Melon Elementary School was part of a suburban school district with between 301 and 350 students. Daniel described the school as the hub of its community with many traditions. Students who received free and reduced lunch benefits ranged between 6% and 10% (CDE, 2022). Between 22% and 25% of the students identified as non-white, and less than 5% of the students were English learners (CDE, 2022). About 5% of the students qualified for the gifted program (CDE, 2022).

During the lockdown in the spring of 2020, Daniel shared videos of his family with students and staff to highlight the unexpected opportunity to be with his family. In 2020-21, Melon Elementary School held in-person classes with new required safety measures. Daniel shared that he worked with community members when defining the safety measures, and this experience reminded him that "you're not going to keep everyone happy." He strove to "communicate and justify my decision and tie it back to what we believe is good for students." Daniel felt he "was absolutely the same leader through COVID-19 that I was before, but certain things get highlighted." He believed his professional growth during this time was related to other activities, such as mentoring new or aspiring principals.

Hannah

At the time of the interviews, Hannah had been in education for 23 years and served as a principal for six years at Berry Elementary School. When reflecting on what motivated her to become a principal, she had experienced success as a mentor teacher and desired to have an impact on an entire school of students and staff. She believed education was about "growing students as learners and helping them to become better people."

Berry Elementary School was located in a rural community and served between 151 and 200 students. Hannah described the staff as having "longevity" with a low turnover rate. The number of students who qualified for free and reduced lunch ranged between 21% and 25% (CDE, 2022). Between 16% and 20% of the students identified as non-White, and less than 5% were English Learners (CDE, 2022). Also, less than 5% of students qualified for the gifted program (CDE, 2022).

During the 2020-21 school year, Berry Elementary School had three different programs, in-person, online, and hybrid, and Hannah was responsible for overseeing all three programs. Hannah described the 2020-21 school year as "fragile, unknown, [and] scary." She was "so stressed and so fearful" and "left that year literally exhausted." Hannah described her staff as "always on edge. I felt like my staff was always on the edge and nervous and fearful." Leading through the pandemic left Hannah feeling "pretty fried" and planning to retire after the 2022-23 school year. Planning to retire was difficult for her as she viewed being a principal as "your identity." Hannah shared a card she had received from her staff. She felt the sentiments acknowledged the "things that I do to make their job better" and demonstrated who she was "as an administrator." Toward the end of our second interview, Hannah reflected on the interview experience and recognized that "we could do anything" after experiencing education during the pandemic.

Linda

Linda loved education and leadership and believed she could impact programs, kids, and the community by becoming a principal. She brought a doll to the second interview and described that it represented how she always put "kids first" in every decision that she made. She had been in education for 29 years and served as a principal at Cherry Elementary School for six

years. Linda had experience in both suburban and city schools as well as K-8 experience. She valued her different experiences and her mentors' advice and coaching along the way. At the end of the 2021-22 school year, she left Cherry Elementary and began a district director position.

Cherry Elementary School was situated in a city and served between 551 and 600 students (CDE, 2022). Linda described the community as having a high enlisted military population. Between 31% and 35% of the students qualified for free and reduced lunch (CDE, 2022). Between 51% and 55% of the students identified as non-White, and between 6% and 10% of students were English learners (CDE, 2022). Less than 5% of students qualified for the gifted program (CDE, 2022). Linda described the school as having a dedicated staff who loved kids.

Linda shared that the levels of fear varied between staff members. Some staff members were not afraid, while others were terrified. Linda had a staff member "crying when she first heard about it [the pandemic] because she feared that she and her entire family were going to die. . . . That's a real fear for her." Linda described the experience as

when you have a crisis in a building, . . . everybody kind of has the same fear. I think about a lot of different situations that have been tragic, shootings or the death of a teacher or a child or something. But with COVID-19, there were so many different levels of fear. [For] some, this is a political thing; I'm out; this is ridiculous. [Others] truly fearing for their life. That's harder to, you know, kind of, not manage, because I can't really manage their fear, but just understanding is such a spectrum.

Linda shared that working with varying levels of fear among staff members brought a "challenging time."

During the lockdown, Linda said that she and her staff "felt disconnected and not helping kids. That was really hard. Because when you're in a school like ours, you do a lot of helping

kids with their emotional needs as well." Cherry Elementary School began the 2020-21 school year online, and Linda made a site-based decision that required her staff to be at school. She received pushback from teachers because other schools in her district allowed teachers to work from home. Linda addressed the issue by saying, "we need to build our community within our staff, and we can learn from each other." In September 2020, they returned to in-person learning with increased safety measures. During that school year, students and classes experienced quarantines that caused them to move to online learning for short periods.

Linda felt that leading through the pandemic "taught me some resiliency that I didn't know I had." She thought, "a lot of principals were just like, Oh, I'm done, I'm not doing this." But Linda "didn't feel like that. I felt like, you know, it's a hurdle, and it's huge. But we'll see what happens." As she reflected, she saw herself "a little more fearless. I mean, I feel like I can handle just about anything now." She concluded, "I gained more confidence that we can persevere." Leading through the pandemic left Linda feeling more confident and resilient in her leadership.

Mary

Mary described her passion for instruction when reflecting on what led her to become a principal. She believed everyone was part of making a school successful and used the phrase "we are crew, and we're in it together" to promote a collaborative culture. Mary brought a gray rock with quartz inlaid in the shape of a heart that she had found on a backpacking trip. To her it represented the "courage, conviction, and compassion" that she tried to lead with and that there was a "bigger purpose and world out there." When asked if she would have brought the same item, she shared a bust with the back of the head open. She said it reminded her of "having an open mind" when leading. However, she gravitated toward the heart rock at this time. At the

time of the interviews, Mary had been in education for 20 years and served as a principal for six years at Fig Elementary School.

Fig Elementary School was located in a Colorado town (NCES, 2022b) and educated between 351 and 400 students (CDE, 2022). The school provided an expeditionary learning program where students deeply learned about focused units of study. Mary shared that they served a large portion of Native American and Latino students. Between 41% and 45% of the students identified as non-White, and between 6% and 10% were English learners (CDE, 2022). The percentage of students who qualified for the free and reduced lunch program ranged between 26% and 30% (CDE, 2022). Less than 5% of the students were serviced through the gifted program (CDE, 2022).

Mary shared that when the staff returned to school for the 2020-21 school year, "there was so much fear for our staff coming back. And some of my staff was like, fine, COVID-19. It's like, no big deal. It's nothing. And some of my staff were completely terrified." During that school year, Fig Elementary School also offered in-person, online, and hybrid programs that Mary oversaw. She was "constantly juggling" enrollment as students migrated back to in-person learning throughout the school year. She faced challenges with "shutting down" small classrooms and "opening [new] classrooms" to maintain manageable classes and quality instruction. Wednesdays were remote learning days to support the required extra cleaning and provided staff time for professional learning. She shared that this break in the week "was a rejuvenation day for all of us." It gave everyone a day to "catch up and plan and breathe. For example, people were doing the required Colorado Read Act training. And it was good." In December 2020, the district temporarily moved to remote learning. Mary fought to bring

students who were served by special education or considered high-risk to school to participate in online learning as a way to provide additional support.

As we wrapped up the interviews, Mary described the experience of reflecting on leading during the pandemic as "eye-opening" and that leading "was rough." She also felt "as a leader that if we got through that, I can get through anything. Nothing is as hard as that." She saw herself as more resilient. Mary also realized if she left the school, she was replaceable, and while it "sounds weird, but actually, in some ways, it really helped me." She realized being a principal is "not my whole world. Before the pandemic, she viewed herself as "a wife, a mother and a principal, and they were all the same." After the 2021-22 school year, she identified, "I am Mary, and I am a mother, and I'm a wife." She still identified as "I'm a principal;" however, the emphasis was not as strong.

The data analysis revealed each principal had their own leadership experience during the pandemic and perceived the influence of the pandemic on their professional identities differently. Understanding the participants' backgrounds, the challenging context of leading during the pandemic, and the varying perceived levels of influence on professional identities laid the foundation for the three major themes that developed. Theme 1, Relying on Existing Professional Identities during the pandemic, highlights how principals depended on their existing professional identities to lead through the pandemic. Theme 2, Increased Ethic of Care, discusses principals' increased care for their staff through gratitude, empathy, compassion, and transparency in communication. Theme 3, Increased Shared Leadership, discusses how principals increased their shared leadership practices through increased collaboration and respect for teachers.

