

CRISIS LEADERSHIP: EXPERIENCES OF K-12 PRINCIPALS IN SOUTH TEXAS  
SCHOOL DISTRICTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A Dissertation

by

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This dissertation meets the standards for scope and quality of  
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and is hereby approved.

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic which began in March of 2020 was the start of a crisis no one ever anticipated experiencing in our lifetime. Education was impacted on many levels and the effects continue today. K-12 schools experienced a new way of teaching and learning when forced to utilize modes of online learning to continue with school as communities faced COVID-19 fears and waves of sickness until a vaccine was made available. Although COVID-19 has now begun to dissipate, schools continue to face instructional gaps with students having lost instruction for a little over a year on top of the already existing instructional gaps. Lives have been affected with staff, students, and families having experienced COVID-19 or lost a friend or family member to it.

Educational leaders had not experienced leading through a crisis such as a pandemic. This qualitative study is expected to make a crucial contribution to the existing body of literature of crisis leadership and traditional leadership approaches. Six principals in South Texas school districts were interviewed to gain a better understanding of their experiences and leadership approaches and skills they utilized as they navigated through uncharted territories. Major themes across the participant data included: (1) crisis informs leadership, (2) crisis reshapes leadership approaches, (3) crisis hones leadership skills, (4) crisis required addressing social emotional realm, and (5) crisis reshapes instruction.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all educators who experienced a crisis like no other. All educators persevered and continued the hard work they face daily in schools all while in crisis mode. It is also dedicated to the lives lost during the COVID-19 pandemic, staff members, family, and friends.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation is a symbol of the hard work and dedication to a personal and professional goal of obtaining my doctorate.

No one has stressed the importance of school and learning more than my mother, whom I wish to thank for her unconditional love and support all my life. I could not have completed my journey without her. Everything I have accomplished thus far is because of you. I also want to thank my aunt, Elizabeth Perez, for completing this journey alongside with me. You are the epitome of what a successful educational leader is, and I strive to be like you every day.

I wish to thank Dr. Gerri Maxwell, my doctoral chair and professor from whom I have learned so much during this doctoral program. I also could not have completed this dissertation without her support and guidance. Also, thank you to Dr. Scott Elliff and Dr. Bernie Cervantes for serving on my committee and being so supportive and encouraging. I value both of you for your educational leadership expertise and will apply that in my daily work. I would also like to thank Dr. Stephen Doolan for his guidance and participation as my Graduate Faculty Representative.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge all the teacher and administrative mentors, former and current, I have had thus far in my educational career. Without them I would not be where I am professionally. I have learned so much and continue to learn daily. I deeply appreciate their support and encouragement to grow as a teacher and now as a school leader.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

K-12 schools have experienced many types of traumas and crises such as mass shootings (Brown, 2018), racial incidents (Fortunato et al., 2018; Gigliotti, 2016), and the devastation and aftermath of tornados and hurricanes (Bishop et al., 2015; Goswick et al., 2017; Hemmer & Elliff, 2019; Howat et al., 2012; Mutch, 2015). What K-12 schools were not prepared for and continue to work through has been the Coronavirus “COVID-19” global pandemic crisis. This unprecedented event afforded minimal preparedness. Based on recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the national government, states and school leadership were left to develop policies and procedures on a predominantly just-in-time basis as they occurred or as the crisis progressed. Safety protocols such as social distancing, the use of face masks, and sanitation procedures were established and continue to be implemented informing how day-to-day educational systems could continue their mission (Centers for Disease Control, 2020).

School leadership had to adapt on a daily, and sometimes hourly basis as a constant stream of new information and new developments related to COVID-19 were required to be addressed to ensure optimum student health and safety. Additionally, shifting instructional approaches and strategies to mediate ongoing demands of the impact of COVID-19 remained at the heart of the work. During March 2020, schools across the nation closed their doors (Sawchuk, 2020); thus, teaching and learning had to continue through online or remote learning. Remote learning consisted of schools providing learning via online communication applications and/or their online learning management systems, if districts were fortunate to already have one in place (Sawchuk, 2020). As the pandemic progressed and school systems moved to remote learning to continue teaching students, one crucial element was highlighted during this process. What was unmasked were the inequities that exist between rich and poor districts (Sawchuk,

2020) as well as the inequities that exist between low-socioeconomic students and more affluent students even within the same school district. Some districts and students of low-socioeconomic backgrounds were unable to do remote online learning as they lacked the resources such as Wi-Fi and technological devices. For many of those students, paper packets and communication via phone calls were the go-to means of education (Sawchuk, 2020). While teachers shifted instructional materials and modes of delivery all while working from home, they not only had to teach their students but also manage their own children at home who were also learning remotely (Kamenetz, 2020). Teachers from all over have shared many stories of the intense level of stress and workload of teaching remotely all while managing their own households (Kamenetz, 2020).

As the new 2020-2021 school year was approaching, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) required districts to plan for remote learning to continue along with a phase-in plan to bring students back into schools safely (Texas Education Agency, 2020). School leadership continued to face new developments weekly and sometimes daily, adjusting on a continual basis. While this health crisis persisted, schools continued to teach and facilitate learning in their new environments along with pressures of state accountability, including the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) tests, and the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS) (Texas Education Agency, 2020). The principal must not only continue to exhibit leadership styles such as instructional, transformational, distributive, and situational leadership, but also immediately summon less familiar and predictable skills to respond to crisis. In addition to their normal duties and newly added pressures of COVID-19 protocols, principals navigated their new roles as “symbolic keepers of hope” to their staff, students, and families as one principal described (Sawchuk, 2020).

