

2-2023

**WEATHERING THE STORM: VETERAN ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS
NAVIGATING HYPERSTRESS THROUGH THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC**

Matt Hilderbrand

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/edleadstudent>



Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#)

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

WEATHERING THE STORM: VETERAN ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS
NAVIGATING HYPERSTRESS THROUGH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

By

Matt Hilderbrand

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Educational Leadership

Under the Supervision of Dr. Jeanne L. Surface

Omaha, Nebraska

February 2023

Supervisory Committee:

Jeanne L. Surface, Ed.D.

Elliott Ostler, Ed.D.

Kay A. Keiser, Ed.D.

Amanda Steiner, Ed.D.

WEATHERING THE STORM: VETERAN ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS
NAVIGATING HYPERSTRESS THROUGH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Matt Hilderbrand, Ed.D.

University of Nebraska, 2023

Advisor: Jeanne L. Surface, Ed.D.

Abstract

School Districts across the nation are looking for the best principals to lead their schools. There is a need for highly effective school principals in public schools for the benefit of students, staff, and the general community. The role of the principal can offer extensive challenges and elevated levels of stress. School principals face this elevated pressure and stress on a continuous basis. Veteran principals, those who have led for a decade or more, have come to understand this stress. However, the consuming impact of the COVID-19 pandemic created hyperstressful conditions for elementary principals. Hyperstressful environments are classified as intense bouts of stress experienced over long periods of time which often led to exhaustion. This study examines the stories of veteran elementary principals as they led through the hyperstressful environment of the pandemic. The method of research for this study consisted of a series of semi-structured interviews. The findings and analysis provide clarity to the complexities of leading an elementary school through the pandemic. Analysis of this qualitative data produced connected themes. The findings can be utilized by principals and school districts to help school principals prepare for hyperstress and learn from successful veterans in the profession.

Dedication

To My Wife, Allison:

It is an absolute privilege to be married to you. You have supported me over the past 10 years in my passion for continued education. You have shown grace, patience, and support of our family. You are one of the strongest women I know, and our kids are so lucky to call you, their mom. I have learned so much from you about setting boundaries, organizing ideas, and following through. You were my major source of support as I lost my mom during the pandemic. You have been incredibly supportive, and I am more than grateful to walk through this journey of life with you.

To Our Kids:

I know I took time away from our family in pursuit of this research and degree. I want you to know this was intentional, while you are little, so we may share so many more memories in the future. For Mason, who is always thinking, Lucas who is always caring, Jackson who is always smiling, and Kinslee who is just learning to survive around three older brothers, may this be a reminder that you can do anything to which you set your mind. Your mom and I will be here to support you in the pursuit of your dreams.

To Mom and Dad:

This paper is dedicated to you as people who I admire and appreciate. Dad, you taught me the power of dedicated work to achieve your goals. You have been a support system for me throughout my life and I appreciate your wisdom throughout this process. It will come to no surprise to you that I was able to complete this research following one of the mantras you taught me early on in life. I was most definitely “Early to Rise” and I seek to become ‘wise’. Mom, I love you and miss you dearly.

Acknowledgements

This research journey was made possible by the support I had from so many people. I am extremely thankful to each of you for helping me to achieve this major professional milestone.

- To Dr. Surface, Dr. Keiser, and the Supervisory Committee at the University of Nebraska at Omaha: Thank you for your support in my two graduate programs. I highly value and appreciate the education I have received in your care.
- To my fellow classmates and inner circle of principals: Thank you for your friendships and support throughout this process. The completion of this work would not have been possible without you. When the stress of the profession is a heavy burden, I know each one of you is only a phone call or text away.
- To the research participants: Thank you for your time, energy, and patience as we deconstructed a deeply personal time in your leadership journey. The stories you shared made a deep impact on my life. I appreciate each of you, the time you invested in this process, and most importantly the leadership you demonstrate every day as the leader of your school community.
- To a supporting cast: Thank you to everyone who gave me ideas, inspiration, and support. Dr. Carson and Dr. Mueller, thank you for providing resources and feedback to guide me in producing this dissertation. I am thankful you have given me honest feedback to improve the quality of this research.
- To my Patriot Family: Patriot Elementary holds a special place in my heart. We have navigated many difficult situations but have held together as a family

through the good times and the bad. I appreciate all of you and the support you have shown me along the way.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
	Dedication
	iii
	Acknowledgements
	iv
	Table of Contents
vi	List of Multimedia Objects
x	CHAPTER 1: Introduction
1	Problem Statement
6	Purpose Statement
7	Research Question
8	Theoretical Framework
8	Operational Definitions
10	Significance of the Study
10	Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations
12	CHAPTER 2: Literature Review
15	Part I: The Principal's Impact on Student Learning
16	The Complexity of the Principalship - A Historical Lens
17	Part II: Stress of the Principal
18	Work Related Stress
18	Impact of Stress
19	Prevailing Leaders and Contending with Stress
22	Emotion-Focused Coping
23	Emotional Intelligence and Self-Efficacy
24	Exercise and Physical Condition

25	Social Coping
25	Individual Connections and Support
26	School Community Connections and Support
27	Problem-Focused Coping
29	Instantaneous Change in the Principalship: The COVID 19 Pandemic
30	Summary of Literature Review
32	CHAPTER 3: Research Methodology
34	Research Question
38	Research Design: Qualitative
39	Qualitative Research Approach: Narrative
39	Role of the Researcher
41	Participant Selection
42	Instruments
44	Data Collection and Analysis
44	Verification Strategies
48	Ethical Considerations
50	Summary of Assumptions and Limitations
51	CHAPTER 4: Findings
52	Part 1: Study Context
53	Research Question and Interviews
53	Introduction to the Participants
54	Individual Participant Profiles
55	Part 2: The Context of the Pandemic

65	The Initial Wave of the Pandemic (March-May, 2020)
65	The Incessant Years of the Pandemic (April, 2020-Spring 2022)
73	Context of the Pandemic (Summary)
84	Part 3: Themes and Sub-themes
85	Theme 1: The Principal's View of Stress
85	Theme 2: Resilient Principals Know What 'It' Is and Do What 'It' Takes
110	Theme 3: Release and Coping with Stress
118	Coping with Stress
132	CHAPTER 5: Implications and Professional Recommendations
141	Summary of Findings
142	Comparison of Findings to the Literature
142	Principal Leadership during the Pandemic
143	Principal Stress
143	Implications and Considerations
143	Considerations for School Districts
144	Influence on Current Elementary Principals
145	Recommendations for Aspiring Elementary Principals
146	Recommendations for Future Research
150	Retrospective Reflection
152	References
155	Appendix A: Initial Email to Participants
166	Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Questions
167	Appendix C: CITI Certificate

168Appendix D: Institutional Review Board Approval

169Appendix E: Informed Consent

171Appendix F: Demographics/Member Checking Email

172

List of Multimedia Objects

Table 1	<i>Areas Characterized as an Extreme or High Concern by 50% or More Principals</i>	20
----------------	--	----

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

As an elementary principal, my leadership has been heavily influenced by my past experiences. First as a subject of school leadership, then as a learner through observation, and now as a peer and mentor to school leaders. Growing up in a rural community, I had principals and school leaders that positively influenced my view of leadership. In fact, as part of a shadowing opportunity for ‘Career Day’ in my own high school, I spent a day with my high school principal learning about his leadership philosophies and management techniques. I vividly recalled that experience as I stood in the hallway as a 16-year-old student dressed in slacks, a collared shirt and tie, monitoring my peers during passing periods. I went on to envision myself in the role of the principal because of this experience.

As an education major in college, I had multiple professors that invested in me and helped mentor me toward school leadership. One of these professors encouraged me to take two different trips to Chicago to experience urban, inter-city schools. This experience highlighted the contrast between education as I knew it and the urban setting of Chicago which, at the time, was home to the third largest school district in the United States. I distinctly remember observing and learning from the systems that were in place for these schools. These schools were impacted by the use of public transportation on school attendance, safety and security features upon entry into the building (i.e., metal detectors and armed security), and inconsistent classroom instruction, consisting of high levels of student absence and behavior management.

The other professor, who had a major influence on my education program, gave me insight into what it was like to be a principal in a local school district. He explained local politics as well as the history and culture of the area, and how each of these ideas influenced his leadership in public school administration. This professor also challenged me to serve all students and taught me lessons about leading adults that carried on still today. During my undergraduate degree, the outcomes of these experiences guided my vision for pursuing my passion toward school leadership.

Following graduation, with an undergraduate degree and a Masters in the Art of Teaching, I put my learning into practice. As a new hire as a middle school social sciences teacher, additional roles as a coach and sponsor became a priority. Shortly into my teaching tenure, I began taking on leadership responsibilities in the school. I was a teacher leader with technology integration, instituted building systems for intervention and enrichment, and was active in coaching a variety of sports and activities. During this time, I learned from exceptional building leaders about management of people, systems, and creating positive school culture. I observed principals being model examples of professionalism and positive representatives for the school and District. Further, I was given opportunities to learn and grow because of the trust and accountability I demonstrated as a teacher leader. I remember one principal saying, “You continue to take on more and more and do it at a high level. That is a mark of a dedicated leader” (S. Ballmer, personal communication, 2011). During my tenure as a teacher, I continued to learn through my formal education process as well. I entered a master’s degree program for Educational Administration and Supervision through the University of Nebraska

Omaha. I learned from faculty about their experiences in leadership taking and using certain philosophies and strategies that aligned with my personal beliefs.

Following completion of my degree in Administration and Supervision, I once again learned through experience by transitioning to a formal leadership position. I left teaching at the middle school to enter the elementary setting, where I started my first formal leadership role as an assistant principal. I learned and adapted to this new environment by observing leadership within the building in instructional practices and positive management of people. This experience challenged me to rethink educational conversations at a different level and interactions with staff and students in the elementary setting was an adjustment. This experience reframed what I thought I knew about education and how one serves students. Specifically, I watched and learned from my principal as she challenged through questioning and created a culture of learning with her staff. As I began my first experience leading a building, all these experiences helped shape me as a professional.

As I began my professional career as a principal, I was hired at the largest elementary building in the fourth largest school district in this Midwestern state. I quickly realized the experience of the first year as a principal was quite intense. Almost overnight, I was faced with elevated expectations as I transitioned from the assistant principal role to building principal. However, I was fortunate to work closely with an assistant principal and leaned heavily on veteran principals familiar with the district for guidance. In addition, I collaborated and asked questions from those who I trusted for advice and support. Through this learning process, I cultivated relationships and trust within my principal cohort, much like I did as a teacher. I have grown in my own

leadership over the last 6 years as a principal. Currently, I am able to give back to those who are starting their journey through the principalship, as I see this as an evolution within my career at every stage. Based on my experience, leadership evolution takes place in a three-step process: listen and learn the environment to which you were exposed, build capacity in yourself and others, and complete the circle by sharing ideas and collaborating with those who are beginning their own quest through the principalship. This evolution has been present in each stage of my previous experiences and it has helped guide me on my journey, playing a part in how I reviewed and analyzed the research gathered in this study. I am thankful for the mentors and experiences I've had in my path through education. It is evident that each mentorship opportunity helped me to navigate the stress and demands of the principalship along the way.

The philosophical and personal stance outlined above is evidence of my journey through education and into leadership. I am aware of my own personal position, history, and background, which led me to take a vested interest in the research conducted in this study. I am also aware that I only bring one perspective to the table, that of a Caucasian, male from a Midwestern state who grew up in a rural community with a population just over 3,000 people. I am unique in my experiences all the while living a typical lifestyle of a lower middle-class family in the region. I have been exposed to small town value systems, conservative political views, and have been shaped by a liberal arts college and suburban school districts that serve a suburban metropolitan area. I have worked in education for over 12 years, 4 as a teacher, 2 as an assistant principal, and 6 as a building principal. I have three post-secondary degrees and have been formally educated in the post-secondary education setting for over six years. I am deeply invested in the

information gathered in this study as I seek to better understand the effects of hyperstress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Above all, mentorship in the principalship is the common theme that motivates me to study this topic in detail. The principalship is an incredibly demanding career that challenges leaders mentally and physically. Given the most recent history of the pandemic, there are many lessons that can be learned from the lived experiences of principals who led during the pandemic. As outlined above, there have been many people who have mentored me in this journey. As a form of mentorship for school principals, the data collected in this study along with themes and analysis will serve as a type of mentorship I would offer to the next generation of school leaders.

People are at the heart of the education profession. The experiences and impact of people on my journey inspired me to the process of a qualitative study with the emphasis on hyperstress in principals. My own personal experience of this hyperstress guided me into knowing I wanted to learn more about other individuals' experiences and challenges of leading a school during the pandemic; sharing the stories of these veteran principals in a way that integrates their connectedness and reflects on the reality of their experiences.

My personal philosophies and stance outlined above were revealed through this research, as well as through my own personal reflection and reflexivity. This study will seek to further uncover the stories told through the lens of the principals who have experienced the hyperstress created by the pandemic. This study allowed study participants to explore their experiences prior to the pandemic and how their world of leadership changed because of it. The key to this narrative study was to unpack the

minds of veteran elementary principals to better understand the influence of the pandemic on their leadership.

Problem Statement

Principals are often under great amounts of stress and pressure as they fulfill job responsibilities. These leaders are asked to manage numerous staff, lead school change, process and manage student behavior, and increase school-community relations just to name a few. These responsibilities lead to hours of dedication both physically and emotionally to support the school community (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Simply put, principals do not have time during the regular school day or working hours to complete the tasks the job requires (Harding, 2016). Specifically, from 2019-2021, these working conditions intensified due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic's onset was accompanied by health concerns, political polarity, and a general fear of the unknown. Veteran elementary principals are generally aware of the normal high stress of their job. The pandemic added an additional and arguably more intense layer of stress which, at its height, permeated across 3 school years. Principals, specifically, were forced to adapt their leadership to fit the uniqueness of these circumstances while each school year presented different parameters for school operations. COVID-19 challenged school leaders to find alternative ways to lead their buildings and students, increasing levels of stress over a long period of time. For this study, 'hyperstress' coincides with these extreme levels of stress over a long period of time. Although administrators are typically under stressful conditions as a regular part of their job (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Kelliher et al., 2019), by adding the operational definition of hyperstress, which administrators have experienced in a new era of leadership, principals were faced with an

immense leadership challenge. The need for this research comes on the heels of school leadership through multiple years of extremes presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Prior to the pandemic, principals were facing high amounts of mobility and attrition due to the complexity of their profession. To illustrate, among all U.S. public school principals in 2015-16, approximately 82% of principals remained at the same school the next year, 6% moved to a different campus, and 10% left the principalship (Goldring & Taie, 2018). With nearly 20% change in leadership from year to year, schools are consistently working through the impact of leadership change in their organizations. In order to curb the loss of positive school leadership, this study aimed to learn from veteran principals and their experiences. This knowledge and understanding will help demonstrate the current reality of school leadership. As a result, more informed school officials may be able to better equip school leaders in the future for the demands of the position. Current school leaders, as well as aspiring administrators, could learn from those experts who have come before them and apply this knowledge when future experiences of hyperstress are presented.

Purpose Statement

Stress is, “the wear and tear in the body caused by life at any one time” (Selye, 1956). The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the impact of hyperstress associated with the COVID-19 pandemic on veteran elementary principals serving in Midwestern, suburban elementary schools. By utilizing a veteran group of principals, the study isolated the impact of the pandemic stress on principals who had many experiences in the principalship prior to this era of leadership. In Chapter 3, we review the literature

to create a background and understanding of the influence of the principal in schools and the stress typically associated with this profession.

Research Question

There is a history of concern for the number of qualified leaders in the role of the principal (Norton, 2002), as this profession includes an overwhelming amount of job roles and responsibilities. As such, there is a need to hear from perspectives of veterans in the field who have persisted through extreme levels of stress with success. Therefore, the central research question identified in this study was:

1. How did hyperstress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic influence veteran elementary school principals' leadership experiences?

Theoretical Framework

Hans Selye was a leader in the medical field as well as the scientist who is credited with uncovering the theory of stress (Tan & Yip, 2018). Selye was a Doctor of Medicine and philosophy and was nominated for a Nobel Prize in 1949 prior to his publication of his most famous book, *The Stress of Life* (Tan & Yip, 2018). In this book, Selye (1956) outlined stress as part of the body's response to different situations presented in the environment, including the body's own ability to respond to such stimuli. Hans Selye's Theory of Stress is the theoretical framework for this study. Selye's explanations and uncovering of stress parallels the stress reported by elementary principals. This theory serves as the theoretical framework as a means for understanding the complexities of the position and the experiences of elementary principals leading through the COVID-19 pandemic. To illustrate, Selye explained his views on stress:

No one can live without experiencing some degree of stress all the time. You may think that only serious disease or intensive physical or mental injury can cause stress. This is false. Crossing a busy intersection, exposure to a draft, or even sheer joy are enough to activate the body's stress-mechanism to some extent. Stress is not even necessarily bad for you; it is also the spice of life, for any emotion, any activity causes stress. But, of course, your system must be prepared to take it. The same stress which makes one person sick can be an invigorating experience for another (Selye, 1956, p. xv).

Selye's theory of stress outlines the importance of knowing and understanding stress as there are both mental and physical implications as humans experience stress differently. His work theorized that humans could contend with stress by increasing the body's own defense against stress, dissecting troubles and stressors of adaptation to meet these stresses, and being true to one's own self (Selye, 1956). He explained the basic definition of stress, "Stress turned out to be something quite simple to understand: the nonspecific response to any demand, including efforts to cope with the wear and tear in the body caused by life at one time. (Selye, 1956, p. 398). This simplified definition of stress allows for a closer examination of the 'life' experiences of a principal that may cause 'wear and tear' on the body. Selye (1956) further explained the stages in which the body experiences this stress. He outlined his theory of stress response and concluded that extreme and prolonged cases of stress on the body can eventually produce extreme exhaustion and even death. This theory of stress is used as the framework for understanding the hyperstress experienced by principals as leaders during the pandemic.

Operational Definitions

This section includes definitions of terms and concepts used through the study:

COVID-19 Pandemic: a world-wide pandemic that originated in Wuhan, China in 2019.

Burnout: a state of emotional, mental, and often physical exhaustion brought on by prolonged or repeated stress.

Hyperstress: a person's exposure to levels of stress, to a degree that invokes extreme mental or psychological strain, over a prolonged period of time.

Instructional Leadership: the impact of the principal's direct practices on teachers and students related to teaching and learning.

Pandemic: an outbreak of a disease which produces rapid spread over a wide geographic area.

Stress: defined by the World Health Organization (2022): "any type of change that causes physical, emotional, or psychological strain. Stress is your body's response to anything that requires attention or action."

Transformational Leadership: a leader's ability to facilitate and inspire second order change (Leithwood & Poplin, 1992).

Veteran Principals: principals who have a tenure in the principalship for 10 or more years.

Work-Life Balance: the ever-changing relationship between work and life responsibilities which vie for a person's time (Tapp, 2018).

Significance of the Study

A principal's exposure to stress shapes his or her ability to effectively lead the school community. Selye (1956) described three ways in which stress may be interpreted by the body in response to initiation of the stimuli. The first is the alarm reaction, followed by the stage of resistance, and finally the stage of exhaustion. According to the three ideas, principals may vary in their response to stimuli as well as the impact that may take place as a result. Hyperstress created by the COVID-19 pandemic, however, has never been experienced in this manner of school leadership. This leads to the belief that for much of the pandemic, principals lived their experiences in the third phase, being impacted to the state of exhaustion. Lucker et al., (2022) explained, "During the pandemic...every third principal (32.7%) had serious thoughts of leaving the profession" (p. 9). Examining the layers of stress created by the pandemic may increase the body of evidence surrounding the already well documented stress related to this role.

With the onset of the pandemic, transformational and instructional leadership was replaced with a need for managing safety protocols, pandemic responses, community crisis, and top-down directives - many of which originated with Boards of Education and Superintendents with a political influence from the school community (Fotheringham, et al., 2022; Lucker et al., 2022; Schiffer et al., 2021). Changes in learning modes and platforms, quarantine, masking mandates as well as a general fear and uncertainty caused many complicated implications for school leaders. Foundational skills and characteristics principals had previously relied on, including their own leadership philosophy could, no longer take priority (Middleton, 2020). Moreover, Liphadzi et al., (2017) explained differences between leading and managing. Leading, is providing a driving force to

achieve the vision and missions of an organization. Managing, on the other hand, is leading a project from inception to execution. In many cases, principals made an almost immediate shift from leading to managing their building. Therefore, understanding this shift gives context for how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the trajectory of principals as instructional leaders in their buildings.

Historically, principals play a key role in many aspects of the student experience. Therefore, acknowledging the importance of the principal in student learning prior to the pandemic, is crucial. To illustrate, principal impact, according to Hattie (2009), showed a high effect size in relation to student learning and achievement. Much research exists to support the direct and indirect influence of the principal on student learning (Fuller & Hollingworth, 2018; Horwood et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020; Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022). While research has previously conducted general studies related to stress, burnout, and the role of the principal, this study focuses on the specific experiences of five veteran elementary principals in the Midwest through the COVID-19 pandemic. Their specific stories, experiences, and impact of the Pandemic on their leadership adds to the body of research for future understanding of this worldwide event. The themes derived from the interviews, connected to existing research on elementary principals, may be utilized as a means for personal or systems improvements in support of principals as they navigate future hyperstressful situations.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

This narrative study consists of research collected from five veteran elementary principals who contended with hyperstress during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research conducted through interviews with participants was assumed to reflect their experiences

and stories they remember from this time. The researcher assumed having previous relationships with participants and creating rapport through the research process increased the likelihood that participants shared honestly and openly about their experiences. Participants engaged in conversations throughout the interviews, this exchange of experiences may have influenced the outcome of information presented by the participant. Furthermore, the researcher acknowledged potential bias related to this research due to the researcher's personal connection with participants as well as his work as a principal in this profession. As the instrument for data collection, the researcher was cognizant of these factors and their potential influence throughout the research process.

Participants were purposefully selected for this study because of their location to one metropolitan area that shared similar governing bodies. The five participants lead schools in suburban, Midwestern locations and represent multiple school districts. The participants in this study have (a) been a principal in the same school district for a minimum of 10 years, (b) served in an elementary school setting with students below the seventh-grade level, and (c) experienced the COVID-19 pandemic as the leader of their building. The researcher identified these individuals based on references from leaders of the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) or his own personal knowledge of the leader. Each participant agreed to participate in this research study by signing written consent or verbal informed consent collected via video interviewing. Given the sample size, there is not an ability to generalize these results to the larger population.

Chapter 2 reviewed the literature surrounding the central research question. The following chapter, Chapter 3, outlines the research methodology for this study including

participants, interviews, and methods for obtaining data. Chapter 4 are the themes and findings constructed from the interviews and Chapter 5 is a review of the implications of this study and future recommendations for extended research opportunities as a result.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Chapter 2 of this study examines the professional literature related to the job of the principal in conjunction with the stress experienced by these professionals. The review of literature spans a variety of topics directly related to the themes that emerged from participants as part of their interviews. With the emerging themes identified from the interviews, the review of this literature has a clearly defined and narrowed focus. The literature review presents research regarding two major factors that influenced principal leadership during the pandemic. The first part of the literature review presents research regarding the historical understanding of the principal role in leading a school. The second part of the literature review examines the principal role in relation to stress of the position and how principals have traditionally coped with different forms of stress. Finally, a brief introduction as to how the COVID-19 pandemic created hyperstress is shared. Themes and sub-themes that were hypothesized prior to this research remained prevalent as told through the accounts of those interviewed. In addition to the hypothesized themes, there were additional sub-themes that emerged in a way that prompted the need for an additional review of the current literature.

Stress is the theoretical framework upon which this study is centered. Selye (1956) outlined the concept of stress in a way that remains relevant and applicable today. His theory of stress serves as the framework for this research and the classical view of stress parallels that which principals endured throughout the pandemic. The connections made between the theoretical framework and stress experienced by principals are outlined in the following section of the research process.

Part I: The Principal's Impact on Student Learning

“Leadership matters. Principals make a difference” (Many & Sparks-Many, 2014, p. 7). In order to comprehend the role of the elementary principal, it is important to understand the principal's role in the overall success of the school. The impact of the principal is evident in a variety of ways. To begin with, there is a body of literature to support the importance of the principal in student outcomes (Fuller et al., 2017; Louis et al., 2010). Due to the high impact of principal leadership, being second only to classroom instruction (Louis et al., 2010), the principal is a foundational piece in the effectiveness of leading a successful school. A meta-analysis of over 10,000 relationships in education reported the most significant factors on student learning (Wang et al., 1993). The findings indicated direct practices have significantly more impact on student learning than indirect practices.

Not surprisingly, principals are the leaders charged with creating an environment for direct practices and school culture. For instance, instructional leadership practices, facilitated by the principal, create environments that allow this direct impact to increase. School culture, classroom, management, and instruction were other key findings of this analysis (DiPaola & Hoy, 2015). The impact of leadership on student learning has been studied extensively (Elmore, 2000, 2005; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood et al., 2012; Marzano et al., 2005). More specifically, the type of leadership displayed matters to student learning. Hattie (2009) divided school leadership into two types of leaders - transformational and instructional. He found that both leadership styles had a

positive effect on student learning, but instructional leadership had a much higher effect size that of .42. Effect size helps quantify the impact of practices on student learning and explains ‘how much’ of an impact certain interventions have on student learning outcomes. The hinge point, as defined by Hattie of .4 or higher indicates the desired effects of the intervention.