Theme 1: Relying on Existing Professional Identities during the Coronavirus Pandemic

The first theme is principals relied on their existing professional identities to lead through the COVID-19 pandemic. Daniel described it as knowing "who I was as a leader, and certain things were emphasized and prioritized." All the principals shared that they relied on elements of their existing professional identities as they led through the pandemic. The characteristics of this theme are described by principals relying on three existing professional identities. Four principals relied on their professional identity as educators focused on what is best for children. Two principals relied on being instructional leaders with high expectations for learning. Finally, three principals relied on being role models to maintain a positive culture. While Daniel relied on his professional identity of being a relational leader and a structured thinker, the data collected from his interviews did not fit within this theme.

Principals Focused on What is Best for Children

As principals reflected on their leadership before the COVID-19 pandemic, Hannah, Anthony, and Linda saw themselves as educators focused on what was best for children. The first characteristic of this theme. Hannah had a "love for children" that defined her. She believed education is "the business of kids. We're in the business of children, growing them as learners and helping them become better people." Likewise, Anthony said he willingly "put in that extra time and effort because it's always in service to the kids." As a part of the second interview, principals were asked to share an item representing them as leaders. Linda talked about a doll. To her, the toy meant "kids, kids, kids, kids first. And that's really, that's my whole, you know, every decision is based on what's best for kids." She believed in "being focused on what's best for kids and always being true to that. Model it and live it. I think that's what helped our school be successful."

During the pandemic, Hannah, Allison, and Linda grounded themselves and their staff in educating children with a focus on what is best for children. Hannah reminded her staff that "when you walk through those doors, let that pandemic piece go, . . . teach, and do your best." Allison acknowledged her staff's feelings and advocated for children by saying, "I know it's hard, but our focus is on educating kids." She reminded them that

we really are here to teach kids. And I understand there are so many other stressors now, but we actually do have a job to do. And it's to meet the needs of kids. And it's not just to meet their mental health needs. It's to balance supporting their mental health with providing academic learning.

Allison relied on her professional identity as an educator of children to advocate for meeting children's mental health and academic needs. When Linda reflected on leading through the pandemic, she remembered sharing, "we're here for kids. We're going to persevere through this. And we're going to always do the best we can with the resources that we have." She strove to maintain a "culture for all kids," and as educators, we are "there for kids." Despite the challenges of the pandemic, Hannah, Anthony, Linda, and Allison remained dedicated to doing what was best for children.

Instructional Leader with High Expectations for Learning

A second characteristic of this theme was the professional identity of being an instructional leader with high expectations for learning. Mary and Linda relied on this characteristic. Mary had a passion for instruction, and for her, "clear is kind" so she was "clear on the expectations" to "help everyone be successful." As she built the systems for online learning in the spring of 2020, she "started creating documents of 'this is what your online plans

need to look like. Here's a rubric of what I expect.'" Mary reflected that in the first week of remote learning in the spring of 2020,

I kind of let it go. If it wasn't really great, whatever, you know, just pushing stuff out. It's busy work; like, whatever, we'll get there. And I don't know if it was a good thing to do because starting the second and third week, I'd be like, these are unacceptable lesson plans.

She saw that as "teachers were getting started, [and] there were some [lessons] that were really high quality." However, Mary said some of her staff pushed back by saying,

"We're in a pandemic, and kids do not feel emotionally safe. And here you are trying to push this," and they're [teachers] mad. They're mad at me. And so, I had to really balance . . . "I hear you, and I understand. I understand the fear. And I understand that you believe that kids are not in a place to learn. But that's not true. Kids want structure. And families are asking for structure."

Mary spent the spring of 2020 establishing the "bounds of high expectations." She did have "teachers who would check out and say they cannot [teach synchronously]. And I would say, 'I am okay if you can't do something [synchronously] online if you need that space as long as you've taken care of your students.'" Mary described it as "a push [and] pull. It was really hard."

Similarly, Linda believed she "had to maintain the high expectations that we have for student learning." She shared that keeping "the culture that all kids can learn and will learn and we're going to do it was tough." She was

trying to keep the staff together. And then it was a competing thing where there were some schools that did nothing. . . . That's not us, though. That's not how we were at all, just maintaining those high expectations with what teachers felt were limited resources.

Linda strove to "maintain those high instructional strategies [and] the rigor online with elementary kids." When her staff looked at their [students'] data, there was "joy" as "our kids weren't that bad. It was lower but not significant. The teaching that went on during the pandemic was effective for some kids. We couldn't control the kids that didn't show up." When Linda reflected, she said the staff

all came along. . . . I think when you set the expectations, they rise. And then, they really hear how well we're doing. . . . We did DIBELS [Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills]. We still had them [students] in for testing [fall of 2020]. And [teachers] saw their kids were learning from their online efforts.

Thus, despite the challenges of the pandemic, Linda and Mary did not lower their academic expectations; they remained true to their identities as instructional leaders who expected high-quality teaching and student growth.

Role Model to Maintain a Positive Culture

Relying on the professional identity of being a role model to maintain a positive culture was a third characteristic of this theme. Linda, Allison, and Anthony each relied on this characteristic in their own way. As described above in the participant profiles, some principals viewed leading through the pandemic as challenging. Principals were role models as they celebrated successes, supported teachers, listened, addressed difficult situations, and demonstrated vulnerability to maintain a positive culture.

Linda reflected that during the pandemic, her job was "much more focus[ed] on culture" than before and required her to celebrate, be visible, and listen. In the spring of 2020, Linda joined classes virtually and focused on "celebrating things that I saw online." She felt "teachers want you to see them teaching, especially your stronger ones." Visiting virtual classrooms also

helped teachers see that administration was supportive by being "in it with them" and understanding teachers' challenges. Linda believed that "recognizing the work that they're all doing, I think helps with culture quite a bit."

For Linda, "the fall [of 2020] was hard because there were a lot of emotions." As shared in Linda's profile above, she required her teachers to work from school. She saw being together as an opportunity for teachers to receive support, for staff to support each other, and as a way to "build a stronger community" among the staff. During staff meetings, staff members "highlighted tools that they used." Also, Linda felt she could provide feedback and support to teachers by being in the building.

To maintain the culture, I had to be visible and supportive in any way that I could. Overly giving kudos and recognition to people that I knew that were struggling. But also, those that were doing a really good job, [and] being able to problem solve. I didn't have it as hard as they did.

She continually offered teachers support, such as "I can cover your class, or let me know what I can do to help you." Then she was there "listening when they were upset." Her counselor told her, "It was the best thing that we did, coming to school and building community." For Linda, "the highlight was the community that we built as a staff was stronger." She found that being a role model required her "to really be upbeat and kind of fearless in front of people."

Allison found her "biggest challenge was keeping morale up and keeping teachers focused on the fact that they were there to meet the needs of kids." She modeled difficult conversations with positivity. When she felt an issue needed to be addressed or, as she put it, there was "something heavy in the building morale," she would call the staff together for what she termed a "fireside chat." She recalled one meeting where she "reminded them [staff] to be

kind to each other and really not worry about who has a mask and who doesn't. We're here for kids. And we need to treat each other professionally and positively." Addressing these issues was important to Allison because "I really care about morale and relationships. And I like to treat people well."

Allison believed her "attitude can impact other people's attitudes. So, I tried to keep a positive attitude and not make an excuse for not being in a good mood or an excuse for not doing my job as a leader." Allison "felt like at that time [2020-21 and 2021-22], I was kind of like the cheerleader trying to keep morale up." In addition to being a role model, Allison expected her staff to serve as role models. She encouraged staff to

make sure that we kept our attitude positive so that kids didn't know. Kids can't know that we don't like something. So, if we persevere on not liking something, it will roll. I think it does end up impacting kids.

Allison established staff expectations and served as a role model for being positive, professional, and serving students.

Anthony modeled vulnerability by acknowledging a challenge he saw the staff face. In 2021-22, students returned to in-person learning at Peach Elementary School, and Anthony believed his

teachers worked really hard to do their best to break down that first wall that kids had; [students] not really understanding their role in the school environment. . . . The teachers were working really hard to have those structures and systems. And the teaching looked great, and the learning was looking good.