The extant literature is limited on the topic of crisis leadership within K-12 schools with regard to campus *principals* tackling crises, as much of the current literature pertains to school *superintendents* dealing with crises. With the necessity of dealing with a world pandemic, the implications for principal leadership were daunting. Much of the extant literature on crisis leadership emanated from the higher education area with regard to racial incidents (Fortunato et al., 2018; Gigliotti, 2016) as well as that of K-12 superintendents and their responses to weather disaster events (Bishop et al., 2015; Goswick et al., 2017; Hemmer & Elliff, 2019; Howat et al., 2012; Mutch, 2015) or school shootings (Brown, 2018). In spite of the recent nature of the pandemic crisis, a few studies and articles have emerged with regard to school leadership responses to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis (Brelsford et al., 2020; Harris, 2020, Kaul et al., 2020; Marshall et al., 2020; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021).

This qualitative study expects to add to the pandemic crisis body of literature through exploring not only the modified role as well as perspectives of K-12 principals in terms of crisis leadership during the COVID-19 health crisis. The study examined the pandemic's effects on what are considered foundational leadership approaches principals employ including transformational, instructional, distributive, and situational leadership approaches. Dealing with a global crisis as was being done so presently during the conduct of the study, is unprecedented, leaving school leaders to simultaneously problem solve and react, while also trying to be proactive, and capably anticipate challenges with which they are faced or may soon be faced. For the purpose of this study, it was important to glean the rich perspectives of how principals dealt with this crisis and how their perspectives will enlighten future leaders as to better prepare schools to continue to not only navigate the current crisis, as well as be prepared for any future crises of a similar nature.



## **Personal Rationale**

I was excited to be hired as first-year Assistant Principal to begin the 2020-2021 school year albeit in the midst of an ongoing pandemic. Prior to March 2020, no school leader ever anticipated dealing with a pandemic. Thus, in the midst of what is likely the most chaotic and life-changing event for much of the world, I was learning to manage the already challenging learning my role and duties would include as a typical first-year assistant principal sans being in the midst of unprecedented crisis. Daily, our efforts as leadership on my campus were altered due to the pandemic response shaped by the COVID-19 protocols, policies, and procedures put forth by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the Texas Education Agency (TEA). As a member of an administrative team of a middle school campus, I believed my personal experience of dealing with this crisis on our campus and in our community, would provide me with a level of preparation I would not have experienced except for having seen firsthand what managing while in crisis mode looks like for campus leadership.

There are many stakeholders as well as responsible parties that must work together to manage the many aspects involved in dealing and managing a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic not only from the top but across leadership throughout a school district. Although superintendents are the ones solely in charge for how things should be managed at the district and campus level, principals are the ones in the trenches with staff, students, and parents. I have not exactly felt the total weight of crisis management on my shoulders, as it mainly falls on my principal, but I am partially responsible as is everyone else on my administrative team as we supported our principal in every aspect. This is where I have experienced distributed and shared leadership come into play as our administrative team managed day by day to get crucial tasks completed especially in the beginning of the school year during the unknown. I also saw and

continue to see evidence of crisis leadership using strategies, in real time, such as clear communication, flexibility, and empathy as we go through this on-going journey. All of this work was overshadowed further by the impact of the coronavirus that took the lives of many including loved ones of our students, staff, and community, not to mention the fear of loss that loomed over every aspect of life as we knew it. As administrators, we found ourselves at various stages within the three-stage model Johnson and Hackman (2013) proffer for varying situational response. Furthermore, while I continued to see aspects of distributive and instructional leadership present, addressing instruction was impacted in an unprecedented way, as teachers not only had to continue teaching to address the already existing gaps in achievement, but moreover, address the widening of that gap due to loss of instruction. When the pandemic first hit the states in March of 2020, this caused some schools to close for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year and despite best efforts, learning loss was exponential.

In March of 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic began in the states, I was an eighth-grade math teacher in Texas in a Coastal Bend urban district that serves about 30,000 students. Communication was a crucial element as leadership including superintendents, as well as principals and even faculty and staff worked to get the word out to the community. District leaders had to quickly determine whether to close down schools as others around the country had done due to rising cases, or to return to school after the spring break. Based on federal and state officials and guidance, schools were to suspend in-person instruction for precautionary measures in hopes of stopping the spread of COVID-19. Spring break was extended as district leaders determined how to continue the rest of the school year. The answer . . . remote learning. School leaders were then tasked with creating packets for students that would cover the rest of the school year's course content. Or, if students had access to technology, students would be able to

access lessons through Canvas, an online learning management system that had fortunately been in place within the district the past few years. However, that platform was quickly taxed as were educators as the technology had not been utilized to its fullest potential as most in the district were still trying to learn the system.

Communication with our students was the first priority to ensure their well-being, provide resources if some did not have enough food for the remainder of the lockdown, and to determine access to technology. As a teacher from a low-socioeconomic campus, most of our students did not have access to technology, evidencing the inequities within parts of the district. Assignments were based on previously learned lessons and not new material. Teachers provided lesson support and teaching through Zoom and Canvas applications with a modified schedule. Teachers were expected to make contact with their students at least once a week making phone calls to those who were provided packets. At times, some calls to parents were to simply provide a listening ear as many had lost their jobs and were struggling. The STAAR test was cancelled, and a state of disaster was declared for all districts across the United States which allowed states to waive accountability ratings for the school year. During this time, we continued with weekly meetings with school leadership and curriculum and instruction specialists to continue the work. My principal at the time provided a weekly professional development opportunity with our district technology specialist to ensure we provided effective teaching remotely through Zoom and Canvas as online teaching was a new concept to all. Constant communication via email, phone, and Zoom was part of our everyday lives as we were not physically on campus.