The Complexity of the Principalship - A Historical Lens

Effective school principals have shown to be essential to moving schools forward (Hattie, 2009). This often takes time and resources of support to help grow the leader for the benefit of the school. An effective principal is essential for continuous school improvement, but stable school leadership is also important because organizational learning and improvement takes time (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Research shows that school leadership is the second most influential factor on student achievement (Kafka, 2009; Louis et al., 2010; Xhomara, 2021). As a result, there has been a greater amount of pressure from external forces on those who aspire to these principal positions. These external forces, paired with increased responsibilities of the principal, have produced complex leadership positions within schools. Xhomara (2021) stated:

The principals face considerable role ambiguity. There is a gap between the principal’s job description and the actual day-to-day duties...The new era of instructional leadership has predictably placed significant demands for accountability for student success and equity on the principal. (p. 159-160)

The role of the principal is complex, challenging, and consuming of both time and emotional output. These factors have resulted in fewer applicants and interest in the

principal position (Beusaert et al., 2016; Darmondy & Smyth, 2016). While in the position, principals are faced with increased work demands and lower job satisfaction. However, school leaders have experienced increasing levels of burnout while simultaneously experiencing high levels of job satisfaction (DeMatthews et al, 2021; Fuller et al., 2018; Horwood et al, 2021). The nuances of the principalship are explored in more detail as part of this review of literature.

Part II: Stress of the Principal

Work Related Stress

Throughout the last 2 decades, the stress related to the role of the principal has increased. The complexity of the position now requires principals to oversee and lead a larger quantity of initiatives of a more diverse nature. The principal is seen as the instructional leader, manager, and visionary for the school (Elomaa et al., 2021). These increased demands are causing more principals to feel stress, some of which is due to the need for resources to support their role (Curbow et al., 2000). “Regardless of the cultural differences and diversity in the school systems, the size of the principals’ workloads and the lack of time to focus on teaching and learning were two main causes of their stress” (Elomaa et. al., 2021, p.15). Increased demands played a role in job satisfaction for principals as well. Turnbull et al., (2013) and Horwood et al. (2021) showed inconsistencies between job satisfaction and depression, noting principals felt positive about their job while showing only a small group of principals experiencing higher levels of depression. Similarly found in the education profession, Darmody and Smyth (2016) suggested teachers can also experience high levels of stress while simultaneously having

higher levels of job satisfaction. This research shows a paradox in education and working to serve students.

Prolonged periods of stress are often associated with burnout. When an individual experiences increased job demands that are perceived as stressful, principals display symptoms of burnout (Beausaert et al., 2021). In the US, for example, the NAESP (2018) reported nearly three in every four principals regularly experience stress-related symptoms that can affect their physical, emotional, and mental health. These symptoms have a personal impact on principals which is explored in the next section.

Impact of Stress

The stress created in the field of education often produces high levels of mental health. “In 2008, mental ill health for the education sector was almost double the rate for all industry” (Phillips & Sen, 2011, p. 178). To illustrate, Patton et al., (2003) summarized stress data into categories. Stress related to the principalship can be classified through workload, interpersonal conflicts, lack of resources, and internal pressures. These factors contributed to higher levels of stress in their roles. This research was congruent with previous research (von Fischer & De Jong, 2017; Leventis et al., 2017; Mahfouz, 2020).

Understanding more specifically these stressors gives a view into the role of the principal. As part of a 10-year report, the National Association of Elementary School principals (2018) outlined the top concerns facing elementary school principals. The highest of these concerns being, “the increase in the numbers of students with emotional

problems” (p. 83). Table 1, adapted from (p. 86) classified the findings in relation to areas of extreme concern above the 50-percentage mark. See Table 1.

Table 1

Areas Characterized as an Extreme or High Concern by 50% or More Principals, 2018

Area	<i>% of principals</i>
Increase in the number of students with emotional problems	73.7
Student mental health issues	65.5
Students not performing to their level of potential	62.3
Providing a continuum of services for students who are at risk	61.6
Student assessment	57.2
Student poverty	56.5
Instructional practices	55.8
Teacher performance/effectiveness	55.1
Professional development of staff	55.0
Fragmentation of principal’s time	53.5
Management of student behavior	52.5
Financial resources	50.8

(The Pre-K-8 School Leader in 2018: A 10-Year Study of the principalship, 2018)

The principals who participated in this survey indicated that roughly 74% had either high or extreme concerns surrounding the increased number of students experiencing emotional problems. When compared to the 2008 report from NAESP, this indicator was not even a part of that list. Approximately one in three principals stated their concern specifically in this category for students experiencing mental health issues (Fuller et al.,

2018). The increased demand for support of student mental health was supplemented by elementary principals' higher levels of concern for management of student behavior, absenteeism, lack of effective adult supervision, and student poverty. These rising concerns have altered the role of the principal but fall in line with previous research. Principals have struggled with high workloads and the ability to effectively utilize their time for the benefit of the school community. In this report, over half of principals experienced fragmented work time and increased concerns over student health and well-being (Fuller et al., 2018).

“As people enter into a new level of school administration, they certainly face long-term challenges as to whether they will remain in their positions” (Bauer & Silver, 2018, p. 317). Principals are exposed to stress as part of their profession as previously outlined by Selye (1956) suggesting stress is a normal reaction of the body to stimuli presented from the environment. In education, principals often juggle many responsibilities that bring on different levels of stress. High levels of stress are a typical part of school administration (Kim, 2022). Darmody and Smyth (2016) found principals in the early stages of their tenure experienced higher levels of stress. They found this trend continued for principals who served around a decade as well. However, between these years, there seems to be a decrease in stress levels which are still elevated when compared with other professions. This trend has been prevalent around the world since the turn of the century.

The NAESP (2018) cited previous studies in which principals discouraged teacher leaders from pursuing the principalship due to the stressful nature of the role. Such mentorship has an impact on educators who are willing to enter the principalship.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment of principals is expected to grow by five percent from 2021 through the next decade. However, there is an unknown as to the number of professionals who are qualified to fill these positions. Perrone, Young and Fuller (2022) noted that there is a gap in the body of research that supports the pipeline to fill these positions. The body of evidence, they argue, is far less than that of teachers.

Principal stability and longevity within the same setting is also a concern. Fullan (2002) outlined the importance of principal stability showing that meaningful change takes place at the system level and takes time in context to be able to create. Further, he notes this change can take almost a decade. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2022) reported that 10% of principals left the profession in 2016-17. In addition, another 6% of principals changed schools in the same year. The retention of successful principals is a pressing school improvement challenge, especially given the increasingly high rates of principal turnover nationally, and the even faster pace of turnover in schools serving high percentages of low-income students. (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Regardless of the statistics related to stress and burnout, the importance of the principal in student learning and achievement is clear: There is a need for highly qualified and trained principals.

Prevailing Leaders and Contending with Stress

Principals who remain in the profession are both proactive and reactive in their ability to cope with stress. Principals have the ability to create healthy work environments, alleviate stress for staff, and formulate a vision that supports student learning. These proactive strategies show how principals positively impact their working

environment and reduce stress they encounter (Tikkanen et al., 2017). Kim (2022) recognizes the importance of taking care of school leaders for sustainability. “We recognize that school principals, education district administrators, and campus-level administrators face enormous responsibilities and challenges in leading their schools and keeping them mentally and physically healthy” (p.776). Knowing the importance of contending with this stress, principals who continue to remain in the profession find ways to contend with the stress they experience as part of their profession. Leaders who defy these factors often end up having monumental impacts on the staff they work with, students they serve, and community in which they live. Principals who have been able to make changes and adapt to the needs of the building have provided a stable climate for working conditions. The challenges presented have been met by successful leaders who have employed new and innovative ways to improve or at a minimum, maintain the status quo (Afsar & Umrani, 2020). To have an even greater impact, leaders find ways to bring staff and the community along with them. They set a vision, communicate it clearly, and use multiple levels of influence to help move the group forward (Afsar & Umrani, 2020). Finally, Elomaa et al., (2021) outline three themes of combating stress for principals. These themes are: emotion-focused coping; social coping; and problem-focused coping and will be explored in greater detail to help provide a research-based understanding of how principals contend with the stress they experience.

Emotion-Focused Coping

To begin with, personal traits and qualities of principals are explored heavily in the research base for principals. Simon and Gibson (2019) explain interpersonal skills and qualities for positive social interactions are needed to be successful in the

principalship. Some of these can be developed over the course of a career and can lead to increased levels of success. Two ideas that are heavily researched and the importance of each in the elementary principal role are explained in greater detail.

Emotional Intelligence and Self-Efficacy

Emotional Intelligence (EI), as outlined by Goleman (1998) refers to a person's ability to recognize his/her own emotions, control his/her behaviors, and to use a variety of strategies to attend to people and situations presented. In education, this type of intelligence is necessary for school leaders as they have direct influence on the staff and students in their building. Brinia et al., (2014) recognized that school leadership is both an art and a science. "The school principal needs to be prominent in leading using emotional intelligence, being rather adaptive, flexible, moderate and self-conscious" (p. 28). Atasoy (2020) indicated that principals influence school culture as well as necessary interventions. Platsidou (2010) agreed that emotions play a role in the school leaders' ability to positively influence the school community. Leaders with higher levels of emotional intelligence can anticipate and respond to situations more effectively which allows them to deal with this stress. Further, principals with high levels of Emotional Intelligence (EI) will be more suited for responding to a variety of stressors. The development or enhancement of EI in principals will help advance the organization toward achieving its goals. Principals who possess higher levels of EI will create environments of trust, stability, flexibility and understanding (Brinia et al., 2014).

In addition, principals who are guided by positive self-efficacy are better able to contend with stress. Skaalvik (2020) found evidence of the importance of self-efficacy in the principalship. "Self-efficacy for instructional leadership was predictive of lower

levels of exhaustion, higher levels of engagement, and lower motivation to leave the position” (p. 492). This research suggests Emotional Intelligence and self-efficacy are factors related to the effectiveness of principals as leaders.

Exercise and Physical Condition

Physical condition is one form of emotion-focused coping. The impact of stress on the physical body is evidence as principals report ailments, high blood pressure, and weight gain (Queen & Queen, 2014). Moreover, women in the principalship reported poorer general health (Mahfouz, 2020). Principals also reported limited time to eat healthy and exercise. Boyland (2011) reinforced that principals are often eating on the run or not at all and having little time for physical activity.

However, Mahfouz (2020) found that many principals practiced stress management by partaking in leisure activities they enjoyed. This included hobbies such as fishing, hunting, and reading for pleasure. Others utilized exercise including running or yoga to physically cope with the stress they encountered in their roles (Mahfouz, 2020). Years before, Boyland (2011) found that regular exercise was perceived by principals as the best strategy for helping manage the stress of their position.

Social Coping

Social support of the principal is another way in which principles rely on human resources to contend with stress. Littleford (1999) found that alliances among co-workers and other administration are vital to the success of principals in maintaining relationships to positively impact success in the school. These relationships serve as support systems for the principal and activate ongoing forms of collaboration for principal growth and success (Fluckiger et al., 2014). Social support can be provided in a

variety of ways for principals. Social support can be provided from those inside the system of the school as well as those outside the school. These ideas are explored in more detail below.

Individual Connections and Support

One form of support system within the school prevails through formal and informal mentoring programs. Veteran principals are typically called upon to mentor new principals as a means of extending their experiences. In some cases, this type of mentoring is not beneficial for principals. “Some districts will utilize a mentor program for problem-solving issues rather than for the growth and development of a new administrator” (Weingartner, 2008, p. 21). This type of mentoring does not foster long-term planning, visioning, and growing of the leader.

Further, Weingartner (2008) reported that support systems, specifically for new principals, are often difficult to establish unless they are separated from the evaluation process. However, when implemented strategically in a proactive way, mentoring can provide much needed layers of support for principals. Below is a summary of these key points:

1. Most people will respond in positive ways when they feel valued and appreciated.
2. If the goal is to maintain a mentor program that will provide lasting support for beginning principals, many of the components mentioned should become best practices.

3. Support systems can be a most effective source for counteracting stress and burnout. (p. 38)

These points suggest mentoring from veteran principals can provide a basis for support and longevity within the principalship. As the mentor of others, veteran principals can have a direct impact on the success of others in the profession. This mentoring relationship can be reciprocal. The collaboration between both parties can yield benefits for both principals as a product of their formal and informal interactions. Principals who are mentoring also need the opportunity to be supported. Beusaert et al., (2016) found that social support predicts a decrease in both stress and burnout for school principals. School districts should take these factors into consideration as part of their mentoring structure and processes for principals.

On the contrary, principals who have feelings of isolation often have higher levels of stress. Bauer & Silver (2018) define isolation as “The principals’ sense of feeling alone at work. It is less a structural reality than an emotional response to one’s experiences as a school leader” (p. 319). As a result, the perception by individuals about the stress and experiences they are exposed to has an impact on whether they have feelings of isolation within their position. Feelings of isolation, along with lack of support and decreased access to resources has led to principals who have experienced increased levels of stress (Friedman, 2002). Those who are less isolated are less likely to suffer from burnout (Tomic & Tomic, 2008). Feelings of isolation increased the predictive factors of someone wanting to leave the profession. Still, the interconnected nature of isolation to additional variables makes it difficult to quantify and the research is limited on the topic of isolation as a result (Bauer & Silver, 2018).

School Community Connections and Support

On many levels, the connection principals have to their community impacts their leadership. Trust is one way in which this connection can be studied. Students, families, the community, and colleagues rely on trust as a basis for leadership. School leaders can work hard to produce a common vision and systems for learning, but without trust a leader's communication may be misrepresented to stakeholders (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Principals are called to formulate trust through communication and relationship building. These relationships are a basis for building a school community that is involved and invested in student success. The community must trust the school to care for the safety of their students in addition to the effective and efficient use of resources to support students. Tschannen-Moran (2014) states:

In sum, for schools to realize the kind of positive transformation envisioned by school improvement and reform efforts, attention must be paid to issues of trust. Finding ways to overcome the breakdown of trust is essential if we want schools to reach our aspirations for them. Meeting this challenge is one of the most important tasks facing school leaders. (p. 253)

Recently, there has been a mix of data in relation to community connections and principal burnout. Beusaert et al., (2016) found a positive connection between the community and principal burnout. This connection might be a product of principals feeling vulnerable to the stresses of the community due to their connectedness. Increases in stress on the community may be influencing a higher level of stress and burnout on the principal (Beusaert et al., 2016). Overall, community support along with trust impacts

the principal's perceived stress in the position, thus, their ability to lead the school. The next sub-section of research links the connection between work and life outside of work for principals in relation to perceived stress.

Problem-Focused Coping

Research around work-life balance for principals is limited with the majority of research taking place outside of the United States. Work/life balance is a term used to describe the tradeoff between the professional nature of their principalship and what happens outside of the working day. Barling and Frone (2004) defined this balance as interactions between work and life with low levels of conflict and high levels of facilitation. The social workings of work and life balance are complex and intertwined.

Principals navigate the demands of these two worlds each day. As Barling and Frone (2004) explained, the complexity of these interactions has a constant influence on the stress experienced by principals. Kossek et al., (2012) recognized the importance of forming boundaries between the work and non-work setting. These boundaries create management styles for principals to frame how they are spending their time. When there are parameters in place, Barling and Frone (2004) found that engagement in both work and school have a positive reciprocal impact on each other. This demonstrates the positive impact that support from the family or work can have on the other. Perceived success in work or family has a positive impact on the other (Kelliher et al., 2019). The opposite is true when stress is perceived in either work or family. Seiger and Wiese (2009) found when supervisors and spouses were sources of support systems, experiencing conflict with either a supervisor or spouse increased the likelihood of conflict between family and work and work and family. Celoria and Roberson (2015)

argued that the ability to manage these two worlds is crucial as a professional practice for school leaders.

For the past few decades, specifically related to the increase of access to technology, the lines of home and work have been blurred for principals. Althammer et al., (2021) stated, “[Access to] information and communications technology...increasingly blur the work-home boundaries, making it difficult for employees to switch off from work” (p. 283). Principals, similarly, are connected with their community through this technology. Time spent outside of the working day to complete administrative tasks, attend student activities and community events, and work to increase student achievement play a role in work-life balance for principals (Reid & Creed, 2021). These blurred lines between work and home have perpetuated stress felt by principals. As principals are more accessible, there is more time spent in nontraditional work hours. Reid and Creed (2021) found time spent outside of the traditional work hours showed evidence of increased stress and decreased job satisfaction. The stress outlined for each of these worlds was higher than most professions prior to the pandemic. As a result, when the pandemic swept across the nation, principals were subject to a new set of rules that guided their leadership of the school.

Instantaneous Change in the Principalship: The COVID 19 Pandemic

“The COVID-19 pandemic has posed unanticipated complications for school leaders in education. One example involves school principals who have been forced to cope with the pandemic on top of performing their everyday work requirement” (Kim, 2022, p. 776). These complications caused prolonged periods of intensely stressful

environments for principals. Selye (1956) stated, “Only the most severe stress leads eventually to the stage of exhaustion and death” (p. 79). With the onset of the pandemic, principals were forced into leading under highly stressful conditions.

In late 2019, the world was first impacted by what is now known as the COVID-19 pandemic. The first cases of this virus were reported in Wuhan, China in early December of 2019 as respiratory illnesses with an unknown source. This unknown virus spread rapidly throughout the world due to the interconnected nature of people and, within a few months, the entire world was reeling from its spread. The World Health Organization (WHO) acknowledged the outbreak and spread of the virus by the Spring of 2020 and the impact of the virus reached all parts of the world. With increased spread by March of 2020, the United States led the world in confirmed cases reporting over 5,000 deaths as a result of its reach (Li, 2021). The United States experienced a sense of fear for the unknown. By early March of 2020, the virus made its way from the coasts of the United States to the Midwestern. Local governments tracked certain individuals who might have been infected and held daily press conferences to update the public on the crisis. People were required to quarantine and isolate themselves in their homes, businesses closed their doors, masks and testing for COVID-19 became a routine part of daily life in reality and on the news. Specifically, the rapid spread of this virus had a widespread impact on the daily lives of students, families, and communities. By mid-March of 2020, many school districts in the Midwest made the decision to close their doors for students and send them home to learn from a remote environment (Li, 2021). “School closures were almost globally implemented in 107 countries by March 18th, 2020 (Kim, 2022, p. 778). “The impact of the pandemic caused more than 124,000 US public

and private schools to close by the end of the 2019-2020 school year” (Kim, 2022). In response, Kim (2022) states, “Nearly 100% of school leaders agreed to change their leadership style in their campus or district administration” (p. 778). The COVID-19 pandemic brought instantaneous change to the role of elementary principals. The following years of leadership consisted of social and political pressure, mounting logistical feats to protect student safety, and extensive amounts of communication to inform the school community. In sum, the onset of the pandemic perpetuated a hyperstressful environment for principals as they chartered new waters to manage their leadership roles.

Summary of Literature Review

The principalship is a complex role in educational administration. The role of the elementary principal is compounded by stress related to leadership and management of resources. The evolution of this role has created varying levels of stress. However, the importance of the principals has been well documented (Louis et al., 2010), specifically, the role of school leadership on student learning and achievement (Anderman & Hattie, 2013; Marzano et al., 2005). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic changed the course of school leadership into school management. Principals were thrust into unknown situations and circumstances for which they could not have prepared. Selye (1956) explained, “People can get used to a number of things (cold, heavy muscular work, worries), which at first had a very alarming effect; yet, upon prolonged exposure, sooner or later all resistance breaks down and exhaustion sets in” (p. 82). The pandemics' longevity provided conditions for such exhaustion.

Finding ways to cope with this stress allows for further understanding of how to increase longevity in the role of an elementary principal. This narrative research study provides accounts of the experiences of veteran elementary principals during the pandemic. Specifically, it captures the stories and experiences of five veteran principals through semi-structured interviews. The themes derived from the interviews may be used to help current and future principals, as well as central office administrators, to be better prepared for future events of hyperstress.

Chapter 2 reviewed the literature associated with the position of principals as a context for this study while providing a brief introduction into the timeline of the COVID-19 pandemic into Midwestern school Districts. Chapter 3: Research Methodology, outlines the research methodology for this study including participants, interviews, and methods for obtaining data. Chapter 4 are the themes and findings constructed from the interviews and Chapter 5 is a review of the implications of this study and future recommendations and research as a result.

CHAPTER 3

Research Methodology

Qualitative research is becoming more common in the field of education as researchers look to uncover the experiences of educators. These experiences hold information that can impact future decision-making in the field. Meaningful research to capture specific stories about lived events allows readers to learn from their experiences and improve in the future. Nasheeda et al., (2019) states, “Stories are essential realities from our past and present. As the primary sources of data in narrative research, interview transcripts play an essential role in giving meaning to the personal stories of research participants” (p. 1). In this research study, carefully designed questions were utilized to uncover experiences and derive meaning from participant responses. The questions were tailored to understanding their lived experiences, leadership styles, and the stress they encountered as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is limited research available on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic specifically related to experiences of elementary principals. Elementary principals are a unique job category in the type of leadership required to be successful in the role. Principals who have been able to navigate this uniqueness over time have valuable insight into the broad realm of responsibilities associated with it. The veteran nature of principals in this study sought to remove the nuances experienced by principals newer to this role. Veteran accounts of the pandemic allowed for perspectives and connections to experiences and stress they overcame prior to the onset of the pandemic. The interviews produced responses that were common among the participants, which were ultimately categorized into themes for analysis. This research can inform future leaders in their

quest to extend their tenure, understand and cope with their stress, and see that the emotions they experience share commonalities with other school leaders. Future educational leaders may benefit from reading these accounts of experiences during the pandemic if they did not experience it for themselves. Furthermore, this research may help school District leaders better understand and support elementary principals in future hyperstressful situations. Knowing this research may positively influence future leaders on their leadership journey influenced the pursuit of this topic for qualitative research. The review of literature indicated that elementary principals were experiencing high levels of stress prior to the pandemic. Thus, the pandemic magnified this stress, creating an era of hyperstressful leadership which makes this research even more relevant.

Narrative research, which is qualitative in nature, shares a few common elements (Creswell, 2017; Nasheeda et al., 2019). Some of the common characteristics of narrative research include selection of participants, conducting and transcribing interviews, familiarizing oneself with the interviews, creating themes and interconnectedness for analysis, and creating the story of the lived and shared experiences of participants (Creswell, 2017; Nasheeda et al., 2019). Unique to this type of research, the interviewer walks alongside the interviewee to listen and follow-up with questions to prompt deeper thinking and analysis of the topic with the interviewee. Because of the intimacy of the conversation, narrative researchers choose to have conversations with participants in their own natural settings. This type of environment lends itself to natural conversations between the researcher and participant (Creswell, 2017).

Researchers conduct the interviews in a way that they are able to collect multiple forms of data. The researcher is responsible for conducting the interview, taking notes

and asking to follow up questions, making observations about the participants as well as formulating and refining key questions in order to truly understand the experiences of the participant (Creswell, 2017). In this study, each participant was someone who this researcher had personal experience with and/or was someone who was referred through the National Association of Elementary School Principals. Prior to the interviews, multiple contacts were made with participants to explain the interview process, create mutual understanding of the topic, and to coordinate the logistics of the interviews. The setting for these interviews was virtual and took place on Zoom. Even with the virtual setting, creating an environment for participants that encouraged openness in their responses was intentional. The environment of the interviews resembled a video podcast interview similar to what you would find in a traditional face-to-face interview as prescribed by Creswell (2017).

In this narrative research, qualitative methods were utilized to make sense of the data collected from a variety of sources. This type of collection and analysis is impacted by the researcher's personal experiences, the stories presented in the interviews, nonlinguistic representations of information presented by interviewees, background knowledge of the profession, personal or professional connections to the participants, and the researcher's own lived experiences associated with the research. All these factors were taken into consideration and accounted for in the assumptions and limitations. These factors also aligned with the narrative research practices outlined by Nasheeda et al. (2019).

The research collected through these interviews is the basis for the remainder of this study. The data from the interviews provided direction for the in-depth review of the

literature, connections to the theoretical framework, and future implications related to the findings. The participant interviews brought to light information that needed to be investigated and processed via the research on stress and leadership. With each new piece of research, there were potential changes with the procedures, and methodology based on the data collected. This is typical in the emergent design of qualitative research in which the study forms more organically surrounding the information collected in the interviews (Patton, 2003).

I acknowledge the impact my own interest in this topic may have on my ability to be the instrument for which this data was collected. This research aligns with the passion I have for my profession. These findings are deeply connected to me personally while my interpretation of the data has been shaped by my own background and experiences of being an elementary principal during the pandemic. My understanding of the research process as well as data collected is influenced by my connection to the role as a principal. Qualitative researchers define this connection and reflection as reflexivity and, in this research, it helped me become part of the interview, to engage with participants, and to share my own personal experiences that then led participants to remember additional stories or information from the pandemic (Dodgson, 2019). Furthermore, my background potentially influenced my analysis of this information as I was the one who organized the research process, analyzed the data, and brought it back into larger themes. Identifying these themes, I organized participant data into manageable, connected experiences shared by participants. I recognize my role as the instrument for data collection could create its own set of bias and error. Patton et al. (2003) explains this is common with qualitative research, yet with balancing multiple sources, maintaining a conscious awareness, and

carefully examining the role in the process I believe I have produced high quality qualitative data (Patton et al., 2003). The data collected in these interviews was abundant and gave way to commonality among participants. “The open-ended responses permit one to understand the world as seen by the respondents” (p. 21).

The choice to conduct qualitative research allowed me to dive deeper into the experiences of these five individuals. There was vivid imagery created by participants in their words and stories recollected from their experiences during the pandemic. Taking meaningful ideas and lived experiences and putting them into a context is how qualitative researchers make sense of the raw data (Creswell, 2017). The end goal was to extrapolate meaning from the interviews in order to analyze it and make connections among participants.

Creswell (2017) explains that ontological studies, such as this, aim to uncover the knowledge held by those in the human world. Although participants have multiple realities based on their own experiences, this research is intended to shed light on a variety of perspectives as the themes naturally emerged through the analysis process. The philosophical assumptions that took place help the audience understand and recognize the lens through which the findings emerged. In this research study, the audience should be aware and acknowledge that although there were similarities and themes that emerged, the stories that were told and experiences of participants were different.