However, Anthony explained the "connection between the teachers and students, and the students and students, and even their families to the school was just not there." Even Anthony

started having those feelings as a school leader. I've gone through the motions. I know what I need to do to build relationships, but the relationships are feeling a little superficial. . . . I'm not necessarily finding those connections.

Anthony acknowledged his feelings with his staff by sharing, "Here's how I'm feeling. You know, I'm feeling like, we're a month and a half into school, we've worked really hard to break down a wall [students understanding their role in school]." He recognized something was preventing the relationships from being authentic and described it as a second wall. Anthony told his staff, "It's taken all of our energy, and our kids have a second wall built up this year [something preventing relationships from developing]. And we don't have the energy to break through that second one. And that's really tough." He said his staff responded by saying, "hearing that from you is what we need to hear. I don't think we need anything else. There's no solution to that, but just knowing that you know." Anthony "wanted to frame it this way because I didn't want to be here's what I think your feeling." Thus, Linda, Allison, and Anthony strove to maintain a positive culture to keep their school moving forward despite the challenges they faced. School principals in this study relied on their existing professional identities to make decisions and established expectations to maintain a sense of control and move their school forward during the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic.

Theme 2: Increased Ethic of Care

While theme one described how principals relied on their existing professional identities, theme two describes how principals existing professional identity of being a relational leader shifted. The second theme is that principals experienced an increased ethic of care for staff because of leading through the pandemic. While principals believed relationships and caring for staff were essential to being a relational leader and relied on this professional identity, the data

analysis revealed that spending more time caring for staff heightened some principals' awareness of staff members' needs. Though principals mentioned relationships with students and families during the interviews, the overarching conversations were focused on relationships with staff members. This theme is represented by three characteristics, principals' reliance on their existing professional identity of being a relational leader and their increased ethic of care as described by their reflections of increased gratitude, empathy, and compassion and increased transparency in communication.

Relying on an Existing Professional Identity of Being a Relational Leader

All the principals relied on their professional identity of being relational leaders as they led through the pandemic which is the first characteristic of this theme. Daniel "value[d] people" and was "always looking for the good, always looking for the positive, [and] always staying strength focused." During the spring of 2020, Daniel shared "fun videos from our home with my family" with staff and students. Sharing "a view into our family a little bit more" was a way to see the good. From a leadership standpoint, his goal was to share that they "got to be home, to be healthy. We live in a beautiful area. It was a time to reconnect with our family." Daniel wrapped up the first interview by saying, "relationships were important to me prior [to the pandemic] and were simply emphasized throughout COVID."

During the online learning timeframe of 2020-21, Anthony and his leadership team "created connection opportunities" for his staff. He explained that being online meant "a lot of disconnect[ion] because teams weren't meeting as frequently and seeing each other's faces." Therefore, his team "put a lot of time into having some meaningful connections." During the 2021-22 school year, Anthony's leadership team also provided "teacher appreciation days throughout the year and made sure that our teachers are valued for the work they do because it's

incredible." Anthony prioritized "staying in contact and trying to get as much face-to-face as you can, whether virtual, face-to-face, or in person" to maintain relationships with his staff.

Allison shared, "as a leader, the main priority for me is taking care of people." During the interview, the item Allison shared that represented her as a leader was a yearbook because it has all the people in it that I care so much about and try to prioritize my time and schedule around. And that's just the students and the staff at the school. So, I have to purposefully plan out my life as a principal to make sure they know that they are my priority.

During the pandemic, Allison prioritized relationships by being "in and out of classrooms" and "meeting with each staff member." In the 2021-22 school year, she engaged the Parent Teacher Organization to "form a gratitude committee and really create some fun and amazing, thoughtful ways" to demonstrate care for the staff. Daniel, Anthony, and Allison remained true to being relational leaders as they cared for staff and students.

Increased Gratitude, Empathy, and Compassion

The data analysis identified a second characteristic of this theme. As principals shared the importance of relationships, they all shared how they had grown in the areas of gratitude, empathy, and compassion. Mary, Hannah, Anthony, and Daniel shared that they were more grateful for their staff's hard work. Mary commented, "I want to make sure that my staff feels appreciated. That's something that changed."

I became very grateful for my staff because they easily could have said, 'Mary, that's not my job.' And they didn't. They all stepped in. They all helped. The amount of gratitude that I feel and appreciation was something that was really different for me. I really, really

value this community and this crew [staff]. And I do a lot of thanking them in my emails and really heartfelt communication about how much I appreciate them.

Mary became more intentional in recognizing her staff. Hannah similarly reflected and said, "I think now I realize how I've changed. It's more of that positive reinforcement. More of those moments to reward this year [2021-22]." For example, "I found these teachers love a little bit of time back."

Anthony and Daniel both commented on the need to express additional gratitude for the staff. Daniel placed "an emphasis on people and celebrating people." For him, he "find[s] the good and celebrate[s]. I think it is even more important now than it ever has been." Anthony commented that people "should do better to just say, thank you. . . . There needs to be a little bit more gratitude in this work." Mary, Hannah, Anthony, and Daniel recognized an increased appreciation for the staff's hard work and contribution to moving the school forward.

Allison and Linda described themselves as being more empathetic due to leading through the pandemic. Allison saw "how much it means to people to just be a good listener and be a sounding board and listen to understand. Not to respond." Linda also shared that she became "a better listener and finding out where you [staff members] are emotionally with all of this. And moving forward from there." When the pandemic began, Linda was not afraid of becoming ill with COVID-19. However, she described 2020 as "a really hard time because I happen to have five teachers who lost parents to COVID-19." One member of her administrative team lost her father "completely unexpectedly." He "was 60 years old." Linda described that experience as "tough." She had "to be careful because here I am kind of stoic about the whole thing. And I have to be empathetic to our staff losing some family members." Linda also "learned to be more empathetic to teachers' fears and teachers' lives." She described herself as "very good about

keeping my home life away from school. And I didn't see that with some teachers." I needed to be "empathetic because everybody has their own trauma." She said she "learned how to be a little more empathetic and understanding. And I did. I learned that very well. And I think that was huge for me."

Hannah and Mary found themselves more compassionate as a result of the challenges brought by the pandemic. Hannah shared about a hallway conversation at the end of the day, and I don't remember what came up, but . . . something was said. I looked around, and we were laughing so hard tears ran down our faces. It felt good. It felt good just to laugh and giggle and, you know, find those moments. We made it through another week.

By letting her guard down, she was able to connect with staff. She spoke about becoming more compassionate for teachers and "knowing that there are days that we just have a rough day." Before, "we always had this big intention of we want teachers there in the building at all times. Meaning all times. Meaning, try not to take as many sick days." Hannah "realized that everybody needs mental health days. And I needed them this year [2021-22] to just step away." She saw herself as "much more tolerant and compassionate."

Mary mentioned, "we have teachers who are already requesting days off." Before, she would have said, "that's such a strain on the system." Whereas now, she knows "that's what makes them the best they can be for kids." For Mary, "that is a big change. I used to get more annoyed, like, 'it's your job. You should just do your job.' And I'm like, 'no, prioritize yourself so you can be the best for kids.'"

Another change for Mary was "understanding how the brain works. And I understand triggers." During the 2020-21 school year, her staff focused their professional learning on trauma

and the brain because of the different levels of fear her staff experienced. Mary reflected that now when "a teacher is coming in crying hysterically. . . . I'm kind of like something's going on in their brain, something happened, how do they regulate? What do they need to do?" Now, "I don't try talking with them right away. I just, you know, 'let's go for a walk.' And I don't talk." "Then [after the teacher regulated], we have a conversation about what's going on." For Mary, "that's really changed."

Mary also became willing to take actions that demonstrated her compassion for others. If she saw a teacher who was "not okay," she told them to "take half an hour. And 'I need you to do whatever you need to do to regulate.'" If the teacher said, "no, no, I'm fine," Mary would have said, "no, you're not. You're yelling at the kids. You're going to take a walk." She has found she became more "direct" and addressed staff by saying, "I want to take care of you, and I care about you. But you need to do this."