Fast forward to the 2020-2021 school year, with the pandemic crisis still in full swing, I applied for and was hired as an assistant principal position at a middle school with similar demographics, serving students who are predominantly low-socioeconomic. The TEA provided

guidance on the type of instruction districts were to provide, that being synchronous (in real time through technology) as well as, asynchronous (on the student's own time). We began the school year remotely for a few weeks. Our district made purchases toward technology and were able to provide technology and hot spots to our students if they needed one. Then, guidance came in to provide a phase-in approach to bringing our students back to campus with our most vulnerable populations, special education, 504, limited English proficiency students being first priority. Every so many weeks, a new group of students would return to in-person instruction on campus. Our district continued to follow guidance from the CDC and TEA and developed a reopening plan with protocols and procedures for the district and campuses to ensure safe learning is occurring to prevent COVID-19 outbreaks. In the beginning, information was constantly changing as district and school leaders were navigating this crisis which further reveals the need for flexibility as a critical aspect during crisis. Trying to find the balance between continuing business as usual and dealing with the health crisis continued to be a daunting task. Our district experienced students and staff diagnosed with COVID-19 with some ending up in the hospital. Within our district, we experienced deaths of employees and family members of staff and students. District leaders and administrators were expected to manage these crises and be the sole provider of support for their staff, students, and community. Counseling services and support played a major role on campuses in dealing with the social and emotional aspects of this crisis for both students and staff. Distributed leadership and capacity building were the school leaders' focus during these times of crisis as the workload has increased with additional responsibilities. As the researcher was writing this, the school year was ending and testing season was upon us with the state mandated STAAR testing to continue as scheduled. Although grade promotion based on STAAR scores were ultimately waived and districts were held

harmless on state accountability measures yet anticipating that the data would reveal the widening of an existing achievement gap, that is a learning gap that will surely be present for years to come due to the COVID-19 health crisis. Education was affected substantially and remained the focus of school leaders regarding next steps.

Crisis leadership of K-12 principals during this pandemic informed this study. While area schools dealt with other natural disasters such as hurricanes in the Coastal Bend, no one in our lifetime, had ever experienced a crisis such as a global health crisis, or experienced it this way in light of media coverage. Telling the stories and lived, vivid experiences of principals during the year-long+ pandemic, can inform the skills, strategies, and leadership approaches that were most effective as well as those that were affected or impeded. The most interesting aspect of studying this crisis was the fact that the current crisis was on-going as the researcher wrote this account, as opposed to others that have been studied that were short term crisis situations. As the researcher is currently a school administrator, and the instrument for this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the researcher has background knowledge in the area of what principals may have and continue to deal with as a result of the pandemic crisis.

### **Crisis Leadership Literature Context**

The existing literature on crisis leadership included information which provided leaders strategic plans and key factors of crisis readiness and preparedness, dealing with the crisis, and dealing with the effects post-crisis. Boin et al.'s (2010) ten-point framework and Smith and Riley's (2012) nine attributes provides leaders ways in which they could effectively manage a crisis. Furthermore, Johnson and Hackman's (2013) three-stage model of before, during, and after a crisis provided the tasks to be implemented throughout the various stages. Regarding preparedness, Gainey (2009), Olinger Steeves et al. (2017) and Sutherland (2017) and suggested

having response plans in place as soon as possible while Liou (2015) focused on three essential areas, readiness, response, and reflection of crisis preparedness and management. In terms of leadership skills, Gainey (2009) also suggested two-way communication and relationships as vital aspects of crisis management.

Gigliotti (2016) and Fortunato et al. (2018) studied a wide range of crises on higher education campuses and focused on the attributes of their leaders. Communication and sensemaking were both key elements for both (Gigliotti, 2016; Fortunato et al., 2018). Gigliotti (2016) established sensemaking, communication, and reflexivity as key leadership skills, in addition to four key leadership themes stakeholders viewed their leaders as during the time of crisis, President as comforter, caretaker, institutional voice, and “man of steel” (Gigliotti, 2016). In addition, Fortunato et al. (2018) also studied crisis situations in light of racial incidents that occurred at the University of Missouri in 2015. Necessary components such as addressing relationships with stakeholders, developing a keen sense for recognizing an impending crisis, ensuring communication, and learning from the experience of these events (i.e., lessons learned), were the four important takeaways Fortunato et al. (2018) found.

Natural disasters are bound to happen, and the level of preparedness can vary as some events can be forecasted while others happen suddenly. Multiple examples of scholarly inquiry exist related to various natural crises. For example, Bishop et al. (2015) studied the leadership characteristics school leaders exhibited during a tornado in rural Alabama and Goswick et al. (2018) in Joplin, Missouri, both in 2011. Planning, communication, decision making, caring, providing support post-crisis, and preparation were a few of the characteristics that were gleaned from data where both studies showed the majority of the same characteristics (Bishop et al., 2015; Goswick et al., 2018). Similarly, Hemmer and Elliff (2019) revealed the experiences of

superintendents after Hurricane Harvey in 2017. Hemmer and Elliff (2019) studied the stages of what the superintendents went through and found three themes to address including: district vulnerability, leadership development, and networks of collaborations. Furthermore, Howat et al. (2012) discovered four themes after examining recovery efforts after several hurricanes in Louisiana, communication, resolving tensions, coordinating with outside services, and learned lessons. In another instance, five earthquakes rattled New Zealand schools in 2010-2011 (Mutch, 2015). Mutch (2015) discovered principals used their distributed leadership styles, communication and collaboration, and situational decision-making efforts were vital.

Sadly, another crisis that is all too common include school shootings. Brown (2018) studied the crisis of a school shooting at a rural middle school in the south where quick responses, focused decision making, and post-crisis support were found to be the main key focuses. Brown (2018) also found that a crisis plan is essential along with social emotional support and counseling for those affected by the crisis as many times school shootings end with loss of life.