Research Question

There is a growing concern for the number of qualified leaders in the role of the principal. This profession includes an overwhelming amount of job roles and

responsibilities. As such there is a need to hear from perspectives of veterans in the field who have persisted through this stress with success. Therefore, the central research question that guided this study is:

1. How did hyperstress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic influence veteran elementary school principals' leadership experiences?

Research Design: Qualitative

The intent of this research was to gather the stories of elementary principals through the pandemic. The timeliness of these interviews was crucial to the details shared and recollection of events throughout the pandemic. By utilizing the narrative approach, I carefully constructed research questions to open the door for participants to share their experiences. This type of narrative approach aligns with transformative inquiry. McCaslin and Kilrea (2019) explain transformative inquiry as “A viable methodological framework for exploring and considering the generative capabilities of compelling and significant relationships” (p. 980). Further dissection of transformative inquiry leads to an investigation into Ontology, which was utilized in this study. Ontology, according to Creswell (2017) seeks to answer the question, ‘What is the nature of reality?’. The ontological approach of this research engaged participants in active reflection on their ‘reality’ as the leader of their building during the pandemic. Often throughout the interviews, participants engaged in reciprocal conversation to gain context as to whether their experiences were similar in nature to those of the researcher. This engagement demonstrated the use of Transformative Inquiry and Ontology as participants sought to connect their reality to those with similar experiences during the pandemic.

Qualitative Research Approach: Narrative

“Narrative research aims to unravel consequential stories of people’s lives as told by them in their own words and worlds” (Ntinda, 2020, p. 1). The findings presented in this research include the participants recollection of feelings they experienced and major events that took place told through their own stories. The collection of this data came directly from the interviews with participants. There was a sense of conversation between the researcher and the participants that allowed these stories to emerge.

According to Creswell (2012), “In a narrative study, the researcher reflects more on who to sample...All of the individuals need to have stories to tell about their lived experiences.” The participants for this study have been a focus from the origination of this specific idea for research. The narrow focus for identifying participants provided data outcomes that were succinct in their connections and made the analysis more aligned with a specific set of events in history. These participants all experienced leadership prior to the pandemic and share commonalities among their education, background, and longevity in their leadership positions which made the narrative research appropriate for collecting their stories. Their perceptions of the events and stress they encountered helped to determine when there were critical points within the experience, and if that was shared with other participants or unique to their own individual experience. The data revealed in these interviews were deeply personal. Findings indicated that participants openly shared thoughts about their personal and professional lives and experiences throughout the pandemic.

In summary, narrative inquiry was chosen to uncover the impact of hyperstress through the pandemic for elementary principals. Each participant shared their own

experiences and philosophies with how they experienced and dealt with stress while leading during this time. Their stories are a source of information for readers to learn from the experiences of others without having the experiences themselves. The research did challenge participants to explore memories that, at times, produced deeply rooted emotions and feelings from participants. Many of the participants shared their experiences that impacted them both personally and professionally, causing them to reflect on their relationships with those around them, their profession, and their connections to the students they serve.

Experience is a key term used in narrative research (Creswell, 2017). Application of these narrative practices brought out enlightening experiences of veteran elementary principals during the pandemic. Future educational leaders, District administrators, and those who experience hyperstress can find new ways of knowing, understanding, and formulating possible change to support school leaders from this research. As a result, it was evident that narrative research was the best tool for this research.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher in this study, I am drawn to the nature of narrative research because of the opportunity to learn from others who work in the same field as me. I have spent over a decade in the field of education and this research is important to me as I grow as a professional.

With the onset of the pandemic, I felt as though elementary principals were not adequately prepared for changes in leadership as well as the stress that accompanied these changes. This research is important to me as it allows me to not only collect and learn from the experiences of veteran principals who I admire, but also to provide

background and understanding for future improvements in the field. Improvements may come through personal mentoring of elementary principals or leadership conversations and positions as a District office administrator. The goal of education is to ultimately have a positive impact on the students who enter our building each and every day. School leaders have a direct impact on the student outcomes within their school. By examining experiences of veteran principals, the next generation of principals will be better equipped to handle stressful situations that might arise in their tenure. Ultimately, better forms of leadership will then have positive impacts on students' learning and achievement.

As the researcher, I have spent much time reflecting on this research, my role as the collector of this information, and the possible outcomes associated with sharing the findings. I found myself making connections, getting lost in their stories, and tying many of their decisions to foundations for excellent leadership. Based on my background, the principals interviewed in these studies are leaders that know themselves, know their community, and want to do what is best for their students. It was personally fulfilling to be part of this research process and a healthy challenge to take the information and represent it in a way that truly reflects the stories shared by participants.

Participant Selection

This narrative study focused on participants who are veteran elementary principals with a minimum of 10 years of experience in their role. The participants-maintained employment in the same school District during these 10 years but may have served as principal at multiple buildings. The participants come from a Midwestern state and serve in a suburban school district in the same geographical area. Participants were

eligible to participate if they had served in multiple levels of school leadership (PreK, elementary, middle school, high school) with their current role being in the elementary setting. When selecting participants, it was also important that multiple genders of leaders were represented in this study. Therefore, I selected two female principals and three male principals who fit the criteria. This purposeful sampling offered both genders the opportunity to share a more holistic view of the experience. The participants were selected based on the criteria above and were engaged from this research through personal invitations from the researcher via email (see Appendix A).

The sample size included a total of five participants. Creswell (2012) outlines the need for having small numbers of individuals participate in narrative qualitative research. The more purposeful the sample of the participants the better informed the research is related to the research question. In addition, the data collected is an indicator of the need for additional participants. In quantitative research, sample size depends on saturation, however, saturation is often difficult to know or explain in qualitative research. In lieu of saturation, informational power was the determining factor of influence in sample size. Information power as explained by Malterud et al., (2016), concludes that the number of participants should be guided by the depth and magnitude of the data provided. The closer the data is related to the topic of the study the less participants necessary (Malterud et al., 2016). In this study, it was evident that participants openly shared their perspectives related to the research question which produced rich accounts of their experiences. Further, the connections between the researcher and participants allowed for an ease of conversation, in depth follow-up questions, and outcomes that painted the picture of their experiences. My background as an educator, interviewing skills, and

personal or professional connections with participants maximized the research findings and allowed participants to openly share their stories in a safe environment.

Instruments

A set of seven semi-structured interview questions were the basis for this research (see Appendix B). Semi-structured interviews are commonly utilized in qualitative studies to allow participants to express their perspectives on personal experiences and, in this case, those specifically related to the hyperstressful nature of leading an elementary school through the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the interviews, I asked follow-up and clarifying questions based on the individual responses of participants. The semi-structured format of these interviews allowed me to prompt participants to dive deeply into the content of their lived experiences (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Participants fully engaged in conversation at a more comprehensive level because of the latitude of this structure for research. Once the questions were formulated and the structure was set, I informally piloted them with an elementary principal who experienced the pandemic but one who did not meet the veteran status required by this research. The results of the pilot indicated that participant responses aligned with the research question so there were no revisions to the original questions presented in the interviews.

Data Collection and Analysis

Prior to conducting interviews, I followed UNO's procedures for obtaining permission to conduct research. I completed modules through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI Program) for training designed for those intending to conduct research through UNO (see Appendix C). Then, I applied for and was granted approval to conduct research through the Institutional Review Board designated for UNO

(See Appendix D). Each participant was contacted via email to engage in the process. Included in the email was an overview of the study and IRB (see Appendix A). This email provided participants with the background for the study as well as the informed consent.

Participants gave their written and/or verbal consent as part of the process and this was recorded and stored via Zoom transcription. Once consent was obtained, the participants engaged in semi-structured interviews consisting of the seven questions outlined previously. Interviews were conducted utilizing Zoom, an online video conferencing platform. Two of the interviews took place through two different recorded sessions as there was an issue with the recording device at the time of the first interview. Once complete, the audio and video from these interviews were transcribed and stored using a dual-factor secure login feature to ensure confidentiality. After transcriptions were completed, I emailed participants a copy of their interview to review and confirm for accuracy. Included in this email was a request for additional background and demographic information (see Appendix F). I sent a follow-up email to participants which served two purposes. First, the email contained the transcription for their review. Second, as noted above, additional demographic information was collected in order to inform the audience of this research as to the scope of participants who responded. This information was returned and validated by participants as part of the research process.

The interviews were conducted in the summer and subsequent fall of 2022 based on the availability of individual participants. As part of the data collected, I asked participants to remember events that took place starting in the winter of 2019-2020. As we sequentially conversed through the timeline of the following years, participants

provided descriptions of major events they experienced. As the interviewer, I leaned into their experiences and asked additional questions that probed for specific details, elaboration on specific topics and events, and clarification of situations presented. Depending on the participant, each of the questions opened the door to a variety of experiences that may have been unique to them individually, in connection to their District, or their own personal lives. The stories that were produced gave details associated with their leadership experiences during the hyperstressful environment created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

All of the participant interviews were conducted prior to analysis of this data. Further, the process of analyzing this data was comprehensive in both person and process. I completed a personal reflection of my own experience prior to the interviews, during the interviews, and after each one. I was aware that my own personal experiences might impact my understanding of the data being collected, which is typical in this type of research process (Creswell, 2009). My personal reflection helped me formulate the lens through which I was seeing the participants and their responses. Overall, I believe these reflections helped me stay engaged throughout the interviews, transparent with participants about my own leadership experiences, and open to hearing from and learning about the stories they remember that were most influential to them.

Following completion of all the interviews, transcriptions were created and separated for analysis. This is the first step in the process for analyzing data outlined by Creswell (2012). He explained this six-step process for analyzing qualitative data. The steps include: "Preparing and organizing data for analysis; exploring and coding data; coding to build description and themes; representing and reporting qualitative findings;

interpreting the findings; and validating the accuracy of the findings” (p. 261). I utilized this process as a guide for analyzing the data collected through the interviews.

Initially, I listened to the recorded audio of interviews. This helped me to hear the voices of participants and become more in tune with each individual participant. Then, I read the transcripts multiple times to familiarize myself with responses. During this process, I made note of the voice and emotions they shared in their stories and began formal coding. Creswell (2012) explains coding as, “the process of segmenting and labeling text to form descriptions and broad themes in the data” (p. 242). For this research, I utilized lean coding whereby I closely read each transcript and began looking for sub-categories that summarized types of responses from participants (Creswell, 2012). I created my own system of abbreviations for these descriptions based on the interview transcriptions. The abbreviations were generalizations of the statements and stories being presented that made sense in a broader context. At this time, I created a “key” for these broader categories. Later in the process, I utilized this key to explore commonalities among the data sets. Following this process helped me limit the number of broad category abbreviations to 38 by the end of the five interviews. As an additional step, there were specific statements or stories that I believed were so powerful from the interviews that I highlighted to be utilized as direct quotations in the research. These were powerful statements about lived experiences to help readers understand, directly from the participants, what they were thinking, feeling, and/or experiencing.

Once I had completed the process of lean coding, I created an organizational chart that paired similar abbreviations into larger categories of themes. I highlighted similar categories and organized them into similar descriptions based on their highlighted colors.

These description groups allowed me to generalize similar ideas into themes. Each of the themes helps make sense of experiences that relate back to the central question of this research. Once the themes were solidified, I began working on the formulation and connections between stories to intertwine them into drafts and narratives to be forthcoming.

Verification Strategies

To utilize this data and validate the accuracy of the results, I explored different ways to gain credible data. Lincoln & Guba (1985), share five ways to gain credible data which include: prolonged period of engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer briefing, and member checking. Further, transferability and applicability checks can be conducted throughout the research process as a means of demonstrating credibility of the data collected. Three strategies above were utilized in this study to provide evidence of credibility for the data.

The verification strategy that made the most sense for this narrative study centered around the member checking process. Member checking allows participants to review the data presented, check for accuracy and credibility related to the work conducted by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checks were conducted with the participants following the transcription of the data. Participants were asked to review the transcripts and amend, with highlighting, anything they would like omitted from the research as well as anything that might be inaccurate about the data. As a preview to participants, they were told not to be concerned about punctuation, grammar, and sentence structure. The goal of the member checking process was to provide the participants the opportunity to substantiate the conversations that took place in the

interviews, it was not to be critical of the transcription. As a result of this verification process, each participant responded to validate the transcriptions. One participant shared an amendment and omission. The amendment correction was made, and the omission is no longer part of this research. Final copies were stored electronically utilizing the dual-identification process to maintain confidentiality.

In addition to the member checking verification strategy, there was an exposure to prolonged periods of engagement with the participants. As noted in the data collection phase, multiple points of contact were made between the participant and researcher. Further, two of the participants spent upwards of 3 hours engaging in interviews with me surrounding their experiences. Ultimately, to achieve the highest level of accuracy, the goal was to show that the finding of these interviews aligned with the experiences of the participants in the real world. Given my personal connections with many of these participants, I was able to engage with them at a deep level and in a relatively short period of time. I know this because of the outcomes they shared as we dove into questions that prompted personal and professional experiences which had deeply rooted emotional origins. These prolonged periods of exposure allowed me to create an understanding of their experiences that closely matched their real-life experiences.

Transferability and applicability checks can also be conducted as a verification strategy to determine if the research could be applied to a variety of settings and experiences in order to assist in decision making processes. Conducting these checks was important as the outcomes of this research is to improve future leadership practices by individuals and systems. This research applies to a variety of settings around the country as so many other principals navigated the hyperstress related to leadership in the

pandemic. The contributions of these participants will help inform future leaders, Districts, and the public as to the hyperstress related to their leadership through the pandemic. Elementary school principals are facing higher levels of burnout and decreased longevity within the field. The goal is that this research will help guide future generations of leaders and keep impactful school leaders in the profession.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in this research study was completely voluntary. The participants relied on protection and confidentiality of information related to information they shared as part of these interviews. This is typical of qualitative researchers as participants rely on researchers to protect their privacy, rights, and contributions to the study (Creswell, 2017).

In my initial conversations with participants, whether via phone or email, I conveyed a description of the interviews and how the findings would be reported. Each participant was given time to review the informed consent and outline for the study. The informed consent was verified through IRB protocol and included all of the necessary pieces of information related to this study. The request for approval provided statements about protecting anonymity and confidentiality of participants. The participants were then given the opportunity to provide written or verbal consent to participate in the study. Participants were informed that I was the principal investigator for the research and there may be risks and benefits associated with sharing this information. Finally, participants were informed that pseudonyms were assigned to them, protecting their names and Districts from being identifiable. As outlined in the safeguards listed above, all data collected in this process has been stored electronically in a system that requires dual form

of authentication prior to access. Through this research, there have been significant steps taken to remain ethical in the collection, storing, and sharing of all data related to the study. Upon completion, participants could request a copy of the findings for this study once the final results are published.

Summary of Assumptions and Limitations

There is a clear and distinct connection between the researcher and participants in this study. As part of the methods for conducting research, the researcher was aware of the dynamic variables related to assumption and limitations of this research process. In Chapter 3 we discussed the research methodology for this study including participants, interviews, methods for obtaining data, and ethical considerations. In the following Chapter, Chapter 4, the themes and findings constructed from the interviews are presented. Chapter 5 is a review of the implications of this study and future recommendations and research as a result.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

The following information is presented to help understand context for this research as well as the interview data collected. This data was collected and analyzed to determine common experiences, patterns, and connectedness from participants. The findings from this chapter are presented in three separate parts:

Part 1 of the research findings is broken down to include the context of the study.

This context equates to:

- restating of the research questions for a general overview of the context for interviews,
- an introduction and look at the job position of veteran elementary principals, and
- individual participant profiles.

Part 2 is composed of two sections related to the pandemic. This segment begins by outlining the initial reactions of principals to the onset of the pandemic, including the thoughts of the individuals as well as the implications for their school community. Following the initial impact of the pandemic on these veteran principals, the next segment outlines the interconnected experiences of principals as they navigated the school years that were most deeply impacted by the pandemic. This segment includes the shift in nature of their job responsibilities faced by these principals from the Spring 2020 to the Spring of 2022.

Part 3 explores the major themes that emerged from the culmination of these lived experiences. These themes were uncovered through the interview questions and subsequent dialogue. The underlying experiences have been woven into similar themes

based on stories and responses provided by participants. Many commonalities emerged from the narratives that guided the analysis and connections of their stories to the principalship through hyperstress. Through these stories, philosophical and strategic core themes materialized that helped explain how veteran principals have utilized strategies to navigate the uncharted demands presented by the pandemic. Their stories are filled with details of the personal impact they felt of stress created by the pandemic environment, political pressures they felt as the leaders of their school community, and their recollections of how they were able to persevere through these hyperstressful times with the support of others.

The participants, their philosophy, and how they experienced the onset of change in the leadership position brought on by the pandemic sets the stage for how each leader handled the hyperstress of the pandemic. The narratives provided by participants are based on the perspectives they brought forth from the interviews. The narratives are credible because they have been checked by the members who gave their accounts. These narratives are realistic accounts of their experiences and include real stories, thoughts, experiences, and philosophies of participants during hyperstressful times created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Part 1: Study Context

Research Question and Interviews

The question that guided this research is related to unlocking the experiences of veteran principals as they navigated the hyperstress related to leadership through the pandemic. As a result, this research intentionally sought answers to the following research question:

1. How did hyperstress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic influence veteran elementary school principals' leadership experiences?

To address this research question, each participant was given the opportunity to react and respond to the following questions as part of a semi-structured interview (see Appendix B). Their responses to the following questions were recorded and transcribed for analysis:

1. Talk about your journey in educational leadership.
2. Talk about a time in your professional career when you have experienced stress.
3. During the initial phase of the pandemic, tell the story of what you remember about the events that unfolded.
4. What types of events stand out the most to you following the initial stage of the pandemic?
5. The current context of educational leadership is unique. Talk about your experiences related to the current era of leadership.
6. Compare and contrast the stress you have faced in the past with the current stresses of leadership.
7. What do you want future educational leaders to know and learn from your experiences?

Introduction to the Participants

The participants for this study were intentionally identified and selected in order to meet the criteria for the research. Each of the participants has been in the same district, serving in the role as elementary principal for a minimum of 10 years. These perspectives are unique as 'veteran' principals had extensive experience with the role of

the principal prior to the hyperstress caused by the pandemic. Many of the participants experienced varying levels of stress prior to the pandemic which qualified them to put the stress experienced during the pandemic into perspective. Each participant was given a pseudonym for confidentiality and the districts represented by principals are not identifiable as part of the findings. The following analysis originated through these semi-structured interviews, verbal and written interactions between the researcher and participants, and an analysis of the themes that emerged from the interviews after all interviews were complete. Participants represent metropolitan school districts in a Midwestern state. The findings are organized by themes so participant voices emerge from the stories they presented. These narrative interviews brought out deeply personal stories and experiences for the benefit of this research and future educational leaders. The next section provides a brief overview of participants through each participant's profile.

Individual Participant Profiles

Participants in this study were chosen specifically because of their background, experience, and generalized success in leadership in relation to their longevity as elementary principals. Each participant has a unique history and perspective he or she brought to the study and a story to tell based on his/her experiences. These experiences are shaped by their own personal environments in which they grew into the leaders they are today. Below is the context for their stories told through their own eyes.

John Ford: Background and Experience.

Race/Ethnicity: Caucasian

Gender: Male

Highest Degree: M.S. (Curriculum and Instruction; Educational Leadership)

Number of years teaching experience: 7

Additional Professional Experience: 2 years in District Leadership Role prior to the principalship

Number of years as a Principal: 11

It was a small town beginning for John that allowed him to begin forming methods of interacting with all types of people. John grew up in a rural town in a Midwestern state that was based in agriculture. He explained their family as affluent for the context of the community because it was rural with a small population. His parents were educated and highly involved in the community. He believes this involvement in the community shaped his ability to interact with all types of people. Growing up in a small town, he was expected to act a certain way in certain situations because the people of the town knew him and his parents. He had a variety of friend groups that ran the spectrum of socioeconomic backgrounds as well. He commented, “I had friends whose families were broken and really struggled” (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022). These interactions, as he grew older, became more evident to him in how he ‘saw’ the people around him. He knows this was a benefit of the small community in how he viewed all different make ups of people and his ability to relate to them.

John continued to sharpen his skills of communication with people as he grew older. Following high school, he tended bar in college.

When you tend bar, you talk and build relationships. You find commonalities to build those relationships with all sorts of people, and I think all of my experiences have allowed me to be able to come in at their

level where they don't feel intimidated or threatened. You can identify with them, so they don't feel as though you're more than an arm's reach away. (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022)

He believes his background in the small community and experiences tending bar gave him opportunities to practice many of the same skills it takes to create connections within a school community.

One of John's goals as a building leader is to create a welcoming environment for his entire community. He believes being visible, connecting with his community, and demonstrating his authentic self-allow him to model this welcoming behavior for his staff while showing all students they matter. He knows the pandemic had an impact on the relationships he holds with the community and is committed to being even more intentional about building those connections in the future.

Olivia Kennedy: Background and Experience.

Race/Ethnicity: Caucasian

Gender: Female

Highest Degree: Educational Specialist (Ed.S)

Number of years teaching experience: 10

Additional Professional Experience: Assistant Principal (2 years)

Number of years as a Principal: 15

Olivia's career has been shaped in many ways by her life experiences, passion for children, and strong beliefs about the importance of advocating for this profession.

Olivia grew up in an urban metropolitan setting and found her way to education as a second career. Early in her life, she knew she had a passion for working with children.

This passion guided her into education after a couple of years in another field of work. She began her formal role in education as a special education teacher. She believes this role provided her an excellent background for her role as the principal. When she began her educational journey, however, she did not envision herself leading as a principal. However, her skills were recognized early on by influential mentors who pointed out her leadership strengths and recognized her vision for learning. She embraced this mentorship and continues to carry with her a passion for working with children. She is driven to serve students with significant needs and previous work in a Title I school is something she cherishes. She explained this leadership as life changing because she spent time taking care of the fundamental needs of the students and families in her community. It was a type of service work that provided her much fulfillment and she saw the direct impact it had on the lives of people she served.

She has evolved in her leadership in many ways but now thinks about the bigger picture of education, seeking to advocate for the profession. This was not always the case as earlier in her career as a principal she was in a different place with her own personal family. She and her husband were parents for foster children while they maintained balance with their own children. She explained, “We had six boys in our home. My husband’s a rock star...[but,] my own personal family was at a different place” (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). Now that her children are grown and she does not have foster children, she says she has more time to give to her profession. She uses this time to advocate for education as a leader in professional organizations and has invested time in political circles to share the positive impact public education has on students and the community.

How important is it to make sure that our [school] community stays out of the negative spotlight, not lying, not being deceptive, but being truthful and celebratory. Problem-solving, related, and kid centered. I think it's how we're going to win the public back. (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022)

Olivia cares deeply about her own school community and wants to do everything she can to care for them. Safety has always been a top priority for her. She keeps these thoughts at the forefront of her mind, "Every day I drive up and park my car. I pray to God every day that somebody keeps us safe...and that we're all okay at the end of the day" (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). She has hope for the future of education because of the people who are in the profession, and this has shaped her view of her position and the responsibility she carries for advocating for public education.

Samuel Huxley: Background and Experience.

Race/Ethnicity: Caucasian

Gender: Male

Highest Degree: M.S. (Pursuing Educational Specialist Degree)

Number of years teaching experience: 10

Additional Professional Experience: Assistant Principal

Number of years as a Principal: 15

Samuel entered the principalship with a wide variety of experiences that shaped his leadership. Although, at the time, he was not aware of the importance of his past experiences. Samuel grew up in a rural community in the Midwestern part of the United States. He began his teaching career in the southwestern part of the country where he

taught 3rd grade. After finding out he and his wife were expecting their first child, they made the decision to move back to the Midwest to be closer to family. He began formal education pursuing his degree in educational leadership in Arizona. He remembered vividly the people he worked with and for, but his wife was the one who prompted him to finish his degree following their move. As he transitioned to a teacher role in their new location, he spent time learning his new District. He connected with the curriculum and fulfilled leadership roles whenever they were presented to him. As he sought roles in the principalship, he had the opportunity to interview with a few suburban school districts. He remembered the process of going through the interviews and thinking he had not been successful. However, with the support of his wife, they made the decision that he would take a role as an assistant principal, even though it came with a pay cut.

His new role was a learning experience as he was the first assistant principal in his District. He was writing the job description as he experienced it. This was unique in that he had to figure out exactly what the role meant to him, support he gave his principal, and how this role was viewed by the district. He approached this challenge much like he had other phases of his life and fully immersed himself into the position. He remembered the work he did early on to unpack and deliver new curriculum and sort and distribute materials all while wearing out multiple pairs of dress shoes in the process. He made it a point to talk to and interact with all kinds of people and staff during this learning year. He knew this was a strength of his and wanted to make sure he was being true to himself. He was learning the community's expectations, and how to navigate the complexities of the role. He was preparing himself for multiple transitions in the future, both to the principalship itself as well as to additional buildings he would serve in the

future. He has formed foundations for his leadership beliefs and these guiding principles helped prepare him to navigate extremely difficult situations in the principalship.

Sophia Ripley: Background and Experience.

Race/Ethnicity: Caucasian

Gender: Female

Highest Degree: Masters in the Art of Education

Number of years teaching experience: 5

Additional Professional Experience: Teacher Leader who covered for Principal in their absence (Private School Setting)

Number of years as a Principal: 16

Sophia has an extensive background of experiences that shaped her journey to the role of the principal. She grew up in a large urban area in the southern part of the United States. After high school, she attended a liberal arts college in which she majored in two areas outside of education. This led her to a position working in a private school and the pursuit of a career that allowed her to work with children. While she was working in the private school, she continued her education and earned her master's degree in education. She taught Montessori and explained how teaching in a private school setting was something that first shaped her understanding of the educational system, specifically the differences between private and public schools. Further, she was given opportunities to lead within the building and she often led the building when the principal was periodically out on leave. She worked to sharpen her skills dealing with student discipline, observing, and completing teacher evaluations, and providing professional development. These experiences increased her interest in formal leadership positions and

prepared her to lead the building after the principal resigned. Shifting from teacher-leader to principal was not a major change for her as the expectations in the private school were not nearly as extensive as she would experience in her future in public school leadership positions.