Mary's compassion was also demonstrated through her self-care. When she was "working 60-to-70-hour weeks, I'm not my best. My teachers are not their best. So, I think I maybe I got more of a work-life balance." Now, when Mary has "a meeting, that's going on until 7:30 at night, . . . I'm going to come in at 8:30." For Mary, "refiguring out my schedule was a game changer." Before, she would have felt "guilt" and said, "I can't do that. I can't do that." After the long hours required to lead during the pandemic, she understood that "if people want me still to be a principal for a little bit longer. I have to do this. So that was really important." For Mary, "you got to do what's best for you. You have one life; do it. So, I'm really encouraging teachers to take time for self-care and mental health."

Allison summarized by saying, "I think we just have to keep doing it; just take good care of people." As a result of recognizing the challenges staff faced during the uncertainty of the

COVID-19 pandemic, principals realized the importance of extending additional care to staff members.

Increased Transparency in Communication

A third characteristic of this theme was that three principals demonstrated a deeper level of care for staff and families through increased transparency in their communication. Allison said, "we needed to communicate even more than usual with everyone, parents, community members, and staff." In addition to direct conversations to establish expectations described in the first theme, Allison "tried to communicate even more than I usually do with parents. And a lot of parents told me how much they appreciated that." She said, "I think they [parents] wanted to make sure their kids were being kept safe at all times and that we are keeping their academic and mental health needs and social needs in mind." She described herself as a transparent leader who balanced "the amount of communication and transparency . . . [to] match the situation so that there was a level of safety and trust."

Linda and Hannah deepened their understanding of transparency with staff and the community as a way to care for others. Before the pandemic, Linda knew "communication was important" and "share[d] on a need-to-know type" basis. She felt she did a "good job of communicating and deciphering what was coming from our district office." Then during the pandemic, she found the "transparency in the district was unbelievable." Her superintendent "met every week with us." Linda realized she "didn't know what teachers needed to know, what they didn't need because everybody's at a different level [of fear]. We had teachers that were truly scared." To maintain trust and "so teachers didn't feel like there were secrets at the district level, anything I learned, I shared." Linda increased transparency and no longer filtered information as a way to care for staff.

Another experience Linda had was during remote learning in the spring of 2020 and fall of 2020. She held open office hours for staff to ask questions or share information. "Teachers could ask me anything," and "if I knew the answer, I would tell them." She felt her team "did a really good job of keeping the communication open." Linda carried the concept of open office hours "to connect with parents." In 2020-21, she invited families to open virtual meetings. She permitted families to "ask me anything, and I'll be honest and share what I know [and] what I don't know. And there were a lot of parents that were fearful, especially when we were coming back to school." Linda wrapped up her conversation about communication by reflecting, "suppose a teacher had a concern." To that teacher, "the concern is genuine," and "I just never considered it." Linda saw that she became "a better communicator because a lot of those practices, I still do." Linda reflected, "another thing I'll carry with me is transparency because it truly does build trust. . . . I never looked at it that way."

Hannah became "more transparent with parents on where we [the school leaders] are going and what we're thinking" and was more "intentional with parent communication." "Because we're locking the schools and not letting outsiders in" out of fear that they may "spread COVID-19, I realized that they [families] just need to know information." "I think that's when I realized that was an unknown piece that I had to improve on." Utilizing the school's "student information system . . . it is so easy to keep them informed" and "has been huge with parents." Hannah wanted families to feel "comfortable bringing their kids into the school" and that they were "safe." She became "more intentional with that [transparent communication]."

As Hannah continued to lead, she found other student reports that parents would have benefited from receiving. She emailed "parents so that they have that body of evidence" of their student's performance. She said, "normally, I never thought to send those [student reports] to

parents. I don't know why. I should have." Hannah saw opportunities to continue to practice transparency in the future. Thus, during the uncertainty of the pandemic, Allison, Linda, and Hannah found increasing transparency in their communication demonstrated a deeper level of care and built trust. As principals spent more time caring for staff as they worked to move their schools forward during the COVID-19 pandemic, they adopted new ways to demonstrate care that increased their ethic of care as a part of being a relational leader.

Theme 3: Shift Toward Shared Leadership

The third theme is principals made a shift toward shared leadership. Hannah reflected that "as an administrator, I realized through this pandemic . . . staff is resilient, and they're problem solvers." The data analysis revealed that three principals shifted toward shared leadership as they sought to understand the realities of teaching online, demonstrated vulnerability, and developed a deeper appreciation for the value of collaboration and teachers' expertise.

As schools transitioned to remote learning, Anthony needed to understand what teachers were experiencing. Both he and his assistant principal demonstrated openness by substituting for a full day and "ran a couple of different grades [classes] and really got to experience it [remote teaching]." He said that

right away, we saw some of the challenges with the programs that we were asking teachers to use. We saw some of the issues with engagement, with muting of the microphones, with multiple kids speaking at once, [and] kids that get called to do other tasks.

For Anthony, he became aware that it is important to "really know what it's like . . . to do some of the things that we ask of teachers." He described teaching online as a "great, great

experience." As a result, when he did an observation, he was "a lot more sympathetic to what teachers are actually doing."

Anthony also became more "open to talking with teachers about how things really felt and trying to create a space where teachers could really share." He was "asking a lot more questions about what I'm asking them to do." As a result of leading through the pandemic, he developed a "need to ask those questions, because sometimes, you could feel a little bit of something getting in the way" of instruction, and he needed to understand. For Anthony, he described becoming open to understanding teachers' reality as a "key leadership move" for him.

Linda also demonstrated openness as she experienced unfamiliar situations. She "sat in on a lot of classes. That's how I worked. I did my observations. I zoomed in and out of some classes and saw some great, great, great things." She thought they "would follow the exact schedule, not considering burnout." However, during the open office hours that Linda held with her staff, her "teachers kept saying, this is too much." As Linda "was in the class[es], I go okay, you're right. Let's meet again." She found a need to be "vulnerable" and acknowledged that "I didn't know what to do with this [remote learning]. I've never dealt with this. And I didn't have any ideas." She learned that she had to be "open to sharing that I'm your leader, but I don't know how we're going to problem solve through this remote learning." Modifying the schedule "required a lot of collaboration and listening," and it was "helpful." As Linda reflected, she said that collaboration was

something I didn't do before. [I] just tried to problem solve on my own. But that collaboration piece, when I truly didn't have the answers and being vulnerable by saying,

I don't know the answer. Now let's put our heads together. Gosh, you've got a result, and you get buy-in from your teachers.

As a result, Linda "feels that [collaboration] was another skill I got better at."

Mary also found ways to collaborate with her staff. She utilized her staff to build the different systems necessary to ensure safety during the pandemic. She formed committees that addressed various concerns, such as entering school, recess, and the cafeteria. Mary reflected that "we were in it together; we are crew." Mary frequently referred to her staff as a crew, meaning, "we're here together; we're in this together. And that means we all have to step up." As she reflected on before the pandemic, she shared a shift in her perspective.

I became more community oriented. We as a staff; we as a community; we can do it [overcome hard times] if we have each other. And maybe I would have said I can do hard things prior to COVID. I really do recognize that it truly is a community that can get you through hard times. I think that's something I changed, I probably would have said I, and now I say we.

Mary became more collaborative by working together with their staff.

When Anthony's school decided to add additional instruction time to their remote learning in the spring of 2020, "it came from teachers really deciding" that they wanted to serve our students in a little bit more." Anthony understood that "asking the teachers to do more than their colleagues" would have been challenging. Instead, the idea "had to come from the teachers." He thought that "probably kicks off an understanding of what we experienced through COVID-19, teachers taking the lead for a change." He viewed that as a "positive way, a teacher empowerment movement" or a "teacher-directed model." Anthony believed "that we have to really make sure as a best practice that we're having teacher leaders and teacher voice in the

change efforts." Anthony developed a deeper appreciation for teachers as professionals and believed their voice was important, especially in change efforts.