Finally, with the recent nature of the current health crisis, some limited literature is emerging. Most of the literature that has emerged concerns school leadership and principals' response to COVID-19 pandemic (Brelsford et al., 2020; Harris, 2020; Marshall et al., 2020; Kaul et al., 2020; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021). Communication (Brelsford et al., 2020; Marshall et al., 2020; Kaul et al., 2020), collaboration (Harris, 2020; Marshall et al., 2020; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021), as well as other key themes such as adaptive leadership (Marshall et al., 2020), accountability and relationships (Brelsford et al., 2020), basic and technological needs, and social emotional learning (Kaul et al., 2020), leadership qualities and school strengths (Reyes-

Guerra et al., 2021), and distributed leadership (Harris, 2020), were uncovered within these studies.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The global pandemic health crisis persisted around the world and impacted daily life and systems. Despite efforts to continue school as normal, the ongoing health crisis challenged and negatively impacted school systems across the world and more specifically in the United States as staff, students, and families continue to contract COVID-19 and work to navigate their personal lives. During the 2020-2021 school year, some schools either reopened to some capacity or not at all which hindered the learning and success of all students. Those who chose to stay at home participated in remote learning. During the 2021-2022 school year, the majority of the country is back in session with health safety measures such as before. This problem has also affected school leadership in how they approach their staff, students, and parents, as well as the social/emotional, and academic achievement of their students. This study investigated the experiences of K-12 principals to highlight how they continued to manage their campuses during a global health pandemic. This study provided lessons learned and suggestions to prepare future leaders with the tools needed to appropriately manage a similar crisis, as well as other crises, in the future.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to gather descriptions of the lived experiences of K-12 principals who dealt with the pandemic in their schools or are currently facing the global pandemic crisis, COVID-19, as it relates to the leadership theory/approach, crisis leadership in addition to traditional leadership approaches. It was important to gather rich, descriptive information regarding how the crisis changed their traditional world of education and



how traditional leadership styles have been affected or if one had proven to be more effective during the crisis event. It was also important to determine whether K-12 leaders found any behaviors and/or skills that were essential to managing their campuses through the crisis to better prepare other school leaders who may face a similar crisis in the future. It was the researcher's intent to analyze the data from interviews in order to illuminate key themes and elements of crisis leadership and other leadership behaviors that were required of K-12 principals during this crisis. The participants of this study included a group of K-12 principals from South Texas school districts ranging from elementary, middle, and high school to determine if any experiences differed based on the type of campus these principals oversaw. The setting of the interviews were virtual through Zoom as it provided convenience to both researcher and participant and in the participants natural setting.

### **Research Questions**

As there is limited research on crisis leadership in terms of context, a health crisis, a qualitative narrative study was used to highlight the lived experiences of K-12 principals. The questions developed for this research study uncovered strategies used to deal with crisis management and leadership, as well as traditional leadership approaches that may also have been effective during the crisis. The overarching research question for this study was:

What are the perceptions of K-12 principals regarding their leadership experience relative to the pandemic?

### **Methodology**

This qualitative narrative case study included in-depth interviews with K-12 principals (Patton, 2015). According to Yin (2009), "a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a

contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18).

To facilitate the case study, the researcher employed multiple strategies to ensure that participants who were selected were appropriate for the data collection. Moreover, the researcher ensured ethical collection of data will occur (Patton, 2015). If issues arose during the data collection process, Patton (2015) emphasized “the interviewer needs to have an ethical framework for dealing with such issues” (p. 495).

The instrumentation used was the human instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that naturalistic inquiry focus on “humans as the primary data-gathering instruments” (p. 39). Since the researcher is currently a second-year assistant principal having experienced leadership in the pandemic context, she brought insider knowledge to the process (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007).

### **Data Collection**

Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015) was used to derive a small sample of six former or current K-12 principals in the South Texas region that experienced and dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Patton (2015) emphasized the use of purposeful sampling through information-rich cases as researchers “can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (p. 53). The criterion for this sample also included K-12 principals who were at a B-rated (or better) campus that service a great number of low-socioeconomic disadvantaged students (Texas Education Agency, 2021). Due to the cancellation of STAAR testing and accountability measures for the 2019-2020 school year, the Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR) results used were based on the 2018-2019 school year (Texas Education Agency, 2021).

Initially, the researcher began with a criterion of principals having survived Hurricane Harvey of 2017 as a principal and experienced the pandemic. The researcher reached out to certain prospective participants who fit this criterion, and none responded. The study's IRB was amended to take out this criterion to cast a wider net of potential participants. The researcher began to search for principals in the South Texas region that fit the criteria of being an "A" or "B" rated campus that serves a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students using the 2018-2019 Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR) provided by the Texas Education Agency website (Texas Education Agency, 2021). Through peer debriefing (Erlandson et al., 1993b), the researcher consulted with a peer to aid in contacting potential participants for the sample as needed. The participants were asked to participate in the study voluntarily through recruitment emails. Zoom interviews were set up with some participants choosing to complete their interview via their office or home according to their preference and time availability, in their natural setting (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Before the meeting began, the researcher provided information regarding the study to provide background and context (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) and built trust with the participant by ensuring any names or schools/districts would be changed to pseudonyms to protect their identity. In-depth interviews "capture the deep meaning of experience in the participants' own words" (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 102). In-depth interviews (Patton, 2015) were conducted and followed a semi-structured protocol with open-ended questions (Bernard, 2006) that followed a series of 12 questions based on a review of the extant literature relative to pertaining to both traditional leadership literature as well as emerging crisis leadership scholarship. Additional probing questions were asked regarding their responses as the conversation flowed. Participants spoke about their experiences during the pandemic as well as experiences of other

crises experienced such as Hurricane Harvey with interviews lasting on average 45 minutes to one hour. The interview was recorded on the Zoom application as well as audio recording and transcription using Otter transcription application. “Credibility needs to be established with the individuals and groups who have supplied data for the inquiry” (Erlandson et al., 1993b, p. 30). Throughout the interview, member checking was used to establish credibility (Erlandson et al., 1993b). The researcher would ask the participant to clarify or confirm if the data was accurately depicted and participants either confirmed and/or elaborated. Member checking (Erlandson et al., 1993b) also continued as needed after having transcribed and reviewed interview responses.