Life changes brought about a move to the Midwest, and she planted herself back into the classroom. She taught in an intermediate classroom for a suburban district and again acquired more leadership skills as a teacher-leader in the building. These experiences led her to apply for and accept a principal role in the same building in which she taught. This experience was a transition as she learned the responsibility of moving from a classroom teacher to the instructional leader in the public education setting. She remembered thinking that dealing with, and leading adults was the most stressful part of the job. Again, she was gaining experiences that prepared her for her next role.

Most recently, she transitioned from one suburban school District to another in a lateral move. She describes this transition as the most difficult in her career. She quickly had to learn her leadership responsibilities in a much bigger system. She recalled the parallel process of learning and leading at the same time. In her transition, she was tasked with an intensive assistance plan with a staff member in her first year while overseeing a variety of special programs in the building that demanded her attention. These experiences have shaped how she views the role of the principal still today as she states, “Each thing is kind of a phase. And so, if you have a few things that you're true to intuitively about being a leader, about working with kids, if you circle back to those in every situation you will stay centered in liking your job” (S. Ripley, personal

communication, 2022). Sophia knows she is in the right role and her past experiences have shaped her perspective on how she leads into the future.

William Stoll: Background and Experience.

Race/Ethnicity: Caucasian

Gender: Male

Highest Degree: Educational Doctorate (Ed.D)

Number of years teaching experience: 7

Additional Professional Experience: Assistant Principal (3 years)

Number of years as a Principal: 23

William's history in the principalship has shaped his view of leadership in many ways. One of the major factors in his journey is the longevity of his tenure in the position. As someone who has experienced over 2 decades as a principal, he has seen and experienced stressful situations that helped mold his beliefs and perspectives.

William grew up in a rural community for most of his early childhood. He grew up in a small community in a Midwestern state and lived mainly on a farm as a young boy. He knows this history impacts his beliefs and values related to hard work and perseverance.

As a professional, he has experienced two distinct urban and suburban school communities. His context for leadership spans multiple traumatic events including leading the school community through the attacks on the U.S. in relation to 9/11/2001 as well as leading his school through a lockdown for an active shooter. Further, he has experienced the dynamics of leading four different elementary buildings, including a Title I school. He has experienced evolutions in curriculum and instruction, school safety, and multiple changes in District Leadership. He has seen how national events can

shape the direction of public education and have a significant impact on how principals are asked to lead their buildings. He has experiences working with leaders above him who have different passions and areas of expertise. Upon reflection, he believes his connections with his community, teachers, and experiences in education may have a significant impact on the responses he receives. “I hadn’t thought of this until now, but I wonder if the fact that I’ve done this for so long impacts parents' perspective of what I tell them” (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022). He does know the level of these experiences helps him put into perspective some of the daily demands of the job. When he put his school in lockdown because of an active shooter, he was at an extremely high level of alertness. Because of the magnitude of that experience, he is able to handle much lesser intense threats more easily. He explained a recent event near the school as a reference for how his perspective is different based on his lived experience. He shared a recent event to highlight this distinction:

It turned out to be a domestic [investigation]. An adult child was at home with a gun and threatening to shoot the rest of his family and so they [the police] were barricading and blocking off the streets. The police called us and told us to keep everybody inside...to me, that doesn’t really rattle me much as all. Because to me it wouldn’t raise my level of concern nearly as much nearly as much as if I hadn’t had that other experience (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022).

This type of reaction, he believes, allows him to process situations by removing his emotions. His experiences have shaped him in a way that makes his perspectives of these situations different from principals who may experience them for the first time.

Part 2: The Context of the Pandemic

The Initial Wave of the Pandemic (March-May 2020)

The following information sets the stage for the importance of these narrative accounts. Each individual leader experienced a unique layer of learning as the news and impact of the pandemic began to reach the Midwestern part of the United States. School Districts worked together to try and solve complex issues that had not been presented previously. However, there was still much discrepancy between how these decisions trickled down to building leaders, the teachers they led, and the students and families they served. As summarized below, there were varying levels of response to the pandemic based on the individual leader, their situation, and philosophical beliefs about how to lead their building. Participants provide background from their perspectives starting in March of 2020 through the end of the 2019-2020 school year.

William Stoll.

Hey, send home your iPads with your kids. Just in case something happens, send home the iPads. We frantically sent home all of the iPads that afternoon...And, if you would have told me that we would never come back from spring break for the rest of the year, I would have thought we were crazy, or the world was ending. (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022)

The initial phase of the pandemic shocked William as he recalled what it meant for him and his staff. It was just prior to Spring Break in the spring of 2020 and there was not a lot of information about the pandemic specifically related to schools. He had been following the news but not closely and right before students left for Spring Break, he

received a call from the Central Office outlining the directive above. Sending home technology so students could access and/or obtain learning from home was not something that had previously been on his mind. As he recalled, the staff and students then left for Spring Break and the initial rush of the moment passed as the school community took a planned break. Instead of stressing about the moment, he saw this as an opportunity. “I actually flew to Mexico on a last-minute whim because airline tickets were tanking. The prices were tanking. So, we booked round trip tickets...super cheap” (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022).

His recollection of the mood for their trip to Mexico changed while he was on vacation. His own adult children called them from the United States to let him and his wife know that places in the Midwest were beginning to shut down. Flights were being canceled and there was a definite possibility that they may not be able to get back if they continued to stay. They headed home as soon as they could.

Fast forward through his leadership lens and the next reference he has was the realization that students would not be coming back into the building, staff would be learning to teach remotely, and he would need to find a way to lead people with minimal direct contact. His world as a leader was now going to be shaped through the use of technology. However, the first drastic shift came in the matter of a week as they organized physical student materials to be picked up by families. They spent time creating a schedule for how parents would enter and exit the building to ensure they could be six feet away from each other and all go the same direction. Some families did not want to enter the building so his staff organized these supplies outside on the school grounds so families could drive up and grab materials for their students. Leadership

shifted to management and getting students and families materials they needed to access their education.

Olivia Kennedy.

It was like yesterday...I remember sitting here, you know you hear it on the news and I'm a pretty avid news watcher...but a teacher who's in the know came into my office and said, 'You realize we won't be in school after Friday.' And I said, oh, My God, you are just over-exaggerating, this is ridiculous. (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022)

Olivia vividly called the conversation herself and this staff member as foreshadowing of her experiences later that week. In the moment, she tried to convince the staff member to be cautious about her influence. She wanted the staff member to keep those thoughts and opinions to herself. In her mind, she did not want to see her staff influenced by thoughts of worry and fear. She remembered and her own affirmation of these beliefs - she did not believe there was any possibility of students not physically being in school. However, later that week, she came to find out she was wrong. The Central Office administration communicated to her that teachers should take their computers home over spring break.

...and then we didn't return. So, she was right. I just never thought in my lifetime that something like that would happen...That's probably one of the first spring breaks in a long time. I actually took it off because I was scared to death to know what responsibility I was going to have when we weren't in school. It's just my defense mechanism was to block it out instead of problem solving, move forward, which is usually my mechanism. (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022)

Olivia went on to explain that she continued to distract herself with home renovations during spring break. She was having a company install wood floors in her house and this gave her something to focus on while the decisions were being made by District leadership. This distraction was one in which she knew she was engaged in because the job she would return to would not be the same one she left:

My whole job was going to change, and I thought I was going to have to quit my job because of my lack of tech knowledge. My interest in being more tech savvy has been minimal at best. So, I thought I'll never be able to support my teachers. I'm not going to be able to be the leader that they're going to need to make it through this pandemic. (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022)

She recalled her concern about adapting to the new demands prompted by the pandemic, further realizing students in her care who now might be at an added risk because the school was not open to provide them with basic needs related to food, direct instruction, and trusted adults. Given all her own personal doubts, she was able to step forward by returning to the building, working with her secretary and strong building teams, and relying on the support of other administrators to adapt to the changes and stress of her new role in school leadership.

Samuel Huxley.

Samuel began the 2019 school year filled with the excitement of opening a new elementary building in his school district. As the principal, Samuel was honored by this opportunity and was determined to create a positive school culture with his new staff and community. Even so, he could not have predicted what the school year had in store for

him. Prior to the onset of the pandemic, he recalled the challenges of opening the building related to delays in construction and lack of materials and furniture. These physical concerns were then accompanied by his bigger concerns related to establishing the culture of this new school.

Samuel put the spread of the pandemic into context as he talked extensively about the assimilation of different teaching strategies, movements, and other societal factors that often moved from the coasts toward the middle of the US. This outward to inward movement of ideas, or in this case, disease is what he recalled swirling around in his mind when he first heard of the pandemic in early 2020. As the pandemic moved closer and closer to home he recalled:

In March of that year, it was a much different situation, I mean the reality became if we get one more public spread case at the time, I think there was one and if we had one more then we were going to have to close our schools down and I thought that would never happen. (You) couldn't even wrap your head around it at the time, like what does that mean we'll have to close our schools down. (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022)

Samuel dismissed this possible reality until he began hearing from their Central Office administration that it was going to happen. Almost instantly, his team came together to formulate a plan to educate students who were not in the building. He recalled how incredibly proud he was of the teachers and staff who collaborated in a joint effort to provide remote education. It was a bonding experience for his staff to create this new

education system in response to the challenges provided by the pandemic. This work was guided by Samuel as part of a vision to serve the students in their community.

As teams worked together, Samuel was still concerned about the culture of his school given the distance now created between staff and students. In the Spring of 2020, when the pandemic began closing schools in the Midwest, Samuel quickly realized how strong the factor of community support would be and was impressed with how his staff responded to these circumstances:

It was amazing how strongly our community came together with the school. They supported the school, and we were all kind of moving in the same direction...I had never seen a culture in a building be so strong. I mean it was such a unique thing. (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022)

Sophia Ripley.

The day before Spring Break, [Sophia's Superintendent] said, 'we're canceling school early'. We had heard of some cases coming up, but we didn't anticipate it would impact school in that way. And so that was sort of the mass pack-up, take your computers home. We were already one-to-one, so we had already been doing some e-learning which was helpful. (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022)

Sophia followed the guidance set out by leadership in her school District. They packed up student materials and sent them home with students. Once this was complete, Sophia took off on a family vacation for Spring Break. Her family decided to continue with their plans for vacation even with the looming fears of the impact on her school community.

She recalled being on vacation that Spring break: “We went to Arizona, but I worked. I worked remotely pretty much the whole time I was there with my family...that was just a given that you weren’t going to be spring breaking that year” (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022).

Sophia remembers the management side of leadership kicking in almost immediately when she returned. There were staff members stepping up to help pack up and send home additional student materials, solicitation of volunteers to help label and organize supplies, and a whole new system created for getting materials out to families of students. Although she believed she could have been more collaborative with other building principals within the school District, she remembered that everyone was in the same position as she was, navigating the unknown and trying to navigate an unfamiliar situation the best she could.

John Ford.

I remember seeing the reports that everyone saw. The image that really stands out was this aerial footage of some street in China with this body just laying on it with this guy that died from coronavirus and it’s spreading...like holy crap people are just falling over and dying like what is this? (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022)

The fear of the virus was real and the unknown of its impact was a real concern for John. In March of 2020, He vividly recalled a small team meeting in which one of his teachers had commented on how tired she was of hearing about the coronavirus. He remembered sharing back with her that he believed this was only the beginning of a long road ahead of

dealing with the virus and its impact in the school. Later that week was when he first knew it was going to significantly change the school experience for his community:

I just remember the very first case...they tracked this guy's whole day and were telling everyone to watch out if you were in these places. And you know at the time, no one knew any different, and I even had that thought like, we don't know any different so we're just going to hunker down and be super-duper careful. (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022)

John remembered a few of his teachers proactively practicing delivery of lessons with online learning options for students. They wanted to try out the technology capabilities as a safeguard for students in case they needed to have them access materials at home. At the time, he thought this might be a stretch in that it would have to be very extreme for schools to close, and yet, he also thought it was a proactive way for teachers to try this type of teaching out while they had students in the physical building. As it turned out, these pilots were a step in the right direction for many staff as they were soon thrust into the business of online education.

Once spring break arrived for John in March of 2020, he also took time to go on vacation with his family. They traveled to Florida as they had planned. This decision had a different outcome than what he expected when he left. His family was able to enjoy the vacation, but upon their return home, he and his family were forced to quarantine for 2 weeks. His quarantine was extended for 2 weeks as per safety protocols established across parts of the United States. As a result, in the chaos of students and families picking up materials from school, he was left to lead and make decisions from

his house that directly impacted his school community. His absence during this time left a void for staff and students during the initial impact of the pandemic.

The Incessant Years of the Pandemic (April 2020-Spring 2022)

The following accounts summarize events that took place following the initial shock created by the fear of the pandemic. School districts chartered a nearly impossible situation, making decisions without a solid research base or specific guidance from government or health departments. As a result, school districts represented by these participants encountered a variety of learning platforms and styles following the shutdown of school from March through May of 2020. Some students were engaging online at home to receive their education, while others went to school in person. Still others accessed their education with a blend of online and in-person learning. Schools dealt with safety protocols from national and local governments as well as procedures within their own school District. Participants recalled events they experienced during this time, including the impact on students and the community. The years that followed brought about significant challenges to the leaders of these schools. The hyperstress created by COVID-19 in three different school years is evident in their stories.

William Stoll. With the initial rush of school closures behind him, William was able to focus on the new task, one in which would require a different approach to school leadership and management. He recalled being on countless Zoom meetings with staff members trying to get people up and running in a virtual setting. This required remote training for teachers, virtual meetings for collaboration, and ensuring that the basic needs of students were addressed. As the leader of the school, William balanced this complexity with the people for which he genuinely cared. He remembers the feelings of

the unknown for staff who had health issues, were pregnant, and balancing concerns of staff who did not believe in the virus with those who had fears of its impact on themselves or their loved ones. Although complex, there were pieces of virtual learning that spring he greatly enjoyed along with many of his staff:

At first, I loved it. I mean, to be honest, that semester, it was great to sit at home in my basement with my television screen and [have] no lunch duty, no discipline, no traffic [duty]...Any problematic communications with parents at all during that whole time it was mostly, 'hey, you guys are doing a great job.'...Gosh, it was a less stressful semester for me. (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022)

Coupled with extended grace to families, William's District administration also found ways to minimize expectations to fit the current reality. He remembers, for the first time in his career, having multiple major expectations taken off of his plate. He was given more leniency in teacher evaluations, state testing, and much of what was then required was only what was essential to the learning process.

There was still a high demand for his time. He found himself embedded in management of the school and directing staff and students more than providing inspiration and instructional leadership. The impact of this type of leadership came at a cost as much of his time was simply spent on managerial tasks to which he was unsure of the best solution. There was not preparation for this type of event nor a wealth of knowledge about what was best to keep staff and students safe. Further, connections with staff members became more difficult to sustain and some staff members were deeply

impacted by the isolation caused quarantine, isolation, and fear. Many of these factors continued to compound themselves throughout the next few years of the pandemic.

Olivia Kennedy. “I think my strength in this position has always been that I’m able to facilitate strong teams” (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). As Olivia looked back at the pandemic, she determined that she was able to navigate through difficult times because of the teams in which she spent so much time investing. She is aware of her leadership strengths and how building teams supplement her strengths for positive outcomes for students. Olivia praised her secretary as a master of building systems and delegated many tasks to her related to her strengths. Her secretary spent much of her time helping form and communicate building systems which freed up Olivia to problem-solve in other ways. In addition, prior to the pandemic, her strong building teams focused on technology implementation, behavior, and grade level learning all were ready to tackle the challenges presented before them. During the pandemic, Olivia often contemplated whether she was following the rules of the District, doing justice to the plans put in place, and finding ways to stay connected with staff. She was constantly monitoring her efforts to sustain consistency in her school community.

Olivia commented multiple times that a major highlight over these years of leadership was the incredible resilience of her staff for the benefit of their students. Each staff member approached the pandemic with different skills, thoughts, and values. Nevertheless, she was impressed with how creative they became, adapting on the fly to novel situations, creating solutions to problems through collaboration. The outcome

became evident in that relationships with students and the community continued to be cultivated even given such circumstances.

As the pandemic surged on, Olivia knew that changes were going to happen, and more uncertainty was surely in their future. This uncertainty presented itself in multiple ways over the course of the following years. She recalled being extremely excited to bring students back into the building following a quarter of remote learning. She shared this excitement with much of her community as parents had reflected and appreciated the work that teachers do with students daily. She spent a great deal of time planning for the logistics of that year and helped set the standards for the District processes as well as her building.

She again relied on her teams to help enact many of the new procedures and expectations brought about by the pandemic. Her secretary and health office team tracked and documented contact tracing within the building, student absences, and unfilled positions left by teachers who were sick, quarantined, or taking care of family members. Her staff came together to support one another and made sure that the well-being of students remained at the forefront of their efforts.

For her, the reality was different. She was leading teams in the building to continue the efforts of instruction and support of students, while trying to fill many gaps in human resources and nuances of safety protocols.

I felt like every time I went into a classroom, I couldn't focus on the joy of kids. I had to focus on where the damn dots were, or how far apart the desks were, or did that kid use hand sanitizer...I felt like I was just putting out fires pretty much constantly. The level of communication was

different. It seemed repetitive and really it wasn't communication to solve, it was communication to inform, and I felt it was all going out and very little was coming in. (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022)

Over the course of the next 2 years, Olivia would experience many different forms of leadership. She often questioned what was appropriate for her expectations of students, staff, and families. This included to what degrees she should hold staff accountable given these unique situations. She balanced everything from lesson planning for absences, to serving lunch, to being a substitute teacher for any subject or specialist area. Through it all, she explained that she has a great amount of appreciation for the staff in her building and the Central Office administration that had to make impossible decisions during an unprecedented time.

Samuel Huxley. Samuel led a school with compounding factors during the pandemic. He was leading a new staff, in a new building, as part of a new community school. Stakeholders knew he was invested in the community as he was a well-known school leader and respected for his leadership. However, he knew that his challenges would come in having a heavily involved parent community that was vocal and not afraid to challenge him, his teachers, or the school District. He remembers navigating this pressure during different phases of the pandemic, knowing he would constantly be challenged. He explained:

We live in a totally different era than our parents lived in. My parents would have never questioned whether or not the teacher was wrong, or my parents would have never questioned whether or not the choice that I made was right or wrong. (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022)

In the beginning of the pandemic, parents were incredibly supportive of getting their children back to school and wanted to support the school however possible. He remembers thinking this gave teachers and himself the feeling that they could take on the pandemic and serve students in the best way possible given the context of safety procedures. Teachers taught both in-person and online which came with a great deal of planning and preparation. He recalled doing the work to make sure classes were spread out and students were in masks. Initially, this response was embraced by the community. Personally, he had to transform his leadership, however, to match what the position demanded:

At the time, I think we were all in survival mode, so...all we wanted to do as administrators was do right by our teachers. Teachers were having to go live every day, they were having to teach every day, they were having to do things we've never asked a teacher to do. (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022)

Samuel noted that one of his strengths as a leader has always been communication. This included personal communication, videos, social media, and newsletters. Countless times throughout the pandemic, however, he found himself unable to communicate the visions for his newly established school. This came on the heels of the pandemic and the unknown nature of education in the future. The unpredictability of the pandemic caused him to lack the answers his community requested. He felt inadequate to set the stage for future events because his vision was lost in the management of the school. Internally, much of his own personal expectations for staff decreased because teachers were also navigating their newly defined roles. Building

goals related to continuous improvement for the school and staff meetings were put aside. He tried to keep teachers time to plan at a premium and this meant cutting in other fundamental areas.

Personally, he spent much of his time carrying out the managerial tasks of the school. He oversaw many areas of the school day which included students eating lunch in their classrooms. Further, he provided students opportunities for extra recess time because of masking protocols, he navigated the local level politics related to masking, ensured students could access and learn from school and home, and tracked cases of COVID while covering classrooms as a substitute for staff that were quarantined or sick. His experience was compounded by his residency in the same community in which he served as the principal. He felt as though he was on duty 7 days a week as he interacted with neighbors in the community. The strengths Samuel relied on to be successful in the principalship had shifted drastically. Previously, he was able to be out and greet students and families, provide support and guidance for teachers, and move the school forward. In the latter stages of the pandemic, he felt like he was fighting an uphill battle against politics, family dynamics, and lack of support from the community.

Sophia Ripley. The District helped lead the vision for Sophia as she navigated the entirety of the pandemic. This District leadership provided broad standards for teaching and learning and expectations for staff and students that Sophia believed were manageable. With so many changes related to the safety procedures she constantly felt as though they were changing if not daily, then on a weekly basis. The constant changes were difficult for the staff as she filtered what was essential for them to know and implement at each different turn.

As a result of these parameters, her own leadership shifted to following these district expectations. She recalled a long weekend with another administrator in which they put arrows around the entire school to establish student traffic patterns. After the system was implemented, it was evident it would not work. All the time and energy poured into systems that vanished when faced with reality was exhausting. Recess equipment was labeled for each class and only one class could touch their respective equipment. The kids cleaned the equipment after its use prior to the next recess. Classroom materials, including manipulatives, were cleaned every day. She spent her time trying to balance reality with how to keep everyone safe all while doing her best to follow the District processes.

Sophia recalls thinking some of the safety procedures from the District were unrealistic. An example of this came from her health office. When a student would show up with symptoms of COVID-19, the nurse would put on a full body safety suit to work with the child. Further, the health office transitioned all students with symptoms to a different location in the building which had a room to isolate students. Sophia did her best to check the boxes and make sure her team was following the protocols. In this instance, however, the full body suit lasted about a month before it was deemed unrealistic to continue. Elementary students displayed symptoms too often for this much of a response. The example from Sophia summarizes her leadership as she explained it throughout the entirety of the pandemic. She did everything she possibly could to ensure the health and safety of the staff and students while balancing the reality of the situation.

Personally, she adapted to the changing role of her position and spent her time managing a variety of tasks. Her district administration eased off expectations for

evaluation and achievement testing. As a result, she utilized this time to contact trace, communicate with families, and provide support to staff. She recalled her leadership at this time as being focused on the short term and repetitive. “You didn’t make plans, really, because you didn’t know what the day was going to hold. So, because every day we spent at least four hours on Covid. We left the days pretty open” (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022).

Throughout the pandemic, she was faced with many obstacles in her leadership. Some of these obstacles came at crucial times throughout the pandemic which caused her to shift her focus from one priority to another. The first setback she experienced was a personal injury to her leg that kept her from being at school and able to walk. She remembered the personal responsibility she felt as a leader was the most difficult to deal with at that time. Staff in the building were struggling as they taught both in person and online and yearned for her support. She was forced to delegate her leadership power through electronic communication which caused a certain level of instability in the building. After she returned, she contracted COVID and suffered extensive absence from the implications. At one point she was unable to hear, and this caused her to lose her sense of balance. She was once again unable to lead the building in the way she was accustomed to. She relied on her assistant principal and teacher leaders to manage the building while she was caring for herself.

For stretches of the pandemic that she was able to be in the building and lead, she felt that she was able to rise to the challenge. She empathized with staff members who had to miss work while taking care of their families. She organized people and directed them in a way that they were able to meet the District expectations. She provided

stability of leadership and answers that others were not able to. “I think I was ok to sort of go with the flow, and that’s with Covid too. I really was...energized by the constant decision making” (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022).

Unfortunately, she encountered another major issue in her personal life that required her to step away from the position for a while. This was another setback in her building leadership, but one in which she knew she needed to put family first. She remembered thinking it was a time in which direct decisions and communication were necessary, but she was not going to be able to provide it for staff that made it difficult. “It was when I left, knowing they needed someone to do that and there wasn’t that kind of leadership that stepped in. It was really gray. It was a lot of ‘What do you think? What do we want to do?’” (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022). Nevertheless, she knew she needed to step away and she consciously made this decision because it was right for her family. In summary, her leadership during the pandemic was fragmented by a variety of experiences. Even though she encountered many setbacks in her ability to lead, she fundamentally believes her passion lies in the principalship. She missed the position when she was not there and wanted to return as soon as possible.

John Ford. John’s Spring Break trip in 2020 caused him to be quarantined for the first couple of weeks upon his return. He created means of leading virtually but was absent in his ability to provide hands-on support and leadership to his staff. Quarantine, paired with new leadership demands were hard on him and his family. He created ways to connect with staff by hosting virtual staff and leadership meetings. This allowed him to infuse humor into the situation while communicating his understanding of the reality

teachers were facing. He embraced the philosophy that the bandwidth which staff had the capacity to provide would be enough to serve the kids in their school community.

In addition, he problem-solved a multitude of scenarios ranging from District administrative updates, to connecting with families about Wi-Fi connectivity or troubleshooting iPads. He remembers how he thought about managing the school:

All those little things, the minutia, you didn't really think that you're having a really big impact. You're just putting band aids on this gaping artery wound. It was just a point of survival and so you just did what you could to get through that day. It was hard to have long-term goals, you know, because no one knew what the hell's going on, so it was all about survival, I think. (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022)

John found through the pandemic that being a filter for so many different forms of communication was often difficult. Communicating the expectations from the District to teachers was complex and often added more stress and duties for staff. Political agendas, including masking consumed time as he mediated between households and the school. Further, each detail of leadership required extra steps of management. Whether that was social distancing teachers in staff meetings, teaching staff how to clean and manage school supplies and equipment or managing teaching students both in person and online. He combatted these factors the best way he could by cutting teacher workloads. He joined other principals in this effort by limiting or removing staff meetings from the calendar, fielding angry parent phone calls, and proactively communicating with the community information that directly impacted their students.