Principals did not have the background expertise for leading remote and online learning. As a result, they demonstrated vulnerability and sought support from their staff. They realized the value that staff added to the new systems and began to seek teacher input as a way to share leadership.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the findings from the data analysis of the participants' interviews. The chapter began with introducing each of the six participants. The profiles described the participants' experiences and perspectives of leading through the pandemic, which provided a background for the themes. The first theme was principals relied on their existing professional identities as they led through the pandemic. The following two themes identified how the pandemic influenced existing professional identities. Principals developed a deeper ethic of care as a part of being a relational leader and shifted toward shared leadership due to seeking teachers' input and recognizing their abilities. The following chapter will discuss and interpret the themes related to research and practice.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a demanding and unfamiliar context to education, beginning in the spring of 2020 and lasting through the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years. As principals led and navigated this unknown environment, their decisions and leadership practices would have been influenced by their existing professional identities (Burke & Stets, 2009; Crow & Møller, 2017). Since situational experiences can contribute to shifts in professional identities (Burke & Stets, 2009; Crow & Møller, 2017), there was a need to investigate the influence that the COVID-19 pandemic had on principals' professional identities.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand elementary school principals' perceptions of the influence that the COVID-19 pandemic had on their professional identities within the context of their school and community. To fulfill the purpose of this study, the following research question was investigated:

- Q1 How do elementary principals perceive the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on their professional identities?

Six principals from public elementary schools in Colorado each participated in two separate interviews. The interviews provided an understanding of their perceptions of the influence that the pandemic had on their professional identities. During the interviews, the participants reflected on how they identified as leaders before and during the pandemic. The principals' stories were analyzed for connections between their professional identities and the pandemic.

Each interview was coded independently of the other interviews as described in chapter 3. Once the initial analysis was completed, categories were developed, and each interview was analyzed further based on the categories. The categories were then compared between the interviews to identify themes. In the previous chapter, I discussed the three themes that surfaced from the data analysis. In theme one, Relying on Existing Professional Identities during the Pandemic, principals made decisions and selected leadership practices based on their existing beliefs and values. In theme two, Increased Ethic of Care, principals recognized that the increased care and support provided to staff influenced their professional identity of being relational leaders. Theme three, Shift Toward Shared Leadership, recognized that as principals demonstrated vulnerability, they realized the value teachers added to developing systems and shifted toward more collaborative leadership. This chapter discusses the findings in relation to the literature and concludes with implications and recommendations for further research.

Discussion of the Findings

Much of the previous research regarding principals' professional identities focused on their evolution over time (Burke & Stets, 2009; Crow et al., 2017; Cruz-González et al., 2020; Robertson, 2018; Scribner & Crow, 2012). The experience of leading through the COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented, and research about educational leadership and the pandemic had just begun at the time of this study. This research contributes to the body of literature on educational leadership during the pandemic by incorporating the voices and perceptions of public elementary school principals. This study reflected principals' perceptions of the influence that leading through the pandemic had on their professional identities. The findings confirm that people rely on existing identities during uncertain times and that professional identities can shift through unfamiliar experiences.

Since the position of principal has been recognized within society, there is a set of expectations that guide people's attitudes and behaviors (Burke & Stets, 2009). According to Burke and Stets (2009), individuals perform their roles based on their understanding of the community's expectations and their professional identity. Each principal in this study served a different school community. They fulfilled their position based on their interpretation of community and school district expectations and aligned those expectations with their professional identities.

Relied on Existing Professional Identities

As the principals discussed their priorities during the COVID-19 pandemic, they shared that these were important before the pandemic in theme one. The principals in this study had a level of self-awareness about their priorities before the pandemic. Principals previously identified with and internalized their professional identities that focused their motivation, drive, and energy within their professional practices (Burke & Stets, 2009; Crow et al., 2017). Daniel repeatedly said he "was absolutely the same leader through COVID that I was before, but certain things get highlighted." Effective school leadership during a crisis relies on a leader's existing practices and skills (Smith & Riley, 2012). Those existing practices and skills would have been established based on a person's existing professional identity (Burke & Stets, 2009; Crow et al., 2017). This finding aligned with the literature that principals relied on existing professional identities to as they took responsibility for supporting and caring for students, staff, and the community.

This study identified three professional identities the principals relied on as they cared for children. These were educators focused on what was best for children, instructional leaders, and role models. The principals in this study saw themselves as educators focused on what was best

for children as a way of caring even before the pandemic. Hannah was "always putting what's best for kids first," even before the pandemic. During a crisis, school leaders are responsible for supporting and caring for their students and staff (Anderson et al., 2020; Braunack-Mayer et al., 2013; Longmuir, 2021; Smith & Riley, 2012). The concept of care in school leadership combines ensuring the school community's welfare and providing quality learning for students (Braunack-Mayer et al., 2013). Principals may check in on students and staff, focus on returning children to learning routines, and frequently communicate while dealing with ongoing anxiety as they lead through a crisis (Mutch, 2015). Despite the added stress and fear that the pandemic brought, the principals in this study established expectations to provide what they believed was the best care for children. Existing professional identities motivated the participants to continue to advocate for children and set expectations that teachers were present and met students' needs.

As a part of caring for students and doing what was best for them, some of the principals in this study relied on their professional identity as instructional leaders to establish expectations for learning. Mary described that her "passion has always been around instruction." Professional identities are a driver behind an individual's actions (Burke & Stets, 2009). Being an instructional leader motivated some principals to ensure teachers continued to engage students in learning, even during the initial lockdown. Some of the principals experienced a misalignment between school district expectations and personal beliefs. When a misalignment occurs, an individual navigates the conflict to reduce stress (Burke & Stets, 2009; Robertson, 2017a). In this study, misalignment motivated some principals to make site-based decisions that expanded learning opportunities. The principals in this study established high expectations for learning and communicated the need to care for children by doing what was best for them. Mary believed "being really clear on what the expectations are, is going to help everyone be successful." so that

"all kids can learn." School leaders are responsible for caring for students and considering community views as they make decisions during a crisis (Braunack-Mayer et al., 2013). Relying on their professional identities as instructional leaders and providing additional learning opportunities allowed principals to expand their care for students and meet community expectations.

A leader must remain in control, be stable, calm, and visible, and demonstrate resiliency during a crisis (Mutch, 2015; Smith & Riley, 2012). The principals in this study saw themselves as role models as they exhibited positivity, established expectations, and demonstrated that they could get through the pandemic together. Linda remained "visible and supportive in any way" and provided "kudos and recognition to people." Leaders must stay focused and positive during a crisis, even when others become physically tired and emotionally drained (Mutch, 2015). Also, leaders remain mission-focused and committed by keeping the big picture in mind (Mutch, 2015). The principals in this study focused staff by grounding their work in the service of students while navigating uncertainties and differing perspectives on appropriate responses to the pandemic. Linda told her staff that "we're here for kids," and that they "can persevere." To care for people and demonstrate control and resiliency, the principals relied on their existing professional identities as they made decisions and engaged in leadership practices throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Increased Ethic of Care

The COVID-19 pandemic brought varying levels of fear and disconnection, and school leaders reverted to the relational aspects of their work (Longmuir, 2021). In theme two, some of the principals in this study increased their ethic of care while relying on their professional identity as relational leaders. Caring for students and staff meant prioritizing the welfare and

well-being of students and staff (Longmuir, 2021). The principals in this study demonstrated care for staff by increasing their time and energy to listen, show appreciation, create connections, and acknowledge the challenges experienced during the pandemic. The principals' concern for the welfare of their staff aligned with the literature that during a crisis, leaders have a responsibility to care for students, staff, and the community (Braunack-Mayer et al., 2013; Longmuir, 2021; Mutch, 2015; Smith & Riley, 2012; Thornton, 2021). Allison "can listen and hear people out when they have concerns." Showing genuine concern for the welfare of others also supports efforts in recovering from a crisis (Smith & Riley, 2012). Allison continually encouraged and shared that "as we transition our way out of the pandemic. I feel like I am either at the back or the middle of the boat, and I'm just like, come on, come on, come on [waves hands forward]. We can do this." Caring for staff by focusing on relationships helped principals in this study to move their schools forward during the pandemic.

While relying on existing professional identities, the principals in this study experienced positive changes within some identities. When individuals spend more time with new or modified behaviors, they may adopt them for the long term (Burke & Stets, 2009; Robertson, 2017a). Principals spent additional time caring for others by listening to and understanding staff's needs and experiences. Linda spent time "listening when they [staff] were upset about something. I had one teacher that was very afraid, and so I had to really listen to her a lot." Spending extra time caring for and being compassionate toward staff and students was a priority for principals during the pandemic (Longmuir, 2021; Thornton, 2021). Through these experiences and reflecting on their own needs, the principals became aware of how much they appreciated their staff and recognized the challenges the staff faced. Reflection on positive experiences reinforces behaviors and creates movement toward professional identity change

(Robertson, 2017a). By spending more time caring for staff during the pandemic, behaviors demonstrating gratitude, empathy, and compassion were adopted to keep the school moving forward.