### **Data and Analysis**

Once the data was gathered via purposeful interviews, thick description emerged from the participants. After all interviews were complete, transcriptions of the interviews were transferred to a Word document where the researcher would re-listen to the interview recording and make edits to the transcription as needed. After pseudonyms were established, the final transcripts were sent to the participants individually to confirm their interview. To begin the data analysis process, the researcher began to go through the Word transcriptions of the interview data and went line by line and copy/pasted participant responses into an Excel sheet where a descriptive word was given for each response (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Saldana, 2016). This was the first cycle of coding, descriptive coding (Saldana, 2016). After doing so, the researcher immersed themselves into the data by reading and re-reading the data over and over so that no detail was overlooked by which then the researcher began coding the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). “Coding is the transitional process between data collection and more extensive data analysis” (Saldana, 2016, p. 5). After going through all transcriptions, the researcher went back again through the responses and did another cycle of descriptive coding to make adjustments

after re-reading responses once more. Saldana (2016) interprets coding as “to organize and group similarly coded data into categories or ‘families’ because they share some characteristic—the beginning of a pattern” (p. 9). The data were sorted by approximately 100 descriptive words with 19 prominent codes in which the researcher began to code into patterns and themes. The following are the five key themes established: (1) crisis informs leadership, (2) crisis reshapes leadership approaches, (3) crisis hones leadership skills, (4) crisis required addressing social emotional realm, and (5) crisis reshapes instruction.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study was significant due to the nature of the unprecedented health crisis the world faced during COVID-19. As there has not been a global health crisis in over a century, there was little to no literature regarding crisis leadership and management concerning a global health pandemic moreover how school principals might deal with the situation. Due to the emergence of a type of crisis no one saw coming, this study highlighted strategies already known of crisis leadership and/or a historical or leadership theory has become the forefront and go-to approach for principals during this unprecedented time. It was crucial to study crisis leadership in the context of the pandemic due to the many difficult situations principals have dealt with and continued to deal with. This study provided the experiences of K-12 principals during the global health crisis as to better prepare future generations if and when a health crisis was to occur again. Those in administration or who seek administrative positions, whether it be district or campus level benefit from this study as it provided insight on what principals faced during the pandemic, how they managed operations, and why they made the decisions they did. This study also added to the existing body of knowledge on crisis leadership as it pertains to a certain type of crisis, a health crisis. Preparation plans have already been developed if another crisis such as this were to

happen. Deep reflection on what worked and what did not work was essential to learn from the experience.

### **Limitations and Possibilities of the Study and/or Assumptions**

An assumption in this study was that all principals who participated in this qualitative narrative study answered honestly and truthfully given the use of pseudonyms and no identifiable information. Another assumption was the data gathered and coded from interviews with the participants showed evidence of crisis leadership strategies in addition to traditional leadership approaches.

There were also limitations of this study regarding the time period of the pandemic. The context of the pandemic shifted many times throughout the time of the study. During Spring 2021, we experienced a reduction in COVID-19 cases. This may have been due to the advancement of a COVID-19 vaccine rollout from the federal government. As more and more citizens gained access and participated in receiving the vaccine, there was a reduction in severe cases. When interviews for this study took place, it was just after another surge of COVID-19 cases due to back to school and the emergence of another variant. At this point, participants had time to reflect on their experiences and leadership during the pandemic and allowed room for “sensemaking.” A potential weakness in this study was the researcher’s background experience as a current campus administrator (assistant principal), which could have potentially led to some bias. Yet, that bias and insight brought the study to the researcher. Another limitation is that the sample of participants were from South Texas. This is a specific region of Texas and experiences differed vastly from those from other cities in Texas as well as other states. COVID-19 cases were more prominent in certain states and areas.

## **Chapter Summary**

This study described a narrative of experiences of K-12 principals in South Texas school districts as it related to the current health crisis of COVID-19 through a qualitative narrative study. As historical literature would show, principals use leadership styles such as transformational, distributed, instructional, and situational approaches in their daily routines as it related to student achievement and managing daily routines. However, within the context of dealing with COVID-19, principals also adopted crisis leadership approaches while navigating this unknown territory, as a health crisis had not been experienced for over a century. The data and findings from this qualitative study provided insight into the lived experiences of K-12 principals and advice for future leaders who may also experience a health crisis.

Additional chapters follow this brief introduction to the research study. Chapter II includes a broad review of the literature based on historical and more traditional leadership styles such as transformational, instructional, distributed, and situational leadership. Chapter II also includes a wide range of research on crisis leadership in general and crisis leadership within certain contexts such as higher education, natural disasters, school shootings, and recent literature on COVID-19. In addition, a brief overview of the Texas School Safety Standards and a look into the equity and social justice aspect is included in Chapter II. In Chapter III, specifics regarding the methodology and research design are detailed. Chapter IV provides the findings of this timely research study. Finally, Chapter V provides an analysis of the findings and recommendations for future study.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### **Introduction**

Many crises have occurred throughout our lifetime. Most crises that occur happen quickly with immediate efforts to mitigate the effects or damages or responsive efforts that follow the event. However, the global health crises of 2020, Coronavirus, or COVID-19, continues until this day. Most affected by this pandemic are families who have lost loved ones, as well as healthcare systems, economies, and education. COVID-19 has left the American education system and its educators to strive to continue with regular business, while trying to navigate through uncharted territory that consist of implementing health protocols and policies to allow the education system to continue.

With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders have relied on their training in proven leadership approaches including distributed, transformational, instructional, and situational leadership; however, as a result of the unprecedented challenges of the pandemic, school leaders had to adapt and move forward using crisis leadership approaches.

This literature review thus shares not only the historical leadership literature as well as an increasingly large body of literature on crisis leadership. For many years until the 1970s, the role of principals was that of “administrative manager” (Valentine & Prater, 2011, p. 5). While there has been a significant shift from the managerial aspect of the school leader, the pandemic required leaders and principals to be sensemakers, decision makers, communicators, and learners, along with being flexible and resilient to name a few (Boin et al., 2013).