The bulk of his time was spent on the variety of compliance and management responsibilities that came with the pandemic. He took the lead on contact tracing, communicating positive cases to the community, and checking lists to make sure they were in close compliance with District guidelines. He explained:

Yeah, early on, like anything it was a lot...I didn't feel I was visible [in classrooms], didn't feel I was involved in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. You know all of those things went away as you were learning the new procedures and making sure that you were in compliance with the expectations. (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022)

The management of the school had become the normal operation for John through the pandemic. As an extension of the school day, he found himself answering phone calls, text messages, and communication from staff and community many nights out of the week and even spent weekends staying in contact with staff who may need his support. He felt as though he was on call every day of the week, specifically managing the human resources in the building. He, like many others, found the hardest part to balancing leadership was managing high expectations while keeping staff engaged in the already challenging profession.

Context of the Pandemic (Summary)

Each of the individual elementary principals experienced the pandemic in their own unique way. The brief summary accounts included in this section outlined brief thoughts and experiences of the pandemic. Through the interviews, there were commonalities shared between all the participants. As a means for making an understanding of this interconnectedness, Part 3 explores these Themes and Sub-themes

as they relate to the lived experiences of the participants. The hyperstress created by the onset of the pandemic is evidenced in the culmination of these experiences.

Part 3: Themes and Sub-themes

Participant interviews were analyzed using a process of lean coding, which produced similar categories from the dialogue. These categories were organized into similar ideas which produced patterns of experiences. These patterns were extracted in a way that produced major themes and subthemes. The result of this analysis produced accounts of experiences related to hyperstress created by the pandemic, as well as ways in which principals handled this hyperstress, delving into the thoughts, beliefs, and commonalities found in veteran principals and how they navigated the hyperstress associated with the pandemic. The three major themes that emerged are: The Principal's View of Stress, Resilient Principals Know What It Is and Do What It Takes, and Release and Coping with Stress.

Theme 1: The Principal's View of Stress

Being an elementary principal is a profession in which there is a consistent level of stress. As a veteran principal, participants in this study were aware of the many stressors they face as professionals. Stress can initiate from interactions with a variety of constituents, form internally and externally, and lead to factors or levels of burnout. In each interview, participants talked about the impact of stress on their position. They dissected the importance of recognizing stress as well as how types of stress can vary over time. The interviews formed a clear picture of how a principal's perception of stressors relates to how they view it now. These thoughts and views of stress are impacted and altered due to exposure to professional growth, personal experiences,

knowledge of their leadership strengths, and circumstances inside and outside of their control. By exploring this theme, participants give their accounts of stressful experiences and how they have viewed them throughout their tenure as principals. The basis for compilation of this theme stems from the elevated stress experienced by principals in conjunction with the additional layer of stress felt by the pandemic which prompted a hyperstressful environment for these elementary principals.

Fear and Uncertainty in the Principalship. One of the most prevalent topics related to stress from each participant was working through the great unknowns caused by the pandemic. As a school leader, planning for the future typically increases effective implementation. As a school administrator, many of the participants recalled experiencing varying levels of stress from the beginning of their tenure either as an assistant principal or principal. Samuel remembered being in the role for the first time and wondering what he should be doing. The District was growing, and he was learning to lead while trying to create a vision for the school. He began by doing anything he could to help including unpacking and delivering supplies and curriculum materials to classrooms. As a new principal, he felt pressure to figure out who he wanted to be and how he wanted to spend his time. Age, however, might have been the biggest stress on him. He recalled having staff members that were double his age that he was in charge of leading. He received feedback from a staff member halfway through the first year that his expectations were too high, and no one would ever meet them (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022).

For William the stress initiated through both minor and major events was something he experienced over the course of his tenure. In his first year as a principal, he

remembered how nervous he would get to have to call a parent about a behavior issue at school. He did not like making the phone calls because he knew the person on the other end of the line was not going to like to hear details about the event that happened. These types of interactions were some of the most stressful he remembered encountering in the first few years. This type of stress is ongoing and part of the position. However, there were also more monumental stresses he encountered in the first years as a principal. He navigated leadership through the attack on the United States on 9/11 and was in lockdown for an active shooter at a nearby school a few years later. These events triggered major changes in the United States as well as in his community for increased safety measures that lived out for years down the road (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022).

In John's experiences, he touched on the personal side of stress he encountered in his journey.

I feel little amounts of stress anytime in which I'm balancing people's expectation or wants and needs that might not align and how I'm working to manage that...I felt some stress when I first started, especially as to how to mold the school in a way that made sense to me, but still honoring the past, a little bit and helping people go through change. (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022)

When he spoke about the people he supported in his building, it was evident that he takes pride in being a good listener and creating a culture where people feel comfortable coming to him with the most major life events. He relayed that he often feels stress when he has to lead a staff member through a difficult situation at work. He might have

sensitive personal information that was shared with him about someone who lost a family member, were diagnosed with a major illness or disease, or are navigating through a difficult marital situation. These experiences stand out to him as he takes on stress caused by being in the position of the principal.

Sophia identified stress in her principalship coming with the transition from one school district to another. Leading adults is something that caused her uncertainty and a great deal of stress. Much of this information came from her being unfamiliar with how specific systems worked and what expectations there were for district processes. Balancing district expectations with her own expectations was a burden on her time. By these two factors vying for her time, she experienced a great amount of stress and uncertainty as she took on the role of the principal. She remembers feeling a looming fear of, “not knowing if I was doing things the right way” (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022).

The initial year of Olivia’s tenure was “a joy ride” (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). At the time, she believed her 2 years of experience as an assistant principal had prepared her to tackle the role of the principal. For the 1st year, this was the truth as she got to know the students, staff and community she served. In contrast, she now reflects with a different lens:

I didn’t know how much I didn’t know until I sat in that seat... You’re like, ‘I got this’. I was so naïve, and that second year was very stressful, because then I knew what I didn’t know [in year one], and I knew the things that I had to accomplish. Some of those things on that list were

really scary...because you're dealing with someone's livelihood. (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022)

The fear for Olivia came in her dedication to serve the students in her building, and, if she did not follow through, the students would be the ones that would ultimately suffer.

As a group of principals reflecting on the stress they faced early in their career, there is a common theme of progression that evolved when they spoke about the complexity of fear and uncertainty they experienced as part of leadership in the pandemic. These veteran principals found themselves searching for answers to this uncertainty and fear of the school community on a daily basis. Below are the accounts of interviewees in relation to the fear and uncertainty created by this novel situation of the pandemic.

Fear and Uncertainty: COVID-19's Impact. There was a major surge in the level of fear and uncertainty created by COVID-19 as explained by participants. This worldwide pandemic caused a complex environment that modern school leaders had not experienced to this magnitude. As political leaders and health officials around the world tangled with making sense of their response to the pandemic, school leaders were at the forefront of caring for their communities. Although major traumatic events often impact school districts, the magnitude of impact and longevity of the pandemic had substantial implications immediately and the effect continued to linger for years into the future.

Processing the impact of the pandemic during the initial phase, many leaders experienced the stress of uncertainty and fear felt throughout the community. This stress came in addition to the typical level of stress associated with their position. Olivia shared her summary of the fear of the unknown, "Everything seemed to be a crisis. It just

seemed like you couldn't decipher what was critical and what needed to be dealt with in sequential order. I felt like I was walking on eggshells, like there were certain things you couldn't do...I [felt] more 24/7; 365, than I was before" (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). This fear and crisis mode of leadership continued to increase throughout the initial wave of the pandemic. Personally, a deeply rooted fear of Olivia's emerged as she started to think about the ongoing implications of the pandemic on her community.

I was scared, but not for me. I was scared for our community and how we were going to help continue to educate kids, because that's our job, and also their well-being. I mean who's going to feed the kids that don't have the food?...My head was in a million places. How often do teachers have to report? When do they? What do they have to do? Who's going to train them? (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022)

These questions outlined the lived fears associated with closing schools at the onset of the pandemic. Olivia recalled the overwhelming amount of new information available all the time. She processed this information and how it might impact her school community. New information about the pandemic often drove the community's fear and uncertainty. She would then analyze the information and process her next steps as a school leader. Olivia's account acknowledges the importance of public schools in the overall well-being of students while highlighting the stress associated with this line of work that involves deeply rooted relationships with the staff, students, and families in her care.

Sophia echoed these sentiments as she discussed the impact the pandemic had on her staff. During school closures, many teachers had their own children to care for and

educate. Initially, these teachers served dual roles as an instructor and caretaker in the homes, teaching virtually while managing their own house. Then, when students returned to school, there was the fear of the virus spreading within the school and how their students as well as their own children could be susceptible to the virus. This balance was difficult for teachers and another layer of stress for administrators. Many teachers were instructing virtually and in-person while organizing and providing homework and materials for students who were not able to attend face-to-face for long periods of time due to quarantine or illness. Sophia remembers her first experience of shutting down parameters for sending students home to learn due to high levels of spread, “you had some in and some gone, and so we only shut a classroom down if they had six kids gone. Then we’d ask that whole class to stay home” (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022). This caused ripple effects throughout the building as staff were aware of the presence of the virus and the quick nature of its spread.

Sophia recalled the stress associated with staff feeling uncertain about their safety as well as their curiosity about what the expectations were and who they were coming from. She explained, “I think that [uncertainty] lasted all year” (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022). Additionally, an added stress for some staff in her building was the fear of their own safety as they worked in close proximity with large numbers of students. This put Sophia in a leadership dilemma for deciding what was the appropriate course of action. “We had teachers who didn’t want to be within certain distance of kids. So then they weren’t doing small groups, so they’d gone back to whole group. So, getting them to go back in a small group was a challenge” (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022).

Elementary principals were walking a balance in how they communicated expectations with staff throughout the pandemic. As they acknowledged the safety of their staff, they also had a responsibility to make sure students were receiving the best possible education. Their leadership was necessary as many staff themselves were in crisis mode. For John, his absence from the building due to quarantine created stress as he recalled a conversation, he had with a staff member. The teacher was fearful of the initial wave of the virus and how it might impact her family. At her time of need, she was genuinely scared for her life and yearned for his leadership presence. He realized, through this conversation, that he would be dealing with the fear and uncertainty of his staff on a larger scale. The fear of the virus was upon them, and John wanted to be sure to follow the safety procedures set out by the District. At one point, he explained they had a procedure in which they were told to let library books returned by students sit on a table for 5 days before they could be reshelved or checked out by another student (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022). This procedure demonstrates one example of the detailed planning it took for leaders to try to help students and staff be as safe as possible within the building.

Staff were not the only ones who experienced fear associated with the pandemic. John recalled one of the first experiences in which he witnessed fear and uncertainty of the pandemic from the students in his building. He was conducting a standardized method of contact tracing by documenting the movement of a student who tested positive for the virus. He explained:

I'll never forget going into the first classroom of fifth graders and we had a positive case, and someone sent their kids to school. And they're like,

‘Oh, I came back positive and he’s at school’ and we had to go around and be like, ‘all right, where was everyone sitting an hour ago’. And all the kids started whispering and freaking out, you know. That was so weird.

(J. Ford, personal communication, 2022)

This type of situation was similar with each principal as they experienced the impact and stress caused by the pandemic for the first time. School is typically viewed as a safe place, and the pandemic brought to light many ways in which this type of safety was compromised and replaced by fear, uncertainty, protocols and procedures. The new normal for principals was the stress of these interactions with people they cared for

William recalled the uncertainty of certain staff members who felt their own health would be compromised if they contacted the virus. Some staff believed they could potentially experience life-threatening outcomes if they were exposed. He was caught in the middle as he wanted to acknowledge the fear and make sure he was following the expectations of his district. He explained this dilemma:

The constant changing of what our rules were or what our guidelines were was stressful for me. We were nervous about it...Everybody had a different tolerance for what they were comfortable with. I have one teacher who wore her mask every single day...You know, some teachers were terrified to come back to work. (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022)

The worries were personal to him as well. The person he worked most closely with in the office had health concerns prior to the pandemic. Now, she was concerned about contracting the virus as she was already at risk. He also had staff members who were

pregnant at the time and there was little research on the impact of the virus on the mothers as well as the baby. There was fear and uncertainty within those staff members and their families, all of which was felt by these principals. William acknowledged his own stress as he carried on with conversations with staff members in the building (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022).

In addition to staff and students, the school community and families felt a great deal of uncertainty as their students entered the classroom not knowing if their student would contact the virus and bring it into their home. When this did occur, families scrambled to find care for their students while trying to keep them connected to their education. If students were sent home due to an exposure or breakout, families had to adapt. Each time a situation arose that involved sending students home, principals aided in the communication. In William's building, he was the one who communicated to families in his community. This was not a simple process, and the product of his communication often sent fear into the inboxes of parents and guardians in the community. He explained:

Every single day I was doing COVID letters, and in our District if it was a positive [student case] somebody would call, typically our health review. You had to call and talk to the parents and you had to get all of the dates of when everything happened and when it started...but then it was, well, how many people were sitting within six feet for up to 15 minutes...Questions that always put you kind of in a tough spot because you're like, 'they're in an elementary room and they're 6, they were

exposed to all 20 kids in that room and in the lunchroom. (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022)

Once the information was collected and communicated, many districts openly displayed data on their website. This allowed for transparency for the community to see how the virus was impacting their school. Much of the data was tracked by district personnel and the numbers informed the community. A byproduct of this transparency was increased levels of fear for some community members. William recalled the stress he felt as he lived the constant process of change, he experienced each time he received new information. He admitted he often made decisions based on his best hypothesis. He remembered asking himself difficult questions such as, “What would be best [course of action] to not spread the virus or have a major outbreak?” (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022).

As Samuel explained how he interpreted his initial thoughts of fear and uncertainty, he mentioned multiple times that he, his staff, and the community believed the impact of the pandemic would be short lived before life returned to normal. As the pandemic continued weeks and months into the future, he realized the pandemic was here to stay. Even so, as they began the school year in 2020, Samuel’s community celebrated students returning to learning in person.

Everybody was so happy that we were in school, you want us to wear a mask, I had one parent [reply]...I don’t care if they have my kid wear a hazmat outfit. I'm so appreciative that they’re going to school, and I will do whatever they tell me to do. (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022)

This type of response was typical at the start of the 2020 school year as parents and community were thankful that students could return to learning in the schools. However, the stance about masks, social distancing, and the virus was not unified throughout the community for long. Principals experienced the stress of pushback from staff and the community related to safety procedures. As the leader of his school, William relied on the District for support and guidance as to how to navigate the questions, parent pushback, and uncertainty of the future. He remembers thinking that he was unsure what might happen the next day let alone the next semester. However, he knew he wanted to serve his community in the best way possible, the world simply did not have the information to succinctly provide answers to such a complex problem. He explained,

Parents would challenge [mask protocol]. That's the worst position to be in is when you don't really know the why. I can research on why to wear a mask but I'm guaranteeing that all of those other people had probably done more research on masks than I had. (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022)

The disconnection between lack of research, ongoing school safety protocols, and constant change created feelings of hyperstress among principals. In each of the accounts above, the complex nature of stress associated with fear and uncertainty from stakeholders is evident. As a major impact in this research, the pandemic highlighted an experience that was new for this generation of school leadership. Even veteran elementary principals were challenged to meet the demands of their position without knowing or being able to set long-term visions for their school.

External Forces of Stress. The next major sub-theme that emerged in each of the interviews was the external pressure faced by elementary principals through the pandemic. Each of the candidates had a unique experience with their own leadership within their school District and how they guided the role of the principal through the pandemic. District leadership influence played a major factor in all of the experiences outlined by principals. Further, the government of the United States experienced political polarity in many aspects related to the pandemic. As a result, there were highly contentious political debates about the future of the United States, research and data related to safety and vaccines for the virus, as well as local disagreements between political parties that often spilled into Board of Education meetings. This discourse influenced the work of local school boards and superintendents, who ultimately drove the systematic experiences of students in the classroom. Elementary principals, acting as middle level managers, engaged in daily interactions among large groups of students and families. Veteran principals explained their perspectives associated with the political nature of the position through the pandemic.

District Office Influence. The District Office was crucial to the success of school districts navigating the pandemic. Although it was highlighted in each interview, veteran principals had a mix of feelings concerning the role of their central office in decision making. This type of decision-making power directly impacted the elementary principals and their job responsibilities. School district officials set the policy and procedures, while principals were tasked with the implementation of such practices. When the community disagreed with these procedures it was the principals who experienced the stress.

Sophia explained her stress was compounded when she first learned about the requirements for teachers when they closed schools and sent students home to learn virtually. In her head, she tried to make sense of how a parent of an elementary student would manage teaching and being a parent at home at the same time. She recognized the same discomfort in her community as they shared their concern about engaging their child in virtual education while trying to simultaneously work from home. At times, Sophia wished the District would have been more specific in their expectations. This would have alleviated stress on her, but she understood why the central office also had to be broad. Each community had different expectations of their school and she knew the stress she felt would be different from experiences of principals at other buildings (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022).

Sophia was appreciative, as with other principals, that leadership at the district office did take some requirements off of their plates. Removing these barriers allowed her to feel as though she had the authority to take more off the teacher's plates (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022). John mirrored these decisions as he saw his role from the district as lessening stress and expectations on teachers. However, as the leader he felt as though he was pushed toward compliance with the District and had to check boxes associated with safety protocols simply to keep up (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022). District office administrators were functioning with little information that guided their decisions. As elementary principals experienced their decision-making, the level of stress increased.

Political Influence on the Principalship. John's recollection of the amount of politically charged emails sent to him averaged from 2 to 3 per week. He explained these

emails also made it to the inboxes of teachers, “You’d have nasty politically driven emails to teachers and different things like that” (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022). The communication did not stop there if a parent or community member disagreed with your response. At that point, they would call the district office and then that would lead to multiple communications internally prior to a public response to the person who initiated the email. John appreciated this type of team approach, “I think everyone kind of understood that we’re all in this together” (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022). In contrast, the time and energy it took to carefully craft these responses created additional stress. The wrong response could fire up emotions in the community and create even more unrest.

The political complexity of this time is difficult to conceptualize. The unknowns at each level of government were a factor in leading school districts. Olivia recalled questioning, “what was going to happen at the Federal level. What was going to happen at the State level. What was going to happen at the local level. It was so unknown because people were starting to fight amongst themselves” (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). Samuel shared a similar experience as he talked about parents and community members putting unusual amounts of pressure on the school. This was one of the most difficult times for him to live in the same community in which he was the school leader. He stated, “It became really hard to live next door to people” (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022). In his experience the divide came via conflict with personal opinions concerning presidential candidates and a looming election. He described it as a divide between two different camps of thought and the schools were the

meeting place of these differing ideologies, specifically related to masking (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022).

As a result of many contested Board of Education meetings, some principals were required to attend meetings while some made the conscious decision to attend. Samuel remembers seeing community members at these meetings who had never been present or taken interest in the functions of the school. They showed up to these meetings with feelings of anger and frustration which accompanied their misunderstanding of the meetings (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022). Olivia chose to attend board meetings regularly. She believed she should support her local Board of Education, which was under attack in the community, and saw herself as a presence in the audience representing school leaders. Further, her attendance allowed her to witness the variety of opinions that were presented in the public comments section of the Board meetings. She remembers thinking she did not always agree with the decisions made by the Board but could support the decisions as she knew she would be charged with carrying out many of the decisions they made in those meetings (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). Samuel knew the same was true for him, “At times I didn’t believe in masks...I had no choice. If the school district and the superintendent say they [students and staff] have to wear masks to be in school, I have to follow through with that” (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022).

William felt the pressure to follow district procedures even though there was not adequate amounts of data or research on certain initiatives. One of the pieces that rested heavily on his shoulders were the directives that came from leaders in the school District.

One of the things that bothered me from my superiors was when they would start talking about stuff as if they knew it to be a fact...And so I felt personally like, well, this person he has chosen to go get his information from is a source that politically aligns with his beliefs (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022).

John commented similarly in that the stress and pressure of District leaders also had an impact on his ability to lead at the building. Pressure felt at the top of the organization was passed on to principals in an increased sense of urgency to carry out initiatives set in place by the Superintendent or Board of Education. This was a shift that caused him to experience heightened levels of stress. Previously, in his building leadership, he felt as though he had the power to filter messages, initiatives, and crucial information from the District into his building. Through the pandemic, this was not his experience as he became management driven, prioritizing procedures and compliance (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022).

The dynamic nature of leadership as a Board member or Superintendent was recognized by all participants. They shared stories of understanding and grace for the impossible positions these individuals were put in at the onset of the pandemic. They agreed that district leadership was navigating something that would change the scope of education well into the future and believed each of their district leaders did their best given the intense stress and pressure they experienced. William summarized this thinking succinctly, "I don't fault my district Superintendent and the people who are trying to make those decisions...[they] were trying to make the decision that was less worse than all of the others you could possibly make" (W. Stoll, personal

communication, 2022). Still, the impact of the political climate carried a heavy weight that rested on the shoulders of principals. These principals are humans, and they experienced the impact of this stress in their personal lives as well.

Personal Lives Impacted by the Pandemic.

I think really, up until COVID hit, I don't know if I really knew what stress was, you know as a principal I mean short of, you know, having an angry parent come into parent teacher conferences, we hadn't really seen the school board thing take off where parents would show up weekly or monthly and bash on the school. So, I think, the stress before the pandemic was at the time pretty big, but I don't really think we knew what we were getting into. All those stressful moments leading up to the pandemic, I would take those 100 times to one. (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022).

As Samuel outlined above, principals felt the exponential increase in stress caused by the pandemic in their personal lives. Throughout these interviews, one of the underlying commonalities among principals was the personal impact of hyperstress on them as individuals. As veteran principals, they all had experienced high levels of stress throughout their tenure. This stress was different, and each leader acknowledged the context of their situation influenced how they handled this stress.

As veteran principals, the communities these leaders served had a general understanding of them as a leader prior to the pandemic. They had previous relationships and interactions with the person leading their school. However, there was not always a clear picture of what toll the stress of leading in the pandemic might take on them as

people. In the initial phase of the pandemic, many principals viewed the situation as an opportunity. As outlined previously, a few of the principals chose to go on vacation out of state as the pandemic hit, one even planned a trip to Mexico on a whim as the prices for flights rapidly declined. Other principals carried on as they would have normally during Spring Break, making home improvements and finding time to relax. These short-term plans seemed mostly unchanged as the week of Spring Break in 2020 commenced. This phase of normalcy was a very short-lived time for principals as they were soon thrust into the reality of what would become the hyperstressful leadership they would experience in upcoming years. The stress of the pandemic changed the lives of all these veteran principals, with the impact of work-life balance being at the forefront.

Sophia remembers early in her career what it was like to have young children at home while trying to balance care for her own children with the magnitude of leading a school. This was a different type of stress than what she feels now as a parent who has children that are grown and tries to balance how she spends her working time outside of school hours. She enjoys being a principal and always has, it is something that drives her and challenges her professionally. She states, “I’m not meant to be a stay-at-home mom...I need both [work and home]” (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022).

Samuel believed prior to COVID he would finish his career in administration and might even look to a position at a Central Office. He was content in his position and saw himself as a leader and staple in the community. He explained, “I wasn’t ever questioning what I do as a job, I loved my job, I felt like I was born to do this” (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022). William was similar in thinking there are positive pieces of this job that he really enjoys. Retirement was on the horizon for him,

and he contemplated whether he should continue working because he enjoys the work he does (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022). These statements changed as principals talked about the demands of leadership during the pandemic.

The personal impact of principals during this time was not limited to the mental strain created by stress during the pandemic. There were also physical implications. During the initial phase of the pandemic when students were remote learning, John recalled his physical state. He shared, “I remember getting neck pain and carpal tunnel cramps from typing and sitting in uncomfortable chairs Zooming doing all those things” (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022). This may seem minor, but the ongoing exposure to screen and extended periods of sitting took their toll. Furthermore, multiple principals reported contracting COVID themselves, being sick or out of work for periods of time, some of which resulted in long-term effects. Sophia was impacted the most with her physical symptoms. She lost hearing in one ear which caused her limited ability to balance even well enough to walk. She missed extended time at work as she could not physically navigate the building.

Mentally, the hyperstress of the position impacted these leaders. Multiple principals referred to the isolation and loneliness caused by the pandemic. There were parts of quarantine that were positive for John’s family as they ate dinner together as a family every night and took the opportunity to sit and play board games. In contrast, he talked extensively about the loneliness of the pandemic, highlighting the isolation he and his family experienced during quarantine. As he reflected, it was a difficult time for him and his family due to the lack of interactions socially with other people. Olivia’s comments aligned, “I felt really lonely. I’m a people person, if you can’t tell. I love to

talk...[and] I am a hugger” (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). The lack of physical touch and socialization played a major role in her personal and professional life. She explained even her marriage was tested more than it had been for decades. The divide was evident in differing perspectives and political views about the pandemic. As a result, she internalized her thoughts and limited conversations with her spouse because of the tension it created (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). Not only were marital relationships impacted, but principals provided support within their own families. Sophia’s experience was heavy as her own child struggled with the demands put forth by the pandemic. Her child was transitioning to college and felt extremely isolated, often not leaving her dorm room, and attending classes online. This situation increased her feelings of isolation to the point there were significant concerns about her mental health. As a result, Sophia stepped away to care for her child. To her, this was an easy decision as she puts family first, but the stress caused by leaving the school to care for her own child weighs heavily on her mind. Her daughter made progress, but Sophia was transparent in the fact that her recollection of the events from the pandemic come from a trauma laden perspective (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022). This type of situation demonstrates the personal struggle of principals throughout the pandemic.

Prior to the pandemic, time was in high demand for principals. The pandemic only increased this strain on time. John and William remember logging even greater amounts of time outside of the school day than what was typical prior to the pandemic. They fielded multiple calls and texts through the week and on weekends with concerned staff and community members. They often spent extra hours contact tracing, calling and communicating with families, and easing community tensions about the virus. One

positive case of COVID-19 might require calls to the local health department; review of dates for onset of symptoms and exposure; contact tracing within the classroom, lunchroom, and specials; exposure emails to staff and parents; and finally, a return date for the student who was positive (Ford & Stoll, personal communication, 2022). As principals spent working hours on these tasks, John's nights were spent catching up on emails and preparing for the next day. Periodically, he would receive politically driven emails that needed multiple levels of attention. This meant contacting the Central Office, drafting a response to a parent, and talking through specifics with the classroom teacher or staff member who had received the communication. The culmination of these events consumed significant amounts of time outside of the school day, including weekends. He explained his reality, "The management side just kind of wore on me and it didn't really inspire me to do a lot on the weekends as I was just so worn out" (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022). Olivia was similar in her work efforts as she devoted many additional hours to the position:

I just couldn't let it go. It was like it swallowed me up...I was getting text messages all night long. 'I'm pretty sure I have COVID, and I'm going to go test. I won't be into work tomorrow,' so I'm spending my entire night trying to rearrange my building so that kids have teachers (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022).