Communication must be frequent and clear during a crisis to keep information flowing (Braunack-Mayer et al., 2013; Mutch, 2015). As the principals in this study led through the pandemic, they increased communication and became more transparent to care for staff and families. Hannah realized her parents needed information so they "felt comfortable bringing their kids into the school." Understanding that different people needed different information to address their level of fear or concern, some participants became more explicit about what they knew and did not know. Linda said that "anything I learned, I shared." She "was very open and honest and would answer any questions." Effective communication "is the key attribute through which the leader can provide direction, certainty, and optimism during a crisis" (Smith & Riley, 2012, p. 68). Increased transparent communication gave families a sense that their children were cared for and safe and built trust in the community.

According to Longmuir (2021), providing care and compassion was a primary responsibility of school leaders during the pandemic. Principals in this study also reported spending increased time caring for staff. One's professional identity evolves based on different experiences (Crow et al., 2017), and meeting people's different needs during the COVID-19 pandemic was a unique experience. While changes in professional identities are gradual over time (Burke & Stets, 2009), principals spent a little over two years listening, caring for staff, and communicating transparently. Spending more time caring for staff resulted in adopting new behaviors, and the participants became more relational in their leadership.

Increased Shared Leadership

In theme three, the principals in this study perceived that they shared leadership more as they led through the COVID-19 pandemic. They found leading a school remotely was an unfamiliar situation. Linda acknowledged with her staff that she did not "know how we're going to problem solve" through this different context. When an individual experiences an unfamiliar situation that does not match their practices and skills, distress is created (Burke & Stets, 2009). They adapt to remove distress (Burke & Stets, 2009). Anthony "experienced what it's really like to lead a classroom throughout the day" by substituting in an online class. To assist in returning to school with new safety requirements, Mary said, "teachers helped me think through every new system at the school." Without prior experience in leading online learning or implementing necessary safety requirements, principals demonstrated vulnerability as they sought input on how best to serve students.

As teachers shared resources and ideas, principals developed a deeper understanding of the contributions that collaboration brings to an organization and respect for teachers' contributions. Linda shared that "teachers were really good about sharing about what worked and what didn't work." Before the pandemic, Linda was "always so driven and task oriented." However, she found they "had to think outside the box a lot more. And that collaboration is vital." After leading through the pandemic, Linda sees herself as "collaborating with everybody, not just our assistant principal or key people" but "all of us, all of us. . . . And I will carry that with me." Experiencing shared leadership with teachers reduced the stress of the unfamiliar context that the pandemic brought. As people become comfortable with new practices, they adopt them, and their professional identity may shift (Burke & Stets, 2009). Engaging in shared

leadership to overcome unfamiliar challenges influenced an existing professional identity for some of the principals in this study.

Conclusions from the Findings

The findings in this study support the literature that principals relied on their existing professional identities when making decisions and selecting strategies to navigate uncertain times (Burke & Stets, 2009). As principals reflected, they connected how they identified as leaders and their actions. Effective school leadership relies on established practices and skills during uncertain times (Smith & Riley, 2012). Depending on existing professional identities allowed these principals to sustain themselves through times of uncertainty and challenge.

In addition, the idea that professional identity continues to "develop and change even for experienced principals" (Robertson, 2018, p. 44) was supported by this study. The COVID-19 pandemic positively influenced principals' existing professional identities. As principals provided intensified care and compassion for a prolonged period, they deepened their human side of leadership. Also, as principals faced unknown situations, they demonstrated vulnerability and overcame uncertainty by engaging staff. When someone becomes comfortable with a new practice, adjustments in professional identities may occur (Burke & Stets, 2009). Leading a school during a COVID-19 pandemic was a time filled with unknowns and uncertainty. Principals recognized their new learning through reflection and increased self-awareness.

Implications for Practice

School leadership is complex, and this study identified that principals relied on their existing professional identities during uncertain times. New and experienced principals will likely face uncertain times during their careers. Understanding that people rely on existing professional identities as a foundation for decisions and strategy selection, especially during

uncertainty (Burke & Stets, 2009; Crow et al., 2017), may sustain principals through challenging times. Linda "maintain[ed] the high expectations that we have for student learning while not knowing what was really going on." Heightened self-awareness and continuous reflection are required to understand one's professional identity and any influence on motivation, drive, and energy (Burke & Stets, 2009; Robertson, 2017a). As principals acknowledge their professional identity, they may identify their sources of strength. Daniel felt "like I knew who I was as a leader" and relied on "the importance of relationships and communicating" during the pandemic.

This study also confirmed that professional identities might shift due to stressful situations that do not directly align with one's professional identity. New and existing principals may benefit from understanding they may need to engage in different strategies and skills to address an uncertain situation. When engaging in different strategies over time, individuals may adopt those behaviors and adjust their professional identities (Burke & Stets, 2009). Linda reflected that she became a "better communicator, more collaborative with my staff, and persevering the adverse, and a better listener" due to leading through the pandemic. Since life experiences may influence professional identities, new and experienced principals may benefit from engaging in reflective practices that reappraise how they identify as leaders. Alice felt she was "becoming more and more reflective" due to leading through the pandemic. Ongoing reflection requires a deep level of self-awareness (Robertson, 2017a), and this self-awareness may help explain shifts in one's motivation and drive for specific practices and decisions.

Recognizing leadership decisions and practices during the COVID-19 pandemic were influenced by one's professional identity provides insight for leadership preparation and development programs. New leaders benefit from understanding that their professional identity affects their leadership practices and decisions and developing deep self-awareness. Based on

this study, participants experienced changes in being relational leaders and sharing leadership. New leaders may benefit from discussions and developing skills in the human side of leadership, such as listening to understand, compassion, gratitude, and transparent communication. Linda became more transparent during the pandemic. She "was very open and honest and would answer any questions. And sometimes, I just truly didn't know. And I said, 'I don't know.'" Developing strategies to share leadership requires vulnerability, and perhaps new leaders would benefit from developing strategies to engage others and recognize when they need to empower others. New leaders may also benefit from understanding that their professional identity will continue to evolve and that they should continuously engage in reflective practices to gain self-awareness. For Hannah, she said leading through the pandemic "was hard. It was really hard. I think now I realize how I've changed." Recognition of the influence of professional identities on leadership practices allows leadership preparation and professional learning programs to assist new leaders in developing deep self-awareness, creating capacities in the human side of leadership, and understanding the source of their motivation and drive.

Implications for Policy

One implication for policymakers may be recognizing that principals need the flexibility to respond to the diverse needs of their community during uncertain times. This study found that some principals deviated from district direction by increasing learning opportunities or advocated for variations such as bringing students into the schools. Linda "had to maintain the high expectations that we have for student learning while not knowing what was really going on." Mary advocated for remote learning labs when her school returned to online learning for several weeks. "Students who did not have a computer or internet or who are high risk could come to school" and participate in online learning. While policymakers may strive to provide

equal opportunities for students during times of uncertainty, their decisions may be limiting. According to Stuart et al. (Stuart et al., 2013), principals need flexibility as they make decisions in the context of their community and school. Anthony's district provided documentation on "what instruction should look like." He said the focus was "more about trying to get devices, more about care, more about SEL [social-emotional learning], and less about instruction. That is hard for a principal. You want to keep rigor high." However, "asking the teachers to do more than their colleagues" was difficult. The decision "had to come from the teachers." Hence, they "put in a complex text block [time to study complex text] into our day because we just felt it was too important not to do." This study suggests that principals need latitude to meet the unique needs of their students and staff during uncertain times. Policymakers may benefit from recognizing the professional expertise of educators during uncertain times.