### **Historical Background/Overview**

The extant literature is shared here in order to ground this study and serve as a foundational context informing emerging crisis leadership. Traditional leadership approaches



such as transformational, instructional, situational, and distributed leadership are foregrounded as key to leadership approaches leaders generally exhibit and may have during times of crisis.

### **Transformational Leadership**

Transformational leadership has been a respected leadership approach since the 1980s (Johnson & Hackman, 2013; Northouse, 2019). This approach focuses on the relationship between the leader and their followers (Northouse, 2019). The premise is that the leader positively influences and empowers their followers to perform above and beyond of what is expected through various means including establishing a sense of ownership and buy-in as well as recognizing leadership often occurs in teams (Northouse, 2019). Often leaders who exemplify transformational leadership are also considered charismatic and visionary (Northouse, 2019). Burns (1978) discussed the differences between transformational and transactional leadership. Transactional leadership exists when there is an exchange between leader and follower, while transformational leaders motivate their followers through connections and relationships (Northouse, 2019).

Johnson and Hackman (2013) described the five characteristics of transformational leaders as “creative, interactive, visionary, empowering, and passionate” (p. 110). On the other hand, House (1976) focused on the characteristics and behaviors of charismatic leadership which is akin to transformational leadership. The characteristics House (1976) described are “self-confidence, dominance, and a strong conviction in the moral righteousness of his/her beliefs” (p. 10). Additionally, Bass’s (1985) four I’s of transformational leadership are idealized influence (charisma), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (as cited in Northouse, 2019). Bennis and Nanus (1985) extended Bass’s work and found four strategies transformational leaders use such as developing a clear vision, become social

architects through communication, forming trust within, and positive self-regard. Finally, Kouzes and Posner (2002, 2017) developed five approaches that model exemplary leadership which consist of modeling, shared vision, challenge status quo, collaboration, and support. Overall, all the characteristics and strategies discussed in each of the different researchers' theories overlap.

Hallinger (1992) described transformational leadership as all educators collectively working together to improve their campus through the inspiration of their school leader. The decision-making process now involved all stakeholders (Hallinger, 1992). Principals ultimately became "change agents" in order to positively improve schools and student achievement (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, p. 535). Furthermore, Marks and Printy (2003) coined the term "integrated leadership" which is a combination of transformational and shared instructional leadership (p. 392). Marks and Printy (2003) also posited that when integrated leadership was present, "teachers provided evidence of high-quality pedagogy and students performed at high levels on authentic measures of achievement" emphasizing the "synergistic power of leadership" (Marks & Printy, 2003, p. 392-393).

Robinson et al. (2008) found transformational leadership focused more on the collegial relationship between the principal and their staff members and less on the actual work of the principal (p. 665). Robinson et al. (2008) posited transformational principals are "motivational, collaborative, and use interpersonal skills" to "improve teaching and learning" (p. 666). According to Hauserman and Stick (2013), their study of principals evidenced high and low levels of transformational leadership qualities demonstrated where those with high levels built the capacity within their staff members in which teachers were able to demonstrate those skills. "Creating a consistent vision," working "collaboratively with staff," and "professional growth" was also evident within the principals (Hauserman & Stick, 2013, p. 193-194). Collaboration

between principals and teachers was a common practice in which discussion regarding issues were problem solved by all stakeholders (Hauserman & Stick, 2013). Other data show that those with low levels of transformational leadership lacked these qualities and behaviors (Hauserman & Stick, 2013). Involving all stakeholders is a key element in creating a culture and vision for a campus in order for all stakeholders to feel a sense of ownership in seeing that vision through.

### **Instructional Leadership**

Valentine and Prater (2011) stated that as the “effective schools’ movement” commenced, the principal now became the instructional leader (p. 6). Due to the newly formed model of instructional leadership, the elements of what an instructional leader entails were necessary, thus warranting researchers to find answers (Valentine & Prater, 2011). Hallinger (1992) stated instructional leadership came to the forefront in the mid 1980s. The school’s main focus was “teaching and learning” (Marks & Printy, 2003, p. 373), while the principal focused on the intricacies of instructional leadership (Hitt & Tucker, 2016).

The instructional leader was viewed as the primary sources of knowledge of development of the school’s educational programme. The principal was expended to be knowledgeable about curriculum and instruction and able to intervene directly with teacher in making instructional improvements. (Hallinger, 1992, p. 3)

Additionally, Marks and Printy (2003) found that there were two distinctive forms of instructional leadership: conventional and shared. Traditionally, as an instructional leader, the principal ensures and monitors teachers in that a curriculum is followed, students are engaged in learning, and that students show mastery of their learning through assessment. For those teachers who were “competent and empowered,” a shared instructional leadership stance could be pursued (Marks & Printy, 2003, p. 374). Marks and Printy’s (2003) found “shared

instructional leadership” involved a more collaborative effort between the principal and teachers within “curriculum, instruction, and assessment” (p. 392). Poole’s (1995) study on the relationship between principal and teachers described a focus on teacher growth and best practices, while the administrator role was that of facilitator and coach. Hitt and Tucker (2016) stated when staff felt their participation in decision efforts was valued and believed their leader was instructionally prepared, then staff would be “more accepting of the invitation to innovate and transcend” (p. 536). Through Marks and Printy’s (2003) study, their findings suggested a combination of transformational and shared instructional leadership “termed integrated leadership” where teachers showed “high-quality pedagogy” and students succeeded at high levels (p. 392). This study highlighted the “synergistic power of leadership” (Marks & Printy, 2003, p. 393).

Additionally, it has been found that school climate is a key element that instructional leaders must strive to improve as it relates to the success of a student. Sebastian and Allensworth (2012) found through their study there is a small, indirect relationship between principals and instruction (p. 644). However, there was one factor that served as an avenue in between this relationship that does influence student achievement, the school learning climate (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012, p. 644). It is crucial principals create environments that allow risk taking and “high levels of comfort” (O’Donnell & White, 2005, p. 68). Seashore Louis et al. (2010) sought to analyze instructional leadership, shared leadership, and trust as they relate to student achievement (p. 316). What they found was shared and instructional leadership, although both equally essential, did not have a direct impact (Seashore Louis et al., 2010, p. 330). However, coupled with trust and strong ties between educators could be effective (Seashore Louis et al., 2010, p. 330-331).