Sophia spent a whole weekend working on arrows for traffic patterns within the building, meticulously placing dots and arrows for students to travel on (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022). Each piece of the job became more intense and required more time and efforts from principals as it was the first time, they navigated the complexity of

the pandemic. The cost to principals was decreased leisure time outside of school and insufficient time to recharge from the stress experienced throughout the week.

William qualified this stress as ongoing and ever-present. The major milestones that took place in his family during this time were canceled or moved to a virtual setting. This had an impact on his family. He personally remembered one of his children was part of a virtual graduation from high school and was not able to participate in the graduation ceremony (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022). Samuel also had a high school child during this time. He recalls her missing several important milestones because you could not bring large crowds of people together. “I feel bad for her as the last 3 years of this pandemic suck to be in as a high school student” (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022). Olivia remembers Christmas at their house taking place outside. “We had Christmas out in the backyard with a fire burning so that we could at least sit six feet apart, with masks on, in our winter coats and see each other... We were so fortunate that none of us became so ill to the level we had to worry about death” (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022). William was not so fortunate, as he shared a personal story of a staff member and spouse who had been trying to have children for years. They were finally able to become pregnant but shortly after had contracted COVID. This resulted in a blood clot, and they lost their baby. This deeply impacted William and impacted his leadership decisions. He knew, through experience, the toll the pandemic could take on the community. Further, he acknowledged these memories will stay with him forever (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022). The personal impact caused by hyperstress on individual principals cannot all be quantified. Given the responses from principals, there were many factors and situations that caused a hyperstressful

environment. The result of this environment created varying levels of burnout for principals.

The Product of the Pandemic: Varying Levels of Principal Burnout. “I thought I was untouchable...yeah, I thought I was untouchable.” (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). A subtheme present from every participant was the overall impact hyperstress from the pandemic created on each individual. This came out in a variety of conversations and at varying levels of intensity. The principalship is traditionally a stressful position, and these veteran principals are not new to their exposure to stress. The uniqueness of this hyperstress did, however, create signs that principals experienced burnout to varying degrees.

It really can be a stressful job and people count on you for everything from food assistance to high ability learning math strategies. Your input and involvement on seizure and diabetic plans, all the way to ensuring you are sending your PE teacher an article or two every year about instructional strategy, you know, you are doing everything and it’s a lot. (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022)

The principals in these interviews were highly reflective of their own thinking and understanding of how they experienced stress specific to the pandemic. This self-evaluation produced thoughts on what it was like to lead the school as well as the gravity of the decisions they made.

An indicator of principal burnout was shared by these veteran principals who, in the past, had not questioned their own abilities in this way. The principals shared insight into the immediate shift of the job position from leadership to management. “I thought,

oh Jesus, do I want to do this for another 10-12 years” (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022)? When students were sent home in the Spring of 2020, Olivia felt as though she did not know where to start. She continually questioned herself and her abilities in order to perform in this new ‘online learning’ environment of public education. She anticipated this change in her mind over Spring Break as she prepared to share communication with staff. She questioned, “Am I going to be able to be the leader that they’re going to need to make it through this pandemic?...My head was in a million places (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). Sophia acknowledged that it felt like she was working independently during this time even though she had others who were navigating similar situations. She recalled thinking she wanted to collaborate with others. What felt the most stressful was feeling she was, “Doing it by herself” (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022). Olivia believed she had to be on her game all day every day. She felt like she was constantly putting out fires and not making progress. The communication she was sending to the community was monotonous and repetitive. It felt like she was stuck and not moving forward. For someone who is driven and motivated, this was difficult. She felt emotional changes in herself but did not feel as though she could display the same emotions publicly, she had in the past. Around the staff, she was reserved with her emotions. However, staff saw a change in her and even made comments to her about her demeanor asking, “Are you alright?”. (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022).

There were signs for Samuel that he was feeling the pressure of the pandemic. Activities which he previously enjoyed leading and being part of he now found himself slowly removing his mark on. At times he felt anger and frustration at the situation he

was put in with the pandemic. He knows it brought out the worst in some of the people in his community and derived him from what he previously loved to do. His trust in members of the school community decreased and he explained, “this was actually one of those moments where I’m like, ‘Do I really want to do this?’” (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022). Olivia shared how important trust was to her, and throughout the pandemic she believed she had lost some of that trust within the District. She didn’t feel as though she could make a mistake and recover from it with the help of the District administration. “It brought a lack of courage for me. I wasn’t as courageous as I was before. I quit sharing because I was afraid of what that meant for me, and then I was afraid of what that meant for my community” (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). William knew very early on in the pandemic that this was the beginning of the end for his career, “I’m close to retirement and...honestly, in the back of my mind, I’m thinking, even if you have a great year...even if it’s the most phenomenal year you’ve ever had, take the early retirement” (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022). The varying indicators of burnout mentioned by principals provides further evidence of the hyperstress created by the pandemic. As a response to hyperstress, principals took actions that helped give them a sense of control in an unstable environment.

Theme 2: Resilient Principals Know What ‘It’ Is and Do What ‘It’ Takes

I felt like we had a solid plan in place. People had worked really hard...I was very impressed with my colleagues at our principal level that felt so passionately about making sure we were all on the same page...I didn’t care how many dots I had to put in place (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022).

Given the stressful nature of the pandemic outlined above, veteran principals shared a theme that outlines the strength, grit, and perseverance of elementary principals through difficult times. These principals embody the attitude and motivation to rise up to challenges they faced. The first section of this theme highlights the leadership and vision each principal shared for a roadmap in what they believe. The second section characterizes the personal strengths of individual principals. The final piece of this theme explores how veteran principals embraced the stress and challenge of the moment by taking action to lead by example - Doing what it takes to get the job done.

Leadership Philosophy.

I tried to be the person I thought people wanted me to be for a while and slowly I just evolved to just being able to be myself. I found that, like everyone, people will accept you and recognize their strengths and your weaknesses, and that's ok. When I got to that point it...alleviates so much stress because you're not trying to pretend to be someone you're not (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022).

Principals must decide who they want to be as the leader of their building. A sub-theme of this research emerged vividly through each principal's leadership philosophy and vision for their school. These personal beliefs and guiding principles materialized in many aspects of the interviews. During the pandemic, personal leadership philosophies presented themselves as a means for which principals made sense of their situations and how they responded to each of the demands placed on them. This section will explore these leadership philosophies based on the climate and culture of the systems they create and the people they lead.

Relationships are at the heart of leadership for John. As a result, he takes pride in making every member of his community feel heard and welcomed. “It starts with the leader’s approach and if the leader is not approachable then that creates division” (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022). Olivia recognized the importance of what she models as a leader. “I think the office area runs the pulse of the school. How you behave in the office area and your office staff is how your school will behave because they take the lead from you” (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). Samuel believes modeling positive interactions creates a positive climate. He finds time to greet students and parents as they drop students off in the morning, he is out in the hallways smiling and giving students high-fives and fist-bumps, and he also believes it is important to take time to listen to staff, parents, and community (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022). This philosophy is something that he has carried throughout this tenure as a school leader.

During the pandemic, maintaining close amounts of contact with staff and families was challenging. However, these relationships continued to be a priority for all the veteran principals. Staff celebrations, including Teacher Appreciation week, Parades through the neighborhood, and unique methods of connecting on video surfaced, much of which was organized by principals. Olivia shared the importance of these interactions, “We were keeping in touch with our communities in one way or another.”(O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). Maintaining connections with staff and community was something principals believed they had to pay specific attention to during the pandemic. Personal contacts to staff, meeting with their teams, and being transparent in

communication aided in opening lines of communication and helping ensure people felt heard and connected.

Through the interviews, principals shared their beliefs about teachers and highlighted their direct role in helping navigate the pandemic. William shared his teachers were extremely flexible for meeting the needs of their students and deserved praise and celebration for their work. They managed online instruction, in person, and in some cases both simultaneously. They completely changed how they taught in the classroom over the course of three different school years (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022). Samuel shared his philosophy about his position as, “I will support my teachers and I will support my para educators; I will support them with all my heart” (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022). This system of support continued to weave itself through the philosophy of principals. Sophia’s school community celebrated how well they were able to navigate the pandemic overall. She knew her staff had a sense of urgency at the time to do the best they could with the situation. Her belief was that it was her job to find ways to celebrate their work along the way. Her scores for both achievement and engagement within the community demonstrated their consistency. They maintained high levels of expectations because of the relationships they had directly with students (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022).

Doing what is best for the culture of the building is not always an easy task. Principals explained the many celebrations and positives they helped foster during the pandemic, but they also shared some of the difficulties in implementing their philosophy behind doing what is best for students. There was often communication that was difficult to present to staff members, much of which required them to change or adapt a practice

they already had in place (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022). In other instances, principals had to remind staff members of their professional responsibilities. Olivia explained while in remote teaching, she noticed a staff member who was consuming an alcoholic beverage during the school day. This prompted individual follow up with the staff member in conjunction with the concerns about the mental health of this person (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). Olivia was able to maintain the relationship and also get help for this individual. Samuel witnessed emotional stress from the pandemic on highly qualified staff members. “You’ve seen these people go through this process of breaking and they’re broken...And I think that’s where it became hard too. I saw teachers that had always been so positive and upbeat turn into, if you will, Debbie downers” (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022). Putting staff on intensive plans of assistance was difficult for multiple principals. They were following their own personal philosophy of doing what was best for kids at a time when the world was broken.

Getting the Job Done. Veteran principals who have many experiences in their leadership have a unique way of describing their own actions to specific situations. An observation throughout these interviews concluded that principals were not quick to ‘push the panic button’. In fact, in some cases, they responded with the opposite behavior than what a typical person might. Their patience, paired with their understanding of the school community and direction of the school helped provide higher levels of stability within their school. In this section, principals shared the duties they took on as part of a team in order to sustain practices of consistency.

Principals, prior to the pandemic, shared their leadership experiences in which they served the school community. Samuel ran errands in the building, helped clean

classrooms when custodians were not available and, early on, learned that he was no longer in charge of his own time. Sophia spent her time learning district processes, procedures, and systems. She coached and evaluated a staff member who was on an intensive plan of assistance for improvement. Olivia spent time handing out food to families in need and making sure she was able to get material resources to families in her community who could not take care of their own basic needs. These acts of service are part of being an elementary principal and come as a responsibility of the job.

With the onset of the pandemic, the needs of the community were compounded. Principals were asked to serve at an even higher level. Principals in these interviews described such situations and what they did in order to step up when the school community needed them most. Olivia was part of a COVID planning committee that helped set in motion plans for elementary principals within her District to return to learning. She helped guide principals in the process and provide communication to the rest of her peers. She remembered thinking, “I didn’t care how many dots I had to put in places, but I remember our conversation. Ok, the dots are three or six feet [apart], and how are you measuring the three to six feet in the lunchroom? Are you doing three to a seat or two to a seat” (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). She spent countless hours planning and collaborating with peers, answering questions, and preparing her own building’s physical environment.

Physically Leading within the Building. Principals filled time in their day based on the needs within their building. At times, it was in a virtual environment stepping in for a teacher or providing support to staff. Other times this meant “shoving those damn lunch carts down the hallway” as students ate in their classrooms (O.

Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). Samuel remembers filling in as a substitute teacher often, “I subbed every day, every day...that year” (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022). Olivia spent her time doing similar tasks. She would organize the building staffing each day to make sure the students were covered and would fill in whenever and wherever she was needed. She relied on the expertise of her team to handle the majority of COVID tracking and reporting which allowed her to utilize her abilities as an additional rotating staff member in the building. William found ways to implement procedural safeguards as well as he could to limit exposure, “We stood in the front door and I squirted hundreds and hundreds of hands every day” (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022). He maintained that his ability to focus on systems of support ended up being one of his most important roles throughout the pandemic.

Support for the District. Board of Education meetings during the pandemic became a major point of contention within many communities around the nation. As a duty of service, many principals joined these meetings via Zoom, YouTube, Facebook, or in person. Two of the principals interviewed spoke directly about this responsibility as an administrator. Both of them saw it as a required piece of their work to support their Central Office administrators and Board members. Samuel went to Board meetings and heard increasing amounts of complaints from community members about a variety of issues. There were waiting lists for people to speak at the meetings, and he knew that the Board would be making policy that directly impacted him. He often felt caught in the middle as his beliefs did not always align with decisions made by the Board (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022). Olivia’s experience was similar. She attended meetings in order to support the Board and administration noting that these community members

were putting their lives on the line in order to guide the direction of the school District. “Personally, I felt it was important to show that support...I wanted them to know we care and no matter what decisions were made that you should never be spoken to in that manner. Ever” (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022).

Providing Hope and Direction. Principals commented on the mental preparation they used to help staff members stay positive given the unknowns. Olivia recalls thinking, “People around me were so upset, scared, and sad. I couldn’t be upset, scared, and sad” (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). She talked about the level of emotional intelligence this type of behavior requires. John’s recollection of these events was similar in nature. He often worried about the messages he shared with staff both in person and formally through written communication or email. He recalled thinking “How do I minimize the emotional reaction because when emotions are high, logic is low. We’re not going to be in a spot to think logically if we’re all emotionally driven” (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022). William found himself in a position to listen and honor the thoughts and feelings many staff continued to share with him. He managed guilt from a staff member who had contracted COVID and thought she had infected a student who was medically fragile. He showed humility when he made mistakes which showed staff that it was ok for them to make mistakes as well. He made a conscious effort to focus on the positive and remember that kids are at the center of this profession (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022).

Principals continued to serve by providing additional layers of support to their school community. Sophia summarized these experiences and what it took to be an elementary principal during the pandemic. She stated:

It's so much COVID driven, and time and experience driven, the COVID piece really grew capacity for stamina in general and collaborating and input and empathy. I think all those things got stronger as a result of the COVID stuff...I think we do a lot of things to reinvent ourselves (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022).

This idea mirrors the thoughts of Samuel. He believes that educators come into the principalship with different motivations. However, he believes that being part of a team, and stepping up when your team needs you is important. "I wanted to make sure I walked that path with them. That's the one thing that keeps me going, because if I walk out today...I'm not a quitter" (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022). These veteran principals combatted this hyperstressful environment by giving their time and energy for the support of the school - they did what it took.

Theme 3: Release and Coping with Stress

"Stress rolls downhill" (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022). Veteran principals were chosen specifically for these interviews as a means of differentiating how longevity in the position brings to light strategies utilized to increase longevity in this profession. Through these interviews, it was evident that veteran principals have commonalities in how they sustain their practice. Release of stress and coping with stress emerged as a major theme throughout the interviews as participants spoke freely about how they intentionally care for themselves as they encounter stressful situations. These strategies are explored in their comments below.

Relationships and Collaboration. It should come as no surprise that the most prevalent sub-theme that emerged throughout these interviews related to coping with

stress involved the connection between the principal and other human support systems. In all the interviews, there was mention of colleagues, spouses, and specific individuals through which these principals go to as a resource of support.

Collegial Networks. The professional learning community of principals was referenced by principals as a way in which they could share information, gain ideas, and vent frustrations about situations and circumstances. William, as well as others, have a group of individuals who they consult when they need a listening ear or piece of advice.

I usually find a colleague in a different building. A principal in a different building that's experiencing pretty much the same kinds of things who you can have that conversation with. You can have a conversation and that person doesn't know who I'm talking about. (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022).

Samuel explained that he works with three principals closely in his District. He believes their values align with him and they are very similar. These colleagues are quick contacts to get the information out and process it with someone they trust (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022).

Much the same was the case with Olivia as she referred to a colleague as her 'trusted confidant'. She has been relying on this person every day since she became a principal. She knows this person will provide her with true and honest advice about whatever is on her mind. She also appreciates being able to be her true self with this person, which leads to authentic conversations. She explains the balance, "She has an inordinate amount of experience, but never tells me how to do my job. You have to have someone like that in your career" (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). Samuel

and Sophia are like Olivia in that they have colleagues they confide in who became principals around the same time they did. Since that time, they have formed friendships in which they speak in confidentiality about a multitude of issues. Sophia connected with her colleagues as they started in the same District around the same time. This was a shared experience for them at buildings with similar demographics. When she wants to talk through a situation, she knows she can count on this person to give her some perspective and be a listening ear (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022). The colleagues may differ, but principals shared experience with a cohort of people they can rely on for professional support. John agreed as he knows the support system from his peers is a form of stability and consistency for him. “You need to have those people that you can go to and just be like ‘what the heck is going on’” (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022). When the hyperstress of COVID was added to the plates of elementary principals, the simplest conversation or opportunity to vent helped ease the situation. “You know that’s the point where we would [call each other] routinely during COVID and so you know as soon as those meetings are over, we would pick up the phone and call each other and...just vent honestly about like, ‘Are you freaking kidding me?’” (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022). The cohorts referenced above are something that all principals rely on in their roles in order to alleviate stress. When they shared their connections with each other it gave them a sense of connectedness that helped them cope with the hyperstress of COVID.

Personal Mentors. Leadership is sometimes quantified by the number of leaders that someone helps produce along their journey. Interestingly enough, principals referred to this very idea throughout their interviews. Some principals referenced how they had

learned from excellent mentors in their own personal journey. Others referenced leading the next generation of leaders and the pride they take in the investment of these leaders. The relationships they had with assistant principals and/or teacher leaders was a highlight. They believe this connection helped bring the best out of them while extending the leadership capacity of others.

Early on in her career, Olivia did not think she was someone who would ever become an elementary principal. She entered the profession to work with kids and loved it. However, she was encouraged by mentors whom she trusted toward the more formalized leadership role of the principal. As she progressed through her formal leadership roles, she remembers how these mentors continued to invest in her. Sometimes, this was through informal conversations, helping her navigate the day-to-day operations of the school. At other times, this meant helping her with difficult conversations with staff, documentation of major events, or support when she made difficult decisions, she knew were best for students. She recalled, “They were there for me every step of the way and at any time for a phone call” (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). Leaning into these relationships was a way for her to feel supported by those who she trusted. This gave her a great deal of confidence and stability to navigate difficult situations. She acknowledged that it was not always easy, and she did make mistakes. When this happened, she was given grace and also clear expectations of how she would need to make it right. She remembers hearing a mentor comment, “We hired you to do this job, so get out there and do the job, and if you need help, you tell us” (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). She perceived she was

capable of success as a principal partially because she had this open line of communication with multiple mentors.

Sophia had interactions with mentors, prior to her role as the principal, which assured her they would be reliable sources of support as she transitioned to the role of the principal. When leadership became difficult, she knew she could rely on trusted mentors to help provide her guidance and support. Sophia regularly converses with one mentor of hers. Their relationship was formed on trust earned over many years of conversation and friendship. She relies on this mentor to provide her with honest feedback and perspective to help her in her leadership journey. She knows this because she has lived it over a long period of time and her mentor wants to see her succeed. This relationship, and its evolution, provides her a more substantial layer of support than many of the relationships she has with other colleagues. She sees this person as someone who truly cares about her and wants to actively invest in her growth and success as a leader (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022).

John and Samuel continue to learn from their respective personal mentors as well as connections they have made with mentors in their leadership journey. These principals maintain high levels of connectedness with leadership in their District. Their experiences also remind them that leadership is modeled from the School Board and Superintendent. John knows he can contact his supervisor as well as other District leaders when he needs realistic and succinct advice. This type of trusted communication formed through his willingness to learn from people he trusts and respects. For him, mentors are people who he knows will do the right thing for students and will support him when he has to make a difficult decision, thus easing some of the stress related to his decision making (J. Ford,

personal communication, 2022). Samuel shares this level of support as he had direct access to district leaders over the years. In the past, he planned weekly appointments with his superintendent or assistant superintendent to discuss his vision for the school. He recognizes these conversations led to relationships and mentorship. Interactions and time to explain his vision to district leadership is something he appreciates. “I wanted them to know that I come to work every day to have a leader that supports me and appreciates what I am doing” (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022). These conversations reassured him that he was doing his job in a way that aligned with the goals of District leadership. Further, he saw their mentorship as a major support in his growth as an administrator.

William shared similar thoughts in that he felt comfortable seeking advice from his supervisor. He stressed that is able to lead and manage his building most of the time without direct support. When he calls his supervisor, the supervisor recognizes the importance of the situation and always takes the time to listen and talk through possible outcomes with him. There is a level of trust in this relationship as well as a mutual respect of time. William knows his supervisor is busy, so he does not burden him with the minor decisions he makes on a daily basis. In turn, the mentor supervisor finds time to invest in William when he knows he needs the support. “He’s been my supervisor for 6-8 years and we have a great relationship. When shit is hitting the fan, I can call him and say ‘hey, this is happening’ and he’ll answer the phone and he’ll listen...He’s usually very supportive of whatever it is that I’m saying or doing so I feel really supported (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022). Mentors provide substantial levels of support to

these principals. As a result, many of these veteran principals reciprocate mentorship to aspiring school leaders.

Mentoring Others. Principals commented about their ability to lead others throughout the interviews. One of the ways in which they led was by reciprocating the leadership process with staff who were aspiring principals. This mentorship created a sense of responsibility for them and another human connection they valued.

During the pandemic, Sophia was forced into putting much guidance and mentorship into two specific individuals due to her absence. She remembered being in constant communication with these individuals as they led the building. One of the staff was a teacher leader at the time. Sophia recognized this was a wonderful learning opportunity and also a huge learning curve. Sophia coached her through the role of leading while she was stuck at home healing from a personal injury. Through these interactions, she helped mentor the teacher leader into understanding that absence of the formal leader has a major impact on staff. In addition, this absence impacted the teacher leader's ability to lead and make decisions. She recognized and communicated to her mentee that staff relied on consistency and there was an impact on staff due to the unknown expectations through her absence. The teacher leader grew in experience and leadership under Sophia's mentorship. This was something they both saw as a positive to their growth as professionals.

John utilized his mentee in a similar capacity when he was quarantined. He relied on her as the source of building leadership in his absence. He provided guidance and communication, almost reversing roles with her while he was stuck at his house waiting for his two weeks of quarantine to end. "I didn't feel like I was the leader at all during a

really critical time. [She] was the one setting it up” (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022). He remembers her gaining confidence and real experience as she navigated through unprecedented times. He gained trust in the individual while also providing her with authentic leadership experiences.

Most recently, John recognized the evolution in his career as a veteran principal. He is now a mentor for many other principals because he is a trusted veteran in their elementary cohort. Prior to these interviews, this change in responsibility was on his mind, “I’ve been reflecting on what it means for me in terms of supporting other principal leaders and our elementary principal group...So many principals started the same year of the pandemic, and they don’t know any difference. You wonder about what kind of foundation those leaders are then reverting back to once COVID really levels out” (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022). He understands he has an obligation to guide these principals into the understanding of post-pandemic leadership.

Olivia believes her teams are stronger because of the challenges they have faced during the pandemic. She sees her leadership come through not only with her peers but also with the teacher leaders she has produced. These teams of people drive building initiatives and are the experts in their particular areas. She takes pride in leading these teams of teachers and mentoring them in a way that helps them see the bigger picture. She noted this strength of her leadership when she recalled the onset of the pandemic, “I am able to facilitate building strong teams...That’s what saved us. Those teams were already strong, so I knew going in we were going to be ‘ok’, it was just a matter of figuring out how to get us all up [to speed] soon” (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022).

Working directly with someone who carried a leadership title in the building seemed to lessen the stress experienced by some principals. Sophia celebrated, “That’s one of the advantages! It isn’t just to grow another person, but one to lessen the load, to bring something new, or to broaden my perspective so you’re not feeling like you’re the only one in the room that knows what to do” (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022). She sees this process play out in many forms in her work mentoring aspiring principals. These relationships are a lot of work in the first year, but she knows the payoff comes as there are multiple perspectives of leadership and that is a benefit to the building. William and John agree with the benefit of having multiple forms of leadership in the building. William bounces ideas off of this leader and talks through scenarios with another leader who has the context of the building. Although, as he explained, this mentor relationship differs from that of a colleague, “It’s a little more professionally appropriate to share some true feelings about what might be going through your head with somebody that is in the same role as compared to somebody you might be mentoring along the way” (W. Stoll personal communication, 2022). John embraces the idea of adding someone new to the building who brings new ideas and perspectives. This new perspective challenges his own thinking on certain issues for the betterment of the staff and building he leads.

Through the mentorship process, Sophia was also able to benefit in her own leadership. She explained that working with aspiring principals, “Brings a new spin on what we’re doing. New ideas, new ways of dealing with things, new ways of talking to teachers, [and] new ways of presenting information...I think we do a lot of things to reinvent ourselves” (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022). The principals who commented about the mentorship process know the importance of their own actions on

the person they are mentoring. This sense of connectedness was seen as a benefit to the building and also directly to them as leaders.

Spouses or Significant Others. Sophia has seen the change in her spouse's role over the course of time. As a teacher, she explained, "You're dating and you hear all those kid stories and all about school" (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022). She has seen a shift in this communication as now she does not necessarily feel the desire to talk about work with her spouse when she gets home. Olivia agreed when she talked about the relationships she carries between colleagues and a spouse which serve as two very distinct support systems. "It cannot be your spouse. It can't be your significant other, even if they're an educator, it just can't be. At least I don't think it can be, because when you go home you have to go home" (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). The dynamics between each of these principals differed when they referred to the relationships, they maintain with their spouses in relation to what they do as part of their job. William is someone who avoids talking about work once he is home. He often shares funny stories about the day or events that might have happened but does not like to go into great detail about the daily grind of the principalship (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022). Sophia explained her situation as one in which it is positive for her to avoid talking about work at home. "We don't really hardly ever talk about work...it actually isn't what I feel like talking about when I get home" (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022).