Recommendations for Further Research

While this study supports the literature, there is still much to learn about the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on school leadership. Participants had differing perspectives on the influence that leading during the pandemic had on them. The design of this study was descriptive and exploratory. Replicating the study to confirm the findings would be beneficial. Widening the participants to include secondary principals could provide additional information. The state of Colorado bound this study, and further research in expanded settings would be insightful since different regions and countries experienced different responses to the pandemic. This research focused solely on the perceptions of the principals. Adding the voices of others who worked with or alongside the principal could shed additional light on the pandemic's influence on principals' professional identities. Participants in this study had between 6 and 12 years of experience as a principal. Daniel had the most experience and felt the experience of leading through the

pandemic did not influence his professional identity. Further research could examine the level of influence that the pandemic had on principals based on their experience level.

Another area of study would be to understand if the shifts in professional identities resulted in long-term changes or if they were temporary as schools returned to learning and focused on academics. The further away the pandemic becomes, will the emphasis on caring and supporting people remain important and continue to grow, or will something else become important and take precedence? A longitudinal study that tracks the participants over time to understand if the changes were long-lasting or temporary would be valuable information about their professional identity development over time. Additionally, there is the possibility that the pandemic had additional influences on principals that are not yet visible.

An area for further study would be to understand the connection between the revised professional identity and their shifts in leader behavior, especially over an extended period. This research may shed light on the process of internalizing and applying lessons from various experiences. Such investigations have the potential to enrich academic conversations and broaden the perspectives on the practices of principals. Principals shared they saw themselves as more resilient. Is there a connection between resolving distress caused by unknown situations and developing resilience?

Summary

This research aimed to understand the perceived influence that leading through the COVID-19 pandemic had on principals' professional identities. The findings provided a rich description of the principals relying on their existing professional identities to navigate uncertainties, provide care, and maintain a feeling of control over the situation. The professional identities that the principals in this study relied on focused on caring for students and staff and

providing a sense of resiliency. They found ways to do what was best for children by extending learning opportunities. The participants served as role models to give a sense of control and hope.

As the principals in this study relied on their existing professional identities of being relational leaders, they found a need to adapt their practices to further extend care, especially for staff. The principals found they listened more frequently and acknowledged the challenges that the pandemic brought to personal lives and education. They also found that staff and the community viewed transparent communication as a source of care. As the principals engaged in a deeper level of practice of caring for staff for an extended time, their professional identity of being a relational leader developed a deeper level of ethic of care.

Leading during the COVID-19 pandemic brought times when the principals did not have an answer and needed the help of their staff. They shared leadership by engaging staff. In doing so, the principals sincerely appreciated their staff's expertise. This experience deepened the principals' existing professional identity of shared leadership. Throughout the pandemic, principals relied on their professional identities to lead. The pandemic also brought new experiences that engaged the principals in different practices. These diverse experiences shifted the principals' relational and shared leadership professional identities.

As I concluded this study, I recognized the importance of an individual's professional identity and reflected on Linda's comment that "there's good in the bad." While the principals in this study faced challenging times during the COVID-19 pandemic, their professional identities became their sources of strength and carried them through. As they reflected on the experience, they recognized growth within their professional identities. I better understand that distress from uncertainty is normal and adapting my skills and behaviors can lead to growth within my

professional identity. This study has brought a deeper understanding of the anonymous quote, "we don't grow when things are easy; we grow when we face challenges." I am inspired to assist others in recognizing their professional identity is a source of strength and that there are possibilities for growth even when we face challenging times.

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APPENDIX A
RECRUITMENT EMAIL TEMPLATE



Dear [principal],

For my dissertation, I am conducting a study to understand elementary principals' perceptions of the influence that the COVID-19 pandemic had on how they see themselves as principals and professionals. This study focuses on March of 2020 through today. My dissertation is through the University of Northern Colorado.

I would love to understand your perspective by interviewing you outside of your contract hours. This study consists of two interviews that will take between 60–90 minutes each. With your permission, the interview will be recorded and later transcribed. Your name and other identifying information, such as school or district names, will be replaced with pseudonyms to promote confidentiality. Your transcribed interview will be made available to you for review.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please respond to this email with a few dates and times. I will connect with you to schedule a time and place for the interview.

Thank you so much for your time, and I look forward to talking with you.

Melissa Gibson Steiner

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

School Principal Interview Protocol

First Interview

90 minutes

Participant's Pseudonym _____ Date _____

Introduction

I am Melissa Gibson-Steiner, and I am conducting research for my dissertation through the University of Northern Colorado.

Thank you so much for agreeing to visit with me and for your time to support my research.

- General-purpose of the study including the definition of the timeframe of interest. The purpose of this study is to understand public elementary school principals' perception of the influence that the COVID-19 pandemic had on how they see themselves as principals and professionals. This study focuses on March of 2020 through today.
- Aims of the interview and expected duration. This interview seeks to understand how you see yourself as a leader during the pandemic by listening to the stories you associated with your experience. I anticipate this interview to last 90 minutes.
- Who is involved in the process? My academic advisor will be reviewing the findings.
- Why the participant's cooperation is important? Each principal has had a different experience as they led through the pandemic. Your participation will help others understand the pandemic's influence on school leadership. You may be helping other school leaders, new leaders, and researchers through your participation.
- What will happen with the collected information, and how the participant will benefit: I am interviewing multiple participants to learn their stories. Transcripts will be kept confidential, and pseudonyms will be used to help protect your privacy. The findings from the different interviews will be compared and published in my final dissertation paper. A copy of these findings will be provided to you.
- Do you have any questions?
- Consent. Please review this consent form. If you agree to participate in this voluntary interview, please sign this consent form. There are two copies, one for you and one for me.
- Permission to record. Are you ok if I record our conversation?

Warm-up [background]

1. Tell me about your career to date.

Early educational experiences, early leadership experiences, university experiences, teaching background and experiences, leadership background and experiences

2. What inspired you to become a principal?

3. Tell me about any significant role models and how they contributed to who you are as a school leader.

4. Describe any situations or events that helped define who you are as a principal.

Now I will ask you some questions about your experiences as a principal during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Domain	Topic and Probes
School Context (10 minutes)	Please describe your school. Demographics, enrollment, grade levels, free/reduced status, culture, what makes it unique or special?
Lived Experience (40 Minutes)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Think back to the spring of 2020, it was the beginning of the pandemic, and schools had closed. Tell me how you saw yourself as a school leader at that time. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Tell me about a situation or an event that emphasized or changed the way you saw yourself as a principal. b. Tell me about a positive experience that emphasized or changed the way you saw yourself as a principal. 2. When you think about being a school leader last year, 2020-21, tell me how you saw yourself as a school leader last year? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Tell me about a situation or an event from last year that emphasized or changed the way you saw yourself as a principal. b. Tell me about a positive experience from last year that emphasized or changed the way you saw yourself as a principal. 3. It is now two years since the pandemic began. Tell me how you see yourself as a school leader now? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Tell me about a situation or an event from this school year that emphasized or changed the way you saw yourself as a principal. b. Tell me about a positive experience from this school year that emphasized or changed the way you saw yourself as a principal.
Reflection (30 minutes)	4. When you think back to who you were as a school leader before the pandemic and compare it to who you are now, tell me what stands out to you.

	5. As I listen, I am hearing... Does that accurately describe who you are as a school leader? Does this capture how the pandemic may have influenced you as a school leader?
--	--

Closing (5 minutes)

Is there anything else about how you see yourself as a school leader that you think is important to share?

To further understand your background, please take a moment to complete this voluntary demographic survey.

When we meet again, please bring an item or two representing who you are as a school leader. It may be an object, a photograph, etc.

Let's schedule a follow-up interview time for 2-3 weeks.

Do you know any other elementary principals who may be willing to participate in this research study? Would you provide an introduction?

Thank you for your time. I will send you a copy of your transcript for your review. I truly appreciate you and your willingness to support research on educational leadership.

School Principal Demographic Survey

Participant's Pseudonym _____ Date _____

To better understand your background, please complete this short demographic survey. Your participation in this survey is voluntary, and you may opt out of any section. Your responses will be kept confidential. Thank you for completing the following questions.

What gender do you identify with? _____

In which age range do you fall?

- Under 24 years old
- 25-34 years old
- 35-44 years old
- 45-54 years old
- 55-64 years old
- Over 65

Please specify your racial/ethnic background _____

What is the highest educational degree you have completed? _____

How many years have you been employed in education? _____

How many years have you worked at your current school? _____

What is the total number of years you have served as a school principal? _____

How many of those years have you served as the principal at your current school? _____

School Principal Interview Protocol
 Second Interview
 60 minutes

Participant's Pseudonym _____ Date _____

Introduction

Thank you so much for agreeing to continue our conversation and for your time to support my research.