## **Situational Leadership**

“Different situations call for different styles of leadership” (Johnson & Hackman, 2013, p. 85). This leadership approach clearly defined the many hats educational leaders must wear throughout the day and the different actions they take. Hersey and Blanchard’s Situational Leadership Model was referenced in Johnson and Hackman’s (2013) text and was dependent on two distinct levels of follower readiness, ability/competence, and willingness/commitment. The leader’s actions were also dependent on two levels, tasks, and relationships (Johnson & Hackman, 2013). The leader’s approach depended where the follower was on the readiness continuum and could change as each situation differs from the other (Johnson & Hackman, 2013).

Readiness level one indicated “low ability and low willingness (follower lacks skills and motivation)” which required leaders to be “directive” (Johnson & Hackman, 2013, p. 85). Readiness level two indicated “low ability and high willingness (follower lacks skills but is committed)” and required the leader to take a “coaching” role (Johnson & Hackman, 2013, p. 85). Readiness level three indicated “high ability and low willingness (follower is skilled but lacks motivation)” and required the leader to be “supportive” (Johnson & Hackman, 2013, p. 85-86). Last, readiness level four indicated “high ability and high willingness (follower is skilled and motivated)” and allowed the leader to “delegate” (Johnson & Hackman, 2013, p. 85-86).

Ireh and Bailey (1999) studied 162 superintendents and their use of Situational Leadership using Hersey and Blanchard’s Situational Leadership Model. The results showed 2% of superintendents primarily used the Telling style, 42% Selling, 56% Participating, and none used Delegating as their choice of style (Ireh & Bailey, 1999). Ireh and Bailey (1999) concluded the Selling and Participative situational style choice could be due to the following reasons:

- 1) They have positive trust and confidence in their employees' maturity level, competence, and professional conduct.
- 2) They actively improve the maturity and readiness of employees as they engage in specific tasks such as the implementation of planned change programs.
- 3) They explain decisions and solicit suggestions from school staff.
- 4) They make decisions together with employees and support their efforts toward performing tasks. Probably because participating (supporting) and selling (coaching) styles encourage making decisions together with subordinates and supporting their innovative efforts, they work well with employees in helping them bring their creative and innovative ideas to fruition. (p. 29-30)

This study continues to confirm Hersey and Blanchard's notion there is no single type of style a leader will utilize.

### **Distributed Leadership**

Spillane (2005) proffered that "distributed leadership is first and foremost about leadership practice rather than leaders or their roles or their functions or routines" (p. 144). Furthermore, Spillane (2005) noted that it is the interactions between individuals and not the actions that are most important to understanding the construct of distributed leadership. Similarly, Harris (2012) referred to research evidence showing "effective principals orchestrate the structural and cultural conditions in which distributive leadership is more or less likely. Effective principals play a key role in leadership distribution and are a critical component in building leadership capacity throughout the school" (p. 8). As this leadership approach emerged, the role of the principal changed from being the sole decision maker to one that builds capacity in their followers (Harris, 2012). Principals are now facilitators who provide support for their

staff as they lead the way to change (Harris, 2012). The process of change is now viewed more as a collaboration between leaders and followers; therefore, relationships are a critical piece to this approach (Harris, 2012). “In England, a recent study of school transformation has shown that distributed leadership is a key component of success and highlights how this was associated with higher performance and gains in achievement” (Harris, 2012, p. 9). Harris (2012) concluded that the perception that principals are seen as the single transformational individual of a campus is long gone. Harris (2012) suggested principals alone are unable to transform schools as they now need a network of individuals who can collectively share leadership responsibilities. With regard to crisis leadership and how distributive leadership plays its role, Gigliotti (2020) studied the social construction of crises while interviewing 37 university leaders. Gigliotti (2020) highlighted in his conclusion that “encouraging distributive leadership and cultivating collective awareness of stakeholder perception during all phases of an organizational crisis, senior leaders can invite others into this important and ongoing process” (p. 573).

### **Crisis Leadership**

Several scholars have created frameworks or contexts around crisis leadership. In the literature below, several scholarly perspectives are provided.

#### ***The Boin Framework***

Boin et al. (2010) defined crisis leadership as “recognizing emerging threats, initiating efforts to mitigate them and deal with their consequences, and once the acute crisis period has passed, re-establishing a sense of normalcy” (p. 706). Further exploration yielded extensive work by Boin et al. (2013) on crisis management defined it “as the sum of the activities aimed at minimizing the impact of a crisis” (p. 81). Boin et al. (2013) set forth a crisis management framework based on evidence of public leadership during times of crisis. Setting this framework

and theory allowed for explanations as to how leaders could manage crisis. In evaluation and assessment of the handling of crises, 10 tasks were developed to create the framework (Boin et al., 2013). The first task was early recognition where those involved could foresee an impending crisis (Boin et al., 2013). The ability to foresee a situation can be an important factor in how swiftly the planning and response can be. The second task was sensemaking which was a crucial piece as leaders must make difficult decisions (Boin, et al., 2013). Leaders must be able to “process information” and gain feedback from stakeholders, while also analyzing “potential consequences” (Boin et al., 2013, p. 83).

Task number three referred to making critical decisions (Boin et al., 2013). Leaders are faced with the daunting task of making decisions that should be adaptive rather than technical (Heifetz, 1994; as cited in Boin et al., 2013). The fourth task was orchestrating coordination of parties vertically and horizontally (Boin et al., 2013). The cooperation of those within the organization is vital so leaders must be able to differentiate whether stakeholders need to be influenced or controlled (Boin et al., 2013).