In contrast, Samuel relies on his spouse to bounce ideas off of and seek input for decisions. This relationship helped him navigate a significant pay cut he took moving from teacher leader to assistant principal as well as his major decision as to whether or

not to take a chance at opening a new building. “I always get her input on everything, whether I want it or not” (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022). Although each of the principals commented on their relationships with a spouse, the manner in which these conversations highlight their work as principals was unique. The commonalities among these relationships provided insight into the purposeful relationships of the spouse in each of the lives of these elementary principals.

Community Support. Samuel has always known that he gets job satisfaction out of the interactions with the people in the community. “We can talk about everything that’s wrong, but 99% of our families are still amazing people” (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022). These are the interactions with people that keep him motivated to serve the community. Whether it is greeting kids at the arrival line or high-fives and fist bumps in the hallways, he always finds a way to connect with students and the community. He knows that living in the community helps him be more relatable and the community knows and trusts him. “You know, 90% of families may not have had me as a principal, but they know I’ve been here long enough and I’ve been out in the community long enough” (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022). This type of relatability he sees as a support system for his vision and leadership of the school.

John sees himself as a member of the community he serves as well. Being there for over a decade, he has been able to form deep and lasting relationships with members of the community. His beliefs about his role as the leader in the community has progressed since he began. Initially, he was focused on supporting teachers so they could support students. Although this remains a focus, his personal beliefs have transformed into an active member of leadership for students in the community. He believes this

change came from growing as a parent himself as well as a deep connection to the community he serves. “I almost see myself as a second dad to kids in my community...How can we all play a role to make this the best for all kids and so much that we do for kids’ lives outside of standardized tests” (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022). The fatherhood mentality he brings to his position gives him reassurance that he is a vital piece of the community. He spoke with passion about this topic as a way to describe something that brings him great fulfillment as the leader of his school.

Teacher Support. “I’ve never been so proud of a group of teachers” (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022). If there is one group of staff that came up consistently and was weaved throughout each of the interviews with principals it was the efforts of their staff, and specifically their teachers, that principals saw a major support in their efforts of leading the school. This should come as no surprise, but teachers seemed to form the core of school and the beliefs about what was best for students. All of the principals recognized their staff and specifically the efforts they gave during the pandemic to provide a stable and consistent learning environment for students. For principals, this was a support system for them personally as they knew students were in good hands. The efforts of teachers fell most naturally in this support category as stories of teachers emerged. Principals were encouraged by their perseverance, grit, and commitment to their profession.

Samuel’s recollections of the initial phase of the pandemic brought to light his admiration for his staff. “I have really good memories about that time because it was kind of actually a really beautiful thing. We all came together and just kind of knew that we had to be there for the kids. I didn’t hear one complaint from teachers” (S. Huxley,

personal communication, 2022). He went on to explain that his staff provided multiple layers of support for students both virtually and in person. “For me, it was a time that is probably one of the highlights of my career” (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022). Seeing his teams work the way they did to connect with students is something that he will always remember and be thankful for. Olivia agreed that the teams within the building went to work immediately in support of students. “I always knew I had a tech team that was strong and a PBiS team that was strong, just different pockets of people that I knew would step up for the greater good of all of us. That’s what saved us. Those teams” (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). She went on to praise the work of her staff in support of students, “I think teachers in that time were remarkable the way they continued to build relationships with their kids...I felt we were all working towards the same thing, the well-being of kids” (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022).

Sophia’s staff carried the weight of school culture while she took a leave for personal reasons. Her staff provided consistency for students among changes in leadership and made positive decisions that directly impacted students. She knows her staff well, and this was a challenge for them, but one in which she is grateful. She stated:

I can remember the responsibility piece of it...not being able to be there during the toughest time for staff. So, having other people step up to do your job when it was a terrible time for staff...I think the staff weathered it awesome. Our achievement scores would say they did a great job, and our parents would say we did a great job...there was sort of that ‘we need to rally for our school’ kind of mentality. (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022)

The nature of elite educators is to go to great lengths to service the needs of their students. As the principals commented above, teachers stepped up in a difficult time to be a core piece of strength for the entire community. As the leader of these teachers, John saw it as his responsibility to help protect his staff so they could maintain a high level of impact over a long period of time. He shared, “I’m trying to find a balance between having high expectations of teachers and then also keeping them realistic with how a society values them and how they’re paid” (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022). He wants to be an advocate for teachers and walk alongside them to protect the future of the profession. William agreed and acknowledged the pressure teachers are feeling about their profession as well, “There is so much going on Tik Tok and Twitter and social media saying teachers are being asked to go above and beyond and this is so hard” (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022). Even with pressure on the profession and a negative light in social media, these veteran principals have maintained relationships with staff in a collective effort for students.

John sees his teaching staff as a partner and relies on them to carry out the most important piece of education - working together to support students. One way he relays this message is by helping teachers visualize the outcomes and bigger picture of their careers, “You know, what we do is super important. [However] it is not brain surgery where if we make one small decision, the whole world is going to crumble and there’s going to be lives at stake, so it’s ok if we make mistakes” (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022). By sharing this message with staff, he believes it cultivates an environment where calculated risks are rewarded, and staff feel supported.

The Why: “Kids”. Principals took many of their messages back to the service of others. Each of these principals keep their leadership based on the needs of the students who come to their school. They explained how they knew their ‘why’ for this position and what they saw themselves as carrying out as the leader of their school. Maintaining this understanding of the position is what keeps them going, especially through hyperstressful times.

William acknowledged that being an elementary principal during COVID was exponentially more stressful than any other era of leadership he had experienced in his thirty years. He explained that much of the stress came from his personal connection and care for his community:

A lot of the stress that you feel comes from the interactions with people...The interaction with people, really the interactions with students. I mean that’s what I like about the job, but it’s also the most stressful part...I get energy from seeing the kids. Those kindergarteners, first graders, you just need a little bit of positivity, and you just go down and walk the halls in those rooms. (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022)

Sophia’s thinking aligned with William as she talked about the importance of making sure that kids stay at the heart of her decision-making. She believes that sticking to the good you see in kids helps center you and help you create a clear vision for yourself and your school (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022). These veteran principals all shared the common belief that students are a major form of support and motivation for them to continue to do their best.

Coping with Stress

Activities, Alcohol, and Antidepressants/Medication.

Being a principal: [causes] your mind to run nonstop sometimes, and it impacts your family life, it impacts your social life, it impacts your professional life...I wonder how many people don't feel comfortable saying 'I need help because I'm not ok'. having that amount of stress all the time and not being able to manage it effectively (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022).

Veteran principals have sustained years in a highly stressful environment. Through their stories, various methods surface of how they cope with this stress, beyond their relationships with people. Although each of the participants was unique in their individual approach, commonalities and connections among principals were unveiled. In the following section, these commonalities are detailed.

Sustained and consistent physical activity was explained as a stress release by multiple participants. Olivia and William combine the stress release of physical activity with trusted colleagues. Olivia is an active swimmer while William runs to decompress. They compound the impact of this stress release by pairing this physical activity with the people they categorize as mentors and colleagues. To increase the impact of stress release, Williams' running group has completed significant physical challenges together and created positive shared experiences (Stoll & Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). Sophia enjoys working out with her spouse at the gym. (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022). John enjoys golfing with friends and Samuel enjoys walks

around his neighborhood. These findings were evidence of the importance these veteran administrators place on a physical outlet for stress.

Alcohol was also a means by which participants shared how they deal with the stress from their positions. Multiple participants commented on their preference to end a stressful day with a glass of wine or beer in the garage. Sophia enjoys having beer in the garage with her husband as he works on different projects. This provides an opportunity for them to talk about their family and future plans. Olivia enjoys time with her husband when it is nice outside and explains, “I have to say, sitting on my deck having a glass of wine with my husband just talking about the day or our lives, or making plans is a perfect end to the day” (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022). This process helps Olivia push the ‘reset’ button and get ready for the next day or challenge she will face.

Alcohol is not the only substance principals commented about. He knows this personal impact as he shared his experience. After a few years in the principalship, he recognized his heightened sense of anxiety. “I don’t know if other people talked about this and I talk openly about it because I’m ok with it...sometimes we put it on ourselves to always have the answers. You better cope with that right away” (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022). He knows the stress and anxiety he felt as a principal and questioned, “It’d be interesting to know what percentage of administrators have started some form of medication to help address the stress.” The clear and obvious impact of hyperstress from the pandemic may have intensified the use of medication to combat stress imposed on principals.

Outlook on Life and the Job: The Bigger Picture.

I remember when I first started as a principal. I mean it would stress me out to have to call certain parents that I knew were going to not like what I was going to tell them or to have to call and tell them... You're trying to appease the parents and the teachers (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022).

Veteran principals provided accounts of how they have personally transformed in their journey of leadership. This discussion provided background as to their personal outlook on this position. There was a clear evolution of how their perspectives changed based on time, experience, and events they had encountered. In the quote above, William shared how his outlook on the position began when he was a principal. Over time, these veteran principals adapted and changed in a way that altered their own outlooks on life. These outlooks transformed their ability to lead and ultimately were utilized to help cope with hyperstress during the pandemic. This section explores these outlooks and qualifies commonalities between participants for the release of stress in their roles.

Finding Humor. For William and others, the sheer humor in the position is something that they often share as a way to cope with the stress. Elementary students often say and do things that are humorous and laughing is a great way to keep the job in perspective (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022). Humor, for Olivia, has changed since she started as a principal. She remembered other principals and administrators commenting to her that she was 'so naive' as she transitioned into the principal position. She commented, "I didn't know how much I didn't know until I sat in that seat... The first year was such a joyride... we do a lot of laughing about how naive I was" (O. Kennedy,

personal communication, 2022). For John, it is the perspective that it is ok to laugh when you make a mistake, or something happens that is funny. He realizes the role of the principal is an important one but balances this idea in that he does not believe you can take it too seriously. “I think through life experiences you just kind of gain perspectives. Don’t take yourself too seriously. What we do is important, but don’t take yourself too seriously” (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022). Sophia gave almost an identical statement in her interview. She discussed taking her job seriously, but also finding ways to laugh about the pieces of the job that are humorous (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022).

Living out Mantras. Throughout these interviews, there were mantras presented from participants. These mantras seemed to guide principals when times became difficult either personally or professionally. The relationships between these mantras and the belief the principals had in them provided clarity as to how they were able to maintain perspective through the hyperstress of leadership throughout the pandemic. William referenced multiple times a saying he once heard, “‘Keep your eye on the ball’, Keep everything in perspective, and maybe this pandemic will have a positive effect in that other things that come up probably won’t be at the scale of which it was, and so people who are already in this role can think, ‘well, we were able to get through the pandemic, we can get through a boiler leak that’s going to put us out of school for 4 days’ right?” (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022).

Sophia finds that her perspective on the position relates to work-life balance, as she describes it. “You should indulge in both when it’s important” (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022). She sees how the principalship has changed in multiple ways due

to her personal life. In the course of her leadership, she has gone from having small kids of her own at home to older kids. This is something that she has balanced over the years, giving more to her job or to her own family based on their needs. When they were younger, she spent more time taking care of them at home whereas she has more time for work as her kids have grown. She explained the ebb and flow of the needs at home and school as well. She knows now the job requires her to be present when there is really important work taking place. Her balance comes when she knows she needs to be present at home and work can take a back seat. She wishes she could tell her younger self this time will come. She tries to pass this learning on to her staff by showing empathy as they navigate having demands outside of school. She clarified, “you can be here [school] until six if you need to be, but the world’s not going to end [if you are not]” (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022). She has seen how teachers have progressed as their own kids have aged and this perspective helps her provide clearer and more consistent mentorship to those staff in her school. It helped her over time practice a form of personal perspective she coined, ‘getting back to zero’ (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022).

For William, the outlook on the principalship changed over the course of his tenure. Through years of experience, he adapted to the needs of the position, and this changed how he viewed situations and crafted a response. These years of experiences decreased his stress level because of the number of times he made phone calls like he explained above. “Just with me having done it over and over and over again over the course of 20 years, those things don’t stress me out nearly as much” (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022). William and Sophia have seen enough in their careers to know

that it is full of cycles. William believes there will always be times of change but also times when the pendulum swings one way or the other. Sophia quoted, “I just feel like it’s all a phase so if you have a few things you’re true to intuitively about being a leader, about working with kids, and you circle back to those in every situation you will stay centered in liking your job (Stoll & Ripley, personal communication, 2022). Samuel agreed with the onset of COVID, he took it in stride as much as he could. He remembered thinking that the pandemic was going to be another challenge for his staff. “It was just another bump in the road for us to kind of hit and kind of keep going over. I think for me, it never really set me back as to like ‘oh God, this is a reality’, This is just another step” (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022). Olivia summarized the cycles of leadership well when she said, “This too shall pass” (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022).

The Payoff. “So much of what we do for kids lives outside of an academic standardized test number...I’m helping my people be the best people that they can be so that we can model what good people are for our society” (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022).

A question that authentically materialized through the interviews was: Why do principals continue to invest in a profession that requires this amount of stress, commitment, and dedication? Principals interviewed in this study shared many reasons why they continue this process and the payoff it gives to them because of their work. These ideas fit into stress release and coping because principals often changed their mood, smiled, and laughed when they commented on their ‘why’. These are a few of their philosophies:

“It’s a really neat opportunity to help set the stage for a whole generation of kids in the neighborhood to understand what a school can and should be. You know, I tell my kindergarten teachers, every year we get an opportunity to show kids what a teacher is” (J. Ford, personal communication, 2022).

“Focus on all the good that’s coming out of the work we’re doing...The job that I like the most, the interaction with people, I mean that is really with the students [is] what I like most about this job. It’s different every day and it’s those relationships” (W. Stoll, personal communication, 2022).

“I’m still learning, doing better the next day. I’ve never had a day that I didn’t want to come to work...As long as there are more rewards than there are times you feel it’s not rewarding, then it’s worth coming to work every day” (O. Kennedy, personal communication, 2022).

“The reason behind why you do something I think for so many years is just that I know I connected to people. I know that I always had them...these people that I have come to love and appreciate” (S. Huxley, personal communication, 2022).

“You know when they talk about being in ‘flow’ when you’re really making a difference. I know I’m really making a difference for teachers” (S. Ripley, personal communication, 2022).

The previous recollections of impact principals have on the students, teachers, and community outlines their beliefs as to why they continue to serve. As a grounding

measure, and means of coping with the stress, these veteran principals have weathered the storm of hyperstress created by the pandemic.

Chapter 4 was constructed of the emergent themes created by participant interviews. These themes were organized into findings as part of the analysis process. As a means of making sense of these themes and findings, Chapter 5 summarizes the data and reviews the implications of this study while providing future recommendations based on the research and possibilities for future studies.

CHAPTER 5

Implications and Professional Recommendations

This chapter provides thoughts, action steps, and recommendations for school administrators, school District representatives, and principals to understand and contend with stress and hyperstress related to elementary principalship. The conclusion of this chapter reviews this researcher's personal retrospective reflection upon completion of this comprehensive qualitative, and narrative research process.

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the experiences and stories of veteran elementary principals through the hyperstressful leadership environment created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants for this study were comprised of five veteran elementary principals from Midwestern suburban schools in which they had been part of for over a decade. Data was collected by means of interviews and follow-up emails. The interviews lasted between 60-120 minutes and were conducted individually via an online format. The process for analyzing this data was created through the interviews themselves. Themes and subthemes originated through the responses by participants, resulting in topics for conversation and analysis. Participants were allowed to share their own stories about their personal and professional experiences within the context of the pandemic. Data collected from the interviews created stories that included interactions with colleagues, community, and staff under the direction of their own Board of Education and Superintendent. The process of answering these semi-structured interviews was highly reflective for participants as they shared their experiences as elementary principals during the pandemic. The research was guided by one central

research question: *How has the ongoing impact of hyperstress from the pandemic influenced veteran elementary school principals' leadership experiences?*

Summary of Findings

Comparison of Findings to the Literature

The information uncovered in this research supports previous research surrounding stress related to the principalship. The findings of these interviews add to this research making it more comprehensive in the understanding of the stress felt by principals, specifically targeting the era of leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. Selye's explanation of stress explored three stages of reaction related to stress (1956). He emphasized, "Most of the physical or mental exertions, infections, and other stressors which act upon us produce changes corresponding only to the first and second stages: at first they may upset and alarm us, but then we get used to them" (p. 64). In contrast, five interviews of veteran principals exposed additional stress related to the pandemic. Through their interviews, they explained the exhaustion caused by the complex nature of leading in the pandemic. This was evidenced through their self-doubt, self-isolation, and desire to quit or retire. These findings parallel the third stage outlined by Selye in which extended periods of extreme stress can produce exhaustion and eventually death.

Further, the findings of this study align with much of the previous stress and burnout research by principals, (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Fuller & Hollingworth, 2018; Horwood, et. al, 2021) maintaining this research is consistent with the experiences of elementary school principals during the pandemic.

Principal Leadership during the Pandemic

This study expands the research on stress and burnout (Beausaert et al., 2016) specifically for elementary principals and the stress they encountered during the pandemic. The results of this study presented valuable insights and information for building administrators as well as school district leaders to understand the complexity of the principalship in connection with the stress related to the position. The findings of this study extend the research on the importance of leaders on school improvement (Kafka, 2009; Louis et al., 2010; Xhomara, 2021). Principals played a direct role in organizing their school teams to meet the demands of the pandemic. This aligns with the principal impact on student outcomes (Fuller et al., 2017; Louis et al., 2010).

Principal Stress

In addition, this study paved the way for determining factors of stress that elementary school principals felt and coped with during the COVID-19 Pandemic. This is the first and only known research to explore the question pertaining to what impacted an elementary principal's stress experience during COVID-19. Based on the findings of this study, recommendations are essential to future leaders as well as school districts in their ability to increase the longevity of school leaders in their tenure as principals.

Implications and Considerations

Principals have the ability to connect with other human resources, know and understand the context in which they lead, and also relate to the philosophy and decision-making process from leaders who have extensive experience in the field. This study supported the need to learn more about factors that impact stress for elementary school

principals through the pandemic. The specific research question identified in this study was answered with the results and subsequent analysis.

Considerations for School Districts

At the system level of District Administration, there are clear themes that emerged that could benefit school leaders in their understanding and coping with stress within their positions. Many of these findings are tangible and could be actionable for school districts as they support elementary principals. There are two specific recommendations that should be highlighted as part of the findings of this research.

The first consideration is based on the importance of formal leadership collaboration opportunities for administrators. These recommendations come from the frequency and depth at which school leaders shared stories and decision making that was based out of authentic conversations they had with other leaders. Some of these leaders have formal leadership to support them within their building such as an assistant principal. Others mentioned the collaborative groups they met with on a consistent basis. Still others mentioned connections to mentors they trusted for guidance and support. All of these human connections were seen as positive support systems in the principalship. To emphasize, the way in which principals talked about collaboration with those leaders who held a formal title in their own building, seemed to believe they felt the most supported. This message came through their ongoing communication and collaboration with the leader, their ability to entertain new ideas and engage in meaningful conversations prior to action, and the formalized support they felt by these leaders when they were absent from the building. School districts could learn from this research that providing a formal leadership position, in conjunction with the principal could lead to

decreased stress by building leaders. Further, it could lead to a sense of shared leadership and mentorship for future principals - a 'grow your own' system of creating the next generation of highly effective leaders in the school district.

The second consideration for school districts is the overwhelming data to support district and district leaders as the principal. Principals were able to share their experiences in a way that highlighted how much these veteran principals knew, respected, and wanted to carry out the goals and objectives of the school district. This form of allegiance to the district shows the highest level of professionalism among school leaders. There were many comments about grace and understanding when school district leaders and boards of education were under attack by community members. Further, there was an understanding that district leaders were put in complex situations, often politically driven, in which they had to make decisions that were going to polarize different aspects of the community. Building leaders knew and recognized the complexities of these decisions and did their best to carry them out. Sometimes, they did this even when their own personal beliefs did not directly align with the direction of the district. Again, this type of leadership takes true professionalism and great amounts of humility. School leaders should take time to recognize the efforts of building leaders in support of a unified school district to create efficacy among staff and communities. This recognition will lead to better relationships between District and building leaders.

Influence on Current Elementary Principals

The first question of the semi-structured interviews focused on the journey in which principals took prior to being hired for this position in their school District. This journey was a compilation of personal and professional experiences that molded and

shaped them as an individual. Their own life story was a means by which their environment shaped their leadership lens. In almost any profession, this is likely to be the case. There are often environmental factors that influence how a person thinks and feels about certain situations. Further, there are interactions with people that mold and shape how leaders are formed. The road to the principalship is no different. Future leaders of schools are being shaped and influenced by all types of external sources, some of which are human and others that are contextual.

Recommendations for Aspiring Elementary Principals

The importance of this research on future school leaders is monumental. Given the complexity of the principalship, it is important for future leaders to know and recognize the levels of stress they will experience given a variety of experiences over their tenure. Further, it is important for them to understand they can increase their longevity in the position by actively engaging in certain behaviors. There are specific methods and strategies that veteran principals have utilized in order to find the best outlook on their profession and increase their impact for staff, students, and community.

It seems, from the research, that future leaders need to make a conscious effort to recognize when they are feeling stress as part of their job. Each principal was different in their levels of stress given certain circumstances, but all shared that high levels of stress was fundamentally part of the job. Personally, knowing which interactions and situations cause elevated stress levels will allow principals to acknowledge the stress and apply appropriate strategies to cope with it. As the veterans explained, much of the stress early in their careers came from parent interactions, dealing with student misbehavior, and a feeling of general lack of positive outcomes within their building. Over time, these levels

of stress decreased as principals led in alignment with their personal belief and knowledge of their school and community. This created resiliency for principals and encouraged a broader view of problems that emerged. The learning for principals is not so different from that of a teacher beginning a new career. It takes time and experience in order to find alignment with your individual leadership style and philosophy. The stress of these situations will decrease, based purely on the volume of exposure principals have to them. Future leaders should understand they will be subject to hyperstressful situations that will leave a lasting impression on them as individuals. Each of the principals shared the personal and professional impact of situations they have encountered. These situations, whether they are the death of someone in the school community, a major incident related to safety, or a pandemic create memories that will stay with them well into the future. It is veteran principals that are able to take these experiences as learning opportunities and grow in their own leadership as a direct result.

Furthermore, veteran principals shared similarities in the ways they have found to see opportunities for sustainability and growth through hyperstressful situations. As leaders reflected, they talked about the importance of making connections with human resources and many of them talked about finding the focus back on the ‘why’ of their profession. This meant focusing on the students they serve and the positive impact their leadership has on their school community. They shared that they were able to ground themselves in their ‘why’ by connecting with people who wanted to see them succeed. Greeting students throughout the school, making rounds on Fridays to connect with all staff prior to the weekend, calling trusted colleagues to vent and then problem solve, and having supportive relationships outside the walls of the school increased their ability to

sustain. These human relationships are vital to the success of elementary school principals as this is a profession that requires great amounts of service-oriented work. It is not self-serving for principals to intentionally plan positive interactions throughout their day, instead, it is likely that these interactions will add positive emotional fuel to the leader.

Seeking positive interactions and relationships is a solid foundation for elementary school principals. Being aware of these relationships and interactions keeps them connected with those who share similar experiences as well as understand the complexity of the problems a principal is tasked with solving. Future leaders should know and understand the sacrifices they will need to make in order to sustain certain levels of success over a long period of time. The principals in this study shared insight into the clear tradeoff between balancing priorities within the building as well as responsibilities in their personal lives. These situations will differ depending on the individual, their familial circumstances, and the needs of their school community. However, each of the principals acknowledged that time management and prioritization of their time continues to be an ongoing challenge in this position.

Committing to longevity in the role of the principal takes a true understanding of the demands of the position. In the findings of this study, principals demonstrated great amounts of resilience through hyperstressful times of leadership. They stepped up and did whatever was necessary to provide consistency and stability within the building. As a principal, they were called upon to fill in gaps with the building, everything from substitute teaching and dealing with angry parents, to participating in training and feedback for critical health plans. The role of the principal requires constant transition

between interactions and demands from students, staff, and the community. Aspiring principals should emerge themselves in experiences prior to the principalship that prepares them to engage in the complex nature of the position. Further, knowing these demands and setting clear boundaries for how they plan to tackle the position allows for less turbulence with all stakeholders. There is no substitute for experience in this position and the resilience it takes to lead an elementary building is something that takes time, exposure, and a collection of mentors and human resources of support.

Mentorship was one of the ways in which elementary principals both influenced future leaders and recognized that their own personal mentors were people who had supported and led them to be where they are today. These influences provided a basis for their philosophies of leadership and their path toward decisions making prior to and throughout their leadership in the pandemic.

Finally, veteran principals utilize a variety of strategies to deal with, cope with, and or release the stress they encounter as the leader of their building. The principals in this study each had methods of physical activity they engaged in as part of a typical weekly routine. They had a trusted colleague or group of professionals they called upon and stayed in contact with as part of their circle of support. They also have an outlook on the position, through experience, that helps them emotionally disengage from situations to make higher impact decisions.

Each of these strategies allow principals to release some of the daily stress they encounter. They casually referred to these coping methods as: hitting the reset button; getting back to zero; removing the emotions out of the decision; and starting over. For

aspiring principals, the implications of finding ways to reset physically and mentally will be a factor in their ability to sustain a high level of impact over a long period of time.

Recommendations for Future Research

From this research, there are many additional opportunities for study in relation to stress experienced by elementary principals. The current study engaged a small, yet meaningful sample of elementary principals through the lens of leadership during COVID-19. However, the principalship is constantly changing and evolving. New leaders are emerging that have yet to experience a hyperstressful event in school leadership. Therefore, there are many possibilities for future study. The study could be replicated for secondary principals, school district administrators, and even Boards of Education who served in their roles throughout the pandemic. This lens would provide more of a picture of what it was like to lead the school district through a pandemic.