- Review the general purpose of the study, including the definition of the timeframe of interest. The purpose of this study is to understand public elementary school principals' perception of the influence that the COVID-19 pandemic had on how they see themselves as principals and professionals. I am focusing on March 2020 through today.
- Review the aim of the interview and expected duration. This interview will continue our previous conversation to understand how you see yourself as a leader during the pandemic and any stories that are associated with your experience. I anticipate this interview to last 60 minutes.
- Permission to record. Are you ok if I record our conversation?

Warm-up

1. Meaningful item (artifact): Participants bring a meaningful item(s) representing who they are as professionals.
 - a. Tell me about your meaningful item and why you choose this item to bring today?
 - b. Explain what it means to you and how it represents you as a professional.
 - c. Would you have brought a different item before the pandemic? If so, what would it have been, and what would it have meant?

Domain	Topic and Probes
Lived Experience (40 Minutes)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Since we last talked, tell me about any other situations or events during the pandemic that emphasized or changed the way you saw yourself as a principal. 2. Ask specific questions for the individual participant based on the analysis of the first interview transcript and publicly available documents.
Member Check (15 minutes)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Share themes from the first interview. When you hear this, what are your thoughts? Does this capture who you are and how the pandemic has influenced you? Is there anything you would add, change, delete?

Closing (5 minutes)

Is there anything else about how you see yourself as a school leader that you think is important to share?

Do you know any other elementary principals who may be willing to participate in this research study? Would you provide an introduction? (If needed)

Thank you for your time. I will send you a copy of your transcript for your review. I truly appreciate you and your willingness to support research on educational leadership.

Specific Questions for Individual Participants

Allison from Apple Elementary School

- You spent a fair amount of time supporting teacher morale during the pandemic. What would you say is your takeaway from that experience? How does that relate to how you view your identity as a principal today?
- You mentioned developing your leadership capacity and understanding the importance of a strong team that will work together to do what's best for the school and the kids. You also mentioned developing staff capacity to take on leadership roles and becoming more comfortable letting people know you would love them to take on a leadership role and asking how you can support them. Tell me about an experience supporting a staff member to take on a leadership role during the pandemic. How does this experience relate to how you view your identity as a principal?

Anthony from Peach Elementary School

- You highlighted engaging the teacher's voice in change efforts during the interview. You also mention Kotter's change model and the use of a core change team. I would like to understand better if the pandemic influenced how you see this part of your leadership. As you reflect on your leadership today, tell me about empowering teachers to lead change.
- When you think about who you are as a leader and reflect before the pandemic, what stands out to you?

Daniel from Melon Elementary School

- You mentioned collaborative decision-making during the pandemic. Tell me about that experience.

- You mentioned that you have grown professionally and cannot pinpoint whether the pandemic or other professional growth caused that change. Tell me how you have grown professionally over the past two years.
- You mentioned reading "Talk Less and Ask more questions." What prompted you to read this book?

Hannah from Berry Elementary School

- Last time, you mentioned delegating a couple of times. First, you shared about becoming more intentional in supporting teachers. You switched from scheduled breaks for your teachers to giving breaks in the moment, such as walking a class to lunch. You mentioned you had learned to do a little bit more delegating yet still be present. The second time you were talking about increased staffing for this year.
- Can you expand on delegating?

Linda from Cherry Elementary School

- You mentioned becoming a better collaborator. Can you tell me about a situation or experience where collaboration was important as you led through the pandemic?
- You mentioned your assistant principal and counselor several times during our last conversation. Tell me about utilizing your admin team as you led through the pandemic.
- When you consider utilizing your admin team now compared to before the pandemic, does anything stand out to you?
- You mentioned hiring a substitute within the building to help provide coverage. Were there other situations where you needed to build in flexibility? As a leader, how do you see flexibility now compared to before the pandemic?

Mary from Fig Elementary School

- You mentioned increasing communication during the pandemic. Tell me about an event or situation which required more communication.
 - How do you see communication in relation to who you are as a leader?
- You mentioned being angry about the lack of support as you endured the pandemic. Tell me about an event or situation which helps to understand this anger.
 - How do you see support in the relationship to who you are as a leader now?

APPENDIX C
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO

Institutional Review Board

Date: 05/05/2022
Principal Investigator: Melissa Gibson-Steiner

Committee Action: **IRB EXEMPT DETERMINATION – New Protocol**
Action Date: 05/05/2022

Protocol Number: [2203036276](#)
Protocol Title: Elementary Principals Perceptions Influence of Covid-19 on Professional Identities - Doctoral Study

Expiration Date:

The University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol and determined your project to be exempt under 45 CFR 46.104(d)(702) for research involving

Category 2 (2018): EDUCATIONAL TESTS, SURVEYS, INTERVIEWS, OR OBSERVATIONS OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR. Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 45 CFR 46.111(a)(7).

You may begin conducting your research as outlined in your protocol. Your study does not require further review from the IRB, unless changes need to be made to your approved protocol.

As the Principal Investigator (PI), you are still responsible for contacting the UNC IRB office if and when:



UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO

Institutional Review Board

- You wish to deviate from the described protocol and would like to formally submit a modification request. Prior IRB approval must be obtained before any changes can be implemented (except to eliminate an immediate hazard to research participants).
- You make changes to the research personnel working on this study (add or drop research staff on this protocol).
- At the end of the study or before you leave The University of Northern Colorado and are no longer a student or employee, to request your protocol be closed. *You cannot continue to reference UNC on any documents (including the informed consent form) or conduct the study under the auspices of UNC if you are no longer a student/employee of this university.
- You have received or have been made aware of any complaints, problems, or adverse events that are related or possibly related to participation in the research.

If you have any questions, please contact the Research Compliance Manager, Nicole Morse, at 970-351-1910 or via e-mail at nicole.morse@unco.edu. Additional information concerning the requirements for the protection of human subjects may be found at the Office of Human Research Protection website - <http://hhs.gov/ohrp/> and <https://www.unco.edu/research/research-integrity-and-compliance/institutional-review-board/>.

Sincerely,

Nicole Morse
Research Compliance Manager

University of Northern Colorado: FWA00000784

APPENDIX D
INFORMED CONSENT FORM



Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research

Title of Research Study: Elementary Principals' Perceptions of the Influence of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Their Professional Identities

Researcher(s): Melissa Gibson-Steiner, gibs5175@bears.unco.edu

Research Advisor: Dr. Michael Cohen, Michael.Cohen@unco.edu

Procedures:

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand elementary principals' perceptions of the influence that the COVID-19 pandemic had on how they see themselves as principals and professionals. Conclusions from this study will help researchers and education leaders develop a mutual understanding of current perspectives of principals' professional identity. The pandemic has been an unprecedented situation experienced by the world. The research question for this study is: How do elementary principals perceive the influence of the pandemic on their professional identities?

As a participant in this research, you will be asked to participate in two semi-structured one-on-one interviews with the researcher. You have the option of participating in person or virtually using Zoom. The interviews will be audio-recorded (no video recording) and transcribed. You will also be asked to complete a short demographic survey to collect specific demographic data such as gender, age, education, and work experience. To promote confidentiality, participants will be identified by a pseudonym within the data and reporting of this research. Publicly available documents gathered for this study will be stripped of any

identifiable information (e.g., district names, school names, staff member names). All data collected will be kept on the University of Northern Colorado OneDrive password-protected account or in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office. All data will be destroyed after three years. Examples of questions may include

- Think back to the spring of 2020, it was the beginning of the pandemic, and schools had closed. Tell me how you saw yourself as a school leader at that time.
- When you think about being a school leader last year, 2020-21, tell me how you saw yourself as a school leader?
- It is now two years since the pandemic began. Tell me how you see yourself as a school leader now?
- When you think back to who you were as a school leader before the pandemic and compare it to who you are now, tell me what stands out to you.

Questions: If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact Melissa Gibson-Steiner at gibs5175@bears.unco.edu. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Nicole Morse, Research Compliance Manager, University of Northern Colorado at nicole.morse@unco.edu.

Voluntary Participation: Please understand that your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study, and if you begin participation, you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in the loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Participant Signature

Date

Investigator Signature

Date