There is also room for future research in the differences faced between urban, suburban, and rural elementary schools through the pandemic. There could be comparisons between these three to uncover similarities and differences between school districts and size that might have impacted the response to the pandemic. Principals often have different levels of support based on the size of their District. Some principals may have direct access to District level leaders because they share the same building, while others may have multiple levels of leadership moving up the organizational flow chart, which removes them further from the decision makers within their District. Extending research in these ways may lend itself to qualitative research as a deep dive into the thoughts and feelings of trust between levels of administration within their school district.

In relation to stress, there are also opportunities for a closer look into how principals of varying tenure levels interpret and respond to situations presented to them. This research only scratches the surface in terms of magnitude and intensity of stressful events and the responses by principals. Following this path, one might lean toward a mixed methods approach in which participants would engage in rating scenarios of stress based on intensity, and then qualitatively share their thoughts and responses to the scenarios presented.

Finally, this study opened the door for further research related to principals who are navigating highly stressful events in their professional positions and how this impacts them personally. The high turnover rate of principals, including principal burnout, could be studied post-pandemic. With multiple principals in this study commenting on feelings of inadequacy, burnout, and thoughts of retirement because of the stress they encountered, more research needs to be conducted to understand each of these factors. In this future study, there is opportunity for either qualitative or quantitative research. The central research question of the study would determine which avenue might be best to understand perceptions of principals and further inform future leaders in their understanding of the demands of the position.

Stress in the principalship is ongoing and ever changing. The hyperstress of the COVID-19 pandemic on principals produced conditions which had never been seen or experienced by this era of principals. The pandemic, and subsequent effect on students, staff, and elementary principals continues. Stress and burnout have previously been studied through the eyes of principals as they are asked to engage in a multitude of leadership roles and activities. This study uncovered the stories of veteran elementary

principals, their experiences, thoughts, and strategies for weathering the storm of hyperstress. This research provided reflections and research to support the understanding of the central research question. The data associated with this research produced themes that helped uncover what it was truly like to lead an elementary school through a pandemic. Future leaders can benefit from hearing the stories of veteran principals and knowing their own struggles with stress are not isolated to them. Truly great leaders and people are needed to lead people in the profession of education. This research is a roadmap to unlocking the key factors to successful leadership as an elementary principal when presented hyperstressful situations.

Retrospective Reflection

As an elementary principal myself, I have taken great interest and pride in interviewing colleagues about their experiences. As I began my pursuit of this Doctorate, I engaged in many conversations with elementary principals about the position, their philosophy, and how they navigated working with stress. It was common that I would have daily conversations with colleagues, my own mentors, and/or those I mentored to understand, work through, and communicate decisions in stressful situations. I also watched as a colleague, I worked with at the time, presented the findings of her dissertation related to work-life balance (Tapp, 2018). This idea intrigued me further as I have a young family at home and hold myself to high standards of leadership as a professional. I often wondered, “How do principals successfully navigate the demands of both?” As the pandemic hit, I was personally impacted in my own pursuit of this degree. The University of Nebraska at Omaha moved Educational Leadership courses to online instruction, which limited interactions with our cohort of professional learners. We were

forced to change and adapt to the conditions of our environment. It had a major impact on me, and I knew at that time that virtual learning was also going to have a monumental impact on students, families, and the connections within each elementary school community. I realized early on that I wanted to study the impact of this level of stress on elementary principals who had extensive experience prior to the pandemic. I began taking notes, writing papers, and focusing on the role of the principal, the pandemic, and work-life balance. As I reflect on some of these formal and informal pieces of data, both in writing and in my own thoughts, it is evident that this study has played a major role in my view of leadership - often changing and challenging me as a leader and mentor for others.

As I conclude my research, I am certain that I found a topic that was a best fit for me. Universally, the findings of this research could be adapted and changed to fit any major leadership position. I see this research as a tool for me to utilize as I mentor, either formally or informally, the next generation of school leaders. I was motivated by these veteran principals because the basis for all of their decisions stems from the benefit of students. Their decisions align with the morals and ethics it takes to influence the minds of students and staff for positive improvement. Further, I am greatly appreciative of mentors I have had in this journey, colleagues who are supportive, and most importantly for my wife and family as a motivation and support system to my efforts in this process. I will find ways to share this information because I believe it can truly help assist great leaders in their own personal leadership journeys.

This study, and specifically the interviews, provided me an opportunity to engage in deep discussions with a group of admirable individuals. My own life has been

enhanced by these conversations and connections with principals. These are people I admire for their dedication and service to students and the profession. I know many of them also appreciated the opportunity to reflect on the events as well as their thoughts and feelings through the pandemic. The time spent in these interviews seemed to disappear as they commented it was therapeutic in some ways to revisit these events and realize how they had progressed. I am grateful for these conversations, the time and openness principals gave to this research, and the relationships I have formed from the experiences we have shared throughout this process. I want future leaders to know they are not alone, in fact, there is a whole community of school leaders that relate to all you are asked to do.

“There is no ready-made success formula which would suit everybody.

We are all different...I think the best the professional investigator of stress can do is to explain the mechanism of stress as far as he can understand it; then, to outline the way he thinks this knowledge could be applied to problems of daily life; and, finally, as a kind of laboratory demonstration, to describe the way he himself can apply it successfully to his own problems. (Selye, 1956, p. 300)

I know I am a better leader because of this process, and I can only hope that many others will benefit in a similar way through examination of this research.

References

- Afsar, B., & Umrani, W. A. (2020). Does thriving and trust in the leader explain the link between transformational leadership and innovative work behaviour? A cross-sectional survey. *Journal of Research in Nursing: JRN*, 25(1), 37.
- Althammer, S. E., Reis, D., van der Beek, S., Beck, L., & Michel, A. (2021). A mindfulness intervention promoting work–life balance: How segmentation preference affects changes in detachment, well-being, and work–life balance. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 94(2), 282-308. doi:10.1111/joop.12346
- Anderman, E. M., & Hattie, J. (2013). *International guide to student achievement*. New York: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780203850398
- Atasoy, R. (2020). The relationship between school principals' leadership styles, school culture and organizational change. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, 16(5), 256-274. doi:10.29329/ijpe.2020.277.16
- Barling, J., Kelloway, E. K., & Frone, M. R. (2004). *Handbook of work stress* (1st ed.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Incorporated. doi:10.4135/9781412975995
- Bauer, S. C., & Silver, L. (2018). The impact of job isolation on new principals' sense of efficacy, job satisfaction, burnout, and persistence. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 56(3), 315-331. doi:10.1108/JEA-07-2017-0078
- Beusaert, S., Dominik, E. F., Riley, P., & Gallant, A. (2021) What about school principals' well-being? The role of social capital. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 1741143221991853. doi:10.1177/1741143221991853

- Beausaert, S., Froehlich, D. E., Devos, C., & Riley, P. (2016). Effects of support on stress and burnout in school principals. *Educational Research, 58*(4), 347-365. doi:10.1080/00131881.2016.1220810
- Boyland, L. (2011). Job stress and coping strategies of elementary principals: A statewide study. *Current Issues in Education, 14*(3), 1-10. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/leo.lib.unomaha.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eue&AN=70931721&site=ehost-live&scope=site>
- Brinia, V., Zimianiti, L., & Panagiotopoulos, K. (2014). The role of the principal's emotional intelligence in primary education leadership. *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership, 42*(4), 28-44. doi:10.1177/1741143213513183
- Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook, Elementary, Middle, and High School Principals, at <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/management/elementary-middle-and-high-school-principals.htm> (visited November 27, 2022).
- Celoria, D., & Roberson, I. (2015). New principal coaching as a safety net. *Educational Leadership and Administration: Teaching and Program Development, 26*, 86-99.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. (3rd ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

- Curbow, B., Spratt, K., Ungaretti, A., McDonnell, K., & Breckler, S. (2000).
Development of the childcare worker job stress inventory. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 15*(4), 515-536. doi:10.1016/S0885-2006(01)00068-0
- Darmody, M., & Smyth, E. (2016). Primary school principals ' job satisfaction and occupational stress. *The International Journal of Educational Management, 30*(1), 115-128. doi:10.1108/IJEM-12-2014-0162
- DeMatthews, D. E., Reyes, P., Carrola, P., Edwards, W., & James, L. (2021). Novice principal burnout: Exploring secondary trauma, working conditions, and coping strategies in an urban district. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, ahead-of-print (-)*, 1-19. doi:10.1080/15700763.2021.1917624
- DiPaola, M. F., & Hoy, W. K. (2015). *Leadership and school quality*. Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing, Inc.
- Dodgson, J. E. (2019). Reflexivity in qualitative research. *J Hum Lact, 35*(2), 220-222. doi:10.1177/0890334419830990
- Elmore, R. F. (2000). *Building a new structure for school leadership*. Washington, DC: Albert Shanker Inst.
- Elmore, R. F. (2005). Accountable leadership. *The Educational Forum (West Lafayette, Ind.)*, 69(2), 134-142. doi:10.1080/00131720508984677
- Elomaa, M., Sirpa Eskelä-Haapanen, Pakarinen, E., Halttunen, L., & Marja-Kristiina Lerkkanen (2021). Work-related stress of elementary school principals in Finland: Coping strategies and support. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, , 17411432211010317*. doi:10.1177/17411432211010317

- Fluckiger, B., Lovett, S., & Dempster, N. (2014). Judging the quality of school leadership learning programmes: An international search. *Professional Development in Education, 40*(4), 561-575.
- Fotheringham, P., Harriott, T., Healy, G., Arengé, G., & Wilson, E. (2022). Pressures and influences on school leaders navigating policy development during the COVID-19 pandemic. *British Educational Research Journal, 48*(2), 201-227.
doi:10.1002/berj.3760
- Friedman, I. A. (2002). Burnout in school principals: Role related antecedents. *Social Psychology of Education, 5*(3), 229-251.
- Fullan, M. (2002). The change. *Educational Leadership, 59*(8), 16-20.
- Fuller, E., & Hollingworth, L. (2018). Questioning the use of outcome measures to evaluate principal preparation programs. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 17*(2), 167-188. doi:10.1080/15700763.2016.1270332
- Fuller, E. J., Hollingworth, L., & Pendola, A. (2017). Every student succeeds, state efforts to improve access to effective educators, and the importance of school leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 53*(5), 727-756.
doi:10.1177/0013161X17711481
- Fuller, E. J., & Young, M. D. (2022). Challenges and opportunities in diversifying the leadership pipeline: Flow, leaks, and interventions. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 21*(1), 19-34. doi:10.1080/15700763.2021.2022712
- Fuller, E. J., Young, M. D., Richardson, M. S., Pendola, A., & Winn, K. M. (2018). The pre-K-8 school leader in 2018: A 10-year study. *National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)*,

- Goldring, R., & Taie, S. (2018). Principal attrition and mobility: Results from the 2016-17 principal follow-up survey. NCES 2018-066. *National Center for Education Statistics*.
- Goleman, D. (1998). *Working with emotional intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H. (1996). Reassessing the principal's role in school effectiveness: A review of empirical research, 1980-1995. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 32(1), 5-44. doi:10.1177/0013161X96032001002
- Harding, J. (2016). Helping school leaders find life balance. *Leadership (Burlingame, Calif.)*, 45(4), 8.
- Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: a synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. London: Routledge.
- Horwood, M., Marsh, H. W., Parker, P. D., Riley, P., Guo, J., & Dicke, T. (2021). Burning passion, burning out: The passionate school principal, burnout, job satisfaction, and extending the dualistic model of passion. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 113(8), 1668-1688. doi:10.1037/edu0000664
- Kafka, J. (2009). The principalship in historical perspective. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 84(3), 318-330. doi:10.1080/01619560902973506
- Kelliher, C., Richardson, J., & Boiarintseva, G. (2019). All of work? All of life? reconceptualizing work-life balance for the 21st century. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 29(2), 97-112. doi:10.1111/1748-8583.12215
- Kim, D. J., PhD. (2022). Navigation to well-being and work-life balance for school principals: Mindfulness-based approaches. *Health Behavior and Policy Review*, 9(2), 776-786. doi:10.14485/HBPR.9.2.5

- Kossek, E. E., Ruderman, M. N., Braddy, P. W., & Hannum, K. M. (2012). Work-nonwork boundary management profiles: A person-centered approach. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 81*(1), 112-128. doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2012.04.003
- Leithwood, K. A., Louis, K. S., Anderson, S. E., & Knapp, M. S. (2012). *Linking leadership to student learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Leithwood, K. A., & Poplin, M. S. (1992). The move toward transformational leadership. *Educational Leadership, 49*(5), 8.
- Leithwood, K., Sun, J., & Schumacker, R. (2020). How school leadership influences student learning: A test of “The four paths model”. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 56*(4), 570-599. doi:10.1177/0013161X19878772
- Leventis, C., Papakitsos, E. C., Karakiozis, K., & Argyriou, A. (2017). Work-related stress and burnout factors of principals in regional Greece: A historical perspective. *Journal of Research Initiatives, 3*(1), 1.
- Li, L. C. (2021). *Facts and analysis: Canvassing COVID-19 responses*. Chicago: City University of Hong Kong Press.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*: SAGE Publications.
- Liphadzi, M., Aigbavboa, C. O., & Thwala, W. D. (2017). A theoretical perspective on the difference between leadership and management. *Procedia Engineering, 196*, 478-482. doi:10.1016/j.proeng.2017.07.227
- Louis, K. S., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K. L., Anderson, S. E., Michlin, M., & Mascall, B. (2010). *Learning from leadership: Investigating the links to improved student learning*. Wallace Foundation New York, NY.

- Lücker, P., Kästner, A., Hannich, A., Schmeyers, L., Lücker, J., & Hoffmann, W. (2022). Stress, coping and considerations of leaving the Profession—A cross-sectional online survey of teachers and school principals after two years of the pandemic. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(23), 16122. doi:10.3390/ijerph192316122
- Mahfouz, J. (2020). Principals and stress: Few coping strategies for abundant stressors. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *48*(3), 440-458. doi:10.1177/1741143218817562
- Malterud K, Siersma VD, Guassora AD (2016). Sample Size in Qualitative Interview Studies: Guided by Information Power. *Qualitative Health Research*, *26*(13):1753-1760. doi:10.1177/1049732315617444
- Many, T. W., & Sparks-Many, S. K. (2014). *Leverage: Using PLCs to promote lasting improvement in schools*. Corwin Press.
- Marzano, R. J., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. A. (2005). *School leadership that works: From research to results*. Alexandria: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development. Retrieved from <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unomaha/detail.action?docID=3002127>
- McCaslin, M., & Kilrea, K. (2019). An introduction to transformative inquiry: Understanding compelling and significant relationships for personal and societal transformation. *Qualitative Report*, *24*(5), 980-1000. doi:10.46743/2160-3715/2019.2689

- Middleton, K.V. (2020). The longer-term impact of COVID-19 on K–12 student learning and assessment. *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, 39(3), 41-44.
doi:10.1111/emip.12368
- Nasheeda, A., Haslinda, B. A., Steven, E. K., & Nobaya, B. A. (2019). Transforming transcripts into stories: A multimethod approach to narrative analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18, 1609406919856797.
doi:10.1177/1609406919856797
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). Principal Turnover: Stayers, Movers, and Leavers. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved [2022], from
<https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/slb>.
- Norton, M.S. (2002). Let's Keep Our Quality School Principals on the Job. *The High School Journal* 86(2), 50-56. doi:10.1353/hsj.2002.0024.
- Ntinda, K. (2020). Narrative Research. doi: 10.1007/978-981-10-2779-6_79-1.
- Patton, G.C., Coffey, C., Posterino, M., Carlin, J.B., & Bowes, G. (2003). Life events and early onset depression: Cause or consequence? *Psychological Medicine*; 33(7), 1203-1210. doi:10.1017/S0033291703008626
- Perrone, F., Young, M. D., & Fuller, E. J. (2022). A call for data on the principal pipeline. *Educational Researcher*, 51(6), 423-430.
doi:10.3102/0013189X221075767
- Phillips, S., & Sen, D. (2011). 10 stresses in head teachers. *Handbook of Stress in the Occupations*, 177.

- Platsidou, M. (2010). Trait emotional intelligence of Greek special education teachers in relation to burnout and job satisfaction. *School Psychology International, 31*(1), 60-76.
- Queen, J. A., & Queen, P. S. (2004). *The frazzled principals' wellness plan: Reclaiming time, managing stress, and creating a healthy lifestyle*. Corwin Press.
- Reid, D. B., & Creed, B. M. (2021). Visible at night: US school principal nontraditional work-hour activities and job satisfaction. *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership, 174114322110276*. doi:10.1177/17411432211027645
- Savin-Baden, M., & Major, C. H. (2013). *Qualitative research: The essential guide to theory and practice*. London: Routledge.
- Schiffer, A. A., O'Dea, C. J., & Saucier, D. A. (2021). Moral decision-making and support for safety procedures amid the COVID-19 pandemic. *Personality and Individual Differences, 175*, 110714. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2021.110714
- Seiger, C. P., & Wiese, B. S. (2009). Social support from work and family domains as an antecedent or moderator of work–family conflicts? *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 75*(1), 26-37. doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2009.03.001
- Selye, H. (1956). *The stress of life*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Simon, S., & Gibson, M. T. (2019). Principal resilience and vitality in extremis: The scenario of involuntary occupational dissolution. *International Journal of Educational Management, 33*(4), 709-720. doi: 10.1108/IJEM-05-2018-0163
- Skaalvik, C. (2020). School principal self-efficacy for instructional leadership: Relations with engagement, emotional exhaustion, and motivation to quit. *Social Psychology of Education, 23*(2), 479-498. doi:10.1007/s11218-020-09544-4

- Su-Keene, E., & DeMatthews, D. (2022). "Savoring" the joy: Reducing principal burnout and improving well-being through positive psychological interventions. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 95(5), 210-219. doi:10.1080/00098655.2022.2097623
- Tan, S. Y., & Yip, A. (2018). Hans Selye (1907-1982): Founder of the stress theory. *Singapore medical journal*, 59(4), 170–171.
<https://doi.org/10.11622/smedj.2018043>
- Tapp. (2018). Giving Your Best to Work and Life: Factors That Impact Principal Work-Life Balance. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- The Pre-K-8 School Leader in 2018: A 10-Year Study of the principalship*. NAESP. (2018). Retrieved October 2022, from <https://www.naesp.org/resources/publications>
- Tikkanen, L., Pyhältö, K., Pietarinen, J., & Soini, T. (2017). Interrelations between principals' risk of burnout profiles and proactive self-regulation strategies. *Social Psychology of Education*, 20(2), 259-274.
- Tomic, W., & Tomic, E. (2008). Existential fulfillment and burnout among principals and teachers. *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 29(1), 11-27.
- Tschannen-Moran, M. (2014). *Trust matters: Leadership for successful schools*. Somerset: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated. Retrieved from <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unomaha/detail.action?docID=1645638>
- Turnbull, B. J., Riley, D. L., & MacFarlane, J. R. (2013). Cultivating talent through a principal pipeline. Building a stronger principalship: Volume 2. *Policy Studies Associates, Inc.*,

- von Fischer, P., & De Jong, D. (2017). The relationship between teacher perception of principal servant leadership behavior and teacher job satisfaction. *Servant Leadership: Theory & Practice*, 4(2), 14.
- Wang, M. C., Haertel, G. D., & Walberg, H. J. (1993). Toward a knowledge base for school learning. *Review of Educational Research*, 63(3), 249-294.
- Weingartner, C. J. (2008). *Principal mentoring: A safe, simple, and supportive approach*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press. Retrieved from <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unomaha/detail.action?docID=1415877>
- World Health Organization. (2022). *Stress*. World Health Organization. Retrieved October 11, 2022, from <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/stress>
- Xhomara, N. (2021). *Instructional leadership and effective teaching and learning*. Hauppauge, NY: Nova.

Appendix A: Initial Email to Participants

Dear _____.

My name is Matt Hilderbrand, and I am working on my Doctorate through UNO and I am looking to interview Elementary Principals in the metropolitan area that have a minimum of 10 years of experience. I am hoping to capture the experiences of the last three years as an elementary principal during COVID-19. The informed consent to interview is attached. I was hoping you would be willing to participate in an interview with me so I can collect your story.

I plan to schedule the interviews this summer and they will be approximately an hour in length. The goal is to capture the experiences of veteran principals through COVID - more specific information is listed in the IRB. Note: I will utilize pseudo names so you and your district will not be identified in my findings.

Please let me know if you have any questions and thanks again for your consideration. If you accept, we can work to find a date and time to meet on Zoom for the interview.

Thank you,

Matt

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

The emphasis of this study is to answer the following central research question: *How has the ongoing impact of hyperstress from the COVID-19 pandemic influenced veteran elementary school principals' leadership experiences and outlook on their position?*

To address this central question, each participant was given the opportunity to react and respond to the following questions:

1. Talk about your journey in educational leadership.
2. Talk about a time in your professional career when you have experienced stress.
3. During the initial phase of the pandemic, tell the story of what you remember about the events that unfolded.
4. What types of events stand out the most to you following the initial stage of the pandemic?
5. The current context of educational leadership is unique. Talk about your experiences related to the current era of leadership.
6. Compare and contrast the stress you have faced in the past with the current stresses of leadership.
7. What do you want future educational leaders to know and learn from your experiences?

Appendix C: CITI Certificate



Completion Date 29-Aug-2021
 Expiration Date 28-Aug-2024
 Record ID 44565213

This is to certify that:

Matt Hilderbrand

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of
 certification through CME.

Group 3: Social/Behavioral Course (all UNO except HPER)
 (Curriculum Group)

Group 3: Social & Behavioral Course
 (Course Learner Group)

1 - Basic Course
 (Stage)

Under requirements set by:

University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC/UNO)



Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?wf69cf275-a789-4c49-a26b-caa50169f583-44565213

Appendix D: Institutional Review Board Approval



NEBRASKA'S HEALTH SCIENCE CENTER

Office of Regulatory Affairs (ORA)
Institutional Review Board (IRB)

March 31, 2022

Matt Hilderbrand, n/a
UNO
Doctoral Program
UNO - VIA COURIER

IRB # 0163-22-EX

TITLE OF PROPOSAL: LEADING THE ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALSHIP THROUGH HYPERSTRESS

The Office of Regulatory Affairs (ORA) has reviewed your application for *[Pick one of the 3 Titles: 1) Exempt Educational, Behavioral, and Social Science Research or 2) Human Biological Material Research or 3) Medical Records Research* on the above-titled research project. According to the information provided, this project is exempt under 45 CFR 46:104(d), category *****add text*****. You are therefore authorized to begin the research.

It is understood this project will be conducted in full accordance with all applicable HRPP Policies. It is also understood that the ORA will be immediately notified of any proposed changes for your research project that

- A. affect the risk-benefit relationship of the research
- B. pose new risks which are greater than minimal
- C. constitute a new risk to privacy or confidentiality
- D. involve sensitive topics (including but not limited to personal aspects of the subject's behavior, life experiences or attitudes)
- E. involve deception
- F. target a vulnerable population
- G. include prisoners or children
- H. otherwise suggest loss of the exempt status of the research.

You are encouraged to contact the ORA to discuss whether changes to exempt research requires review by ORA.

Please be advised you will be asked to update the status of your research yearly by responding to an email from the Office of Regulatory Affairs. If you do not respond, your project will be considered completed.

Sincerely,

Signed on:



NEBRASKA'S HEALTH SCIENCE CENTER

Office of Regulatory Affairs (ORA)
Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Gail Kotulak, BS, CIP
IRB Administrator III
Office of Regulatory Affairs

Appendix E: Informed Consent



IRB PROTOCOL # 0163-22-EX

Page 1 of 1

Title of this Research Study

LEADING THE ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALSHIP THROUGH HYPERSTRESS

Dear Participant,

My name is Matt Hilderbrand and I am currently taking graduate classes through the University of Nebraska Omaha with the main goal of earning my Doctor of Education Educational Administration degree. As part of this degree, I am completing my dissertation work (EDU 9990). This course is allowing me to conduct interviews as part of my research to explore the impact of hyperstress on veteran elementary principals through the pandemic. As an elementary principal myself, I am interested in the stories and experiences associated with your role.

This study aims to capture the experiences of participants who have been elementary principals for a minimum of 10 years. The interviews will be interactive and I will at times be taking the role of participant as well as interviewer. The outcome of this research may seek to inform future leaders of what to expect and how others have handled situations during hyperstressful situations.

Your signature provides your consent to be part of this interview process and permission to use the data collected. A pseudonym will be associated with your data. Your name will not be included.

Thank you for your support and considering to be part of this study. This research may help me grow as an administrator to learn from the experiences of others. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this research study please do not hesitate to email me at matt.hilderbrand@plcschools.org.

Participant Signature: _____

Investigator's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix F: Demographics/Member Checking Email

Dear _____

I wanted to thank you for your participation in the interview related to my Dissertation research. I would like a few pieces of feedback so I can move forward with drafting and writing Chapter 4: Findings.

1. Attached to this email is a rough transcription of your interview - transcribed by Zoom. Please review this draft of the transcription, ignoring any grammatical errors, and send me any comments, questions, or clarifications you would like made. If you are ok with the transcription, please reply to let me know so I can move forward. This process will help determine the validity of information for the study related through the member checking process.
2. There is now a need to collect some general demographic information. I have already assigned you a pseudonym and will not use your District's name in any part of the dissertation. If you could kindly spend a few minutes sending me the information listed below it would be greatly appreciated.

Race/Ethnic Group	
Gender	
Number of years you have been a principal	
University in which you obtained your master's degree or highest Degree	
Current Degree: (M.S.; Ph.D.; Dr.)	

Did you grow up in a rural or urban/suburban setting?	
How long did you teach prior to becoming an administrator?	

Again, thank you for your time with this study, I will look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Matt