Task number five referred to coupling and decoupling (Boin, et al., 2013). “Decoupling: system managers must try to ‘island’ the problem—allowing the system to ‘fail gracefully’ — while protecting as many core functions as possible” (Boin et al., 2013, p. 84). Boin et al. (2013) posited “crisis managers must figure out which systems should be switched off and which ones should be put on life support” (p. 84). The sixth task was meaning making where “members of that society will look to their leaders to hear how they interpret the situation and what they plan to do to restore a state of normalcy” (Boin et al., 2013, p. 84).

The seventh task was communication (Boin et al., 2013). This task may be one of the most crucial aspects of crisis management and leadership. Effective and clear communication is



important, as miscommunication can lead to additional problems (Boin et al., 2013). Boin et al. (2013) referred to Goidel and Miller's (2009) explanation of differences between regular and crisis communication due to context. Communication "should explain the crisis, its consequences, and what is being done to minimize those consequences" (Boin et al., 2013, p. 85). The eighth task was rendering accountability (Boin et al., 2013). Accepting accountability can be difficult for leaders, but this task is necessary as crises can have long term effects post-crisis (Boin et al., 2013). "Crisis managers therefore have a responsibility to explain what was done before and during the crisis, and why. They should explain what worked and what went wrong during a crisis" (Boin et al., 2013, p. 85).

Task number nine emphasized learning (Boin et al., 2013). Reflection during and post-crisis is an essential element in learning in order to adapt and make adjustments to areas where leaders may have failed (Boin et al., 2013). Finally, the last task was enhancing resilience (Boin et al., 2013). Leaders and organizations must exhibit flexibility and resiliency as one can be prepared to a certain degree for a crisis (Boin et al., 2013). Boin et al.'s (2013) framework for crisis management stands as an evaluation tool for leadership performance during a crisis. These tasks can very well also serve as a checklist of items leaders can use for their crisis preparations.

### ***Crisis Leadership and Preparedness***

While there are many definitions for crisis leadership, Boin et al.'s (2010) definition stated earlier at the beginning of this section was most fitting relating to the literature that was available regarding crisis leadership which provides accounts for crisis preparedness, dealing with the crisis, and the aftermath of a crisis. "Effective crisis leadership entails recognizing emerging threats, initiating efforts to mitigate them and deal with their consequences, and once the acute crisis period has passed, re-establishing a sense of normalcy" (Boin et al., 2010, p.

706). Schools should be “crisis-ready” whether it be “traditional school crises (e.g., inclement weather, discipline issues) and crises that originate elsewhere (e.g., economic crisis, health scares)” (Gainey, 2009, p. 267). Gainey’s (2009) findings from two studies in South Carolina and Georgia focused on crisis preparedness with plans in place for when a crisis is to occur and the importance of two-way communication and relationships with key personnel.

Johnson and Hackman (2013) emphasized “different types of crises call for different responses” and “while crises differ, they all appear to follow the similar pattern of development” (p. 440). Johnson and Hackman (2013) offered their three-stage crisis model of precrisis, crisis event, and postcrisis with competencies taken from Wooten and James (2008). Wooten and James (2008) identified 11 competencies in their five-phase model from their study on business crises during 2000-2006. During the first and second phases, “signal detection” and “crisis prevention,” Wooten and James (2008) identified “sensemaking,” “perspective taking,” “issue selling,” “organizational agility,” and “creativity” as key competencies leaders must tap into (p. 363-367). During the third phase, “containment and damage control,” competencies included “decision making under pressure,” “communicating effectively,” and “risk taking” (Wooten & James, 2008, p. 367-369). Lastly, the fourth and fifth phases were, “business recovery” and “learning and reflection.” Leadership abilities included “promoting organizational resiliency,” “acting with integrity,” and, “learning orientation,” which consists of learning and reflecting to better address a future crisis (Wooten & James, 2008, p. 369-371).

Smith and Riley (2012) posited that during a crisis, school leadership must provide “certainty, engendering hope, engaging a rallying point for effective and efficient effort (both during and after the crisis), and ensuring open and credible communication to and for all affected members of the school community” (p. 57). Smith and Riley (2012) argued “each crisis is

unique, and generally requires significant flexibility in response by the school leader” (p. 65). However, one can learn to be prepared with the critical attributes in anticipation that a crisis occurs (Smith & Riley, 2012). Smith and Riley (2012) summarized nine attributes that were vital for any school leader dealing with a crisis as shown in Figure 3: “(1) Procedural intelligence, (2) Synthesizing skills, (3) Optimism/tenacity, (4) Flexibility, (5) Intuition, (6) Empathy and respect, (7) Creativity/lateral thinking, (8) Decisive decision making, and (9) Communication skills” (p. 68).

Sutherland’s (2017) research on crisis preparedness and trust analyzed descriptions from the school community on their perception of school leadership during crisis response and the level of trust. Sutherland (2017) found two themes within the data, one that shifted the focus on oneself to more collective and one that shifted focus on self-protection to learning, while on a continuum of trust shifting from low to high. Trust was important and must be established before crises happen and as it pertains to the decision making, communication, and collaboration processes (Sutherland, 2017).

School preparedness is an essential element in being proactive and responsive to crisis events. Olinger Steeves et al. (2017) surveyed staff members from six elementary schools in Louisiana regarding their perception on the level of preparedness of a crisis or their experience of a crisis. Olinger Steeves et al. (2017) findings showed schools had plans in place for when a crisis was to occur. However, four of the schools’ plans were not tailored with campus information and were formatted to district plans and lacked certain procedures and pertinent information (Olinger Steeves et al., 2017). The data also suggests that although staff found themselves feeling prepared for a crisis, the lack of information and specificity in crisis plans suggests they may not be as prepared as they believe (Olinger Steeves et al., 2017). Access to

crisis plans was limited as three of the six elementary schools' plans were only known to administration leaving the rest of the staff unfamiliar with procedures (Olinger Steeves et al., 2017). Access to plans, training, and practice were among the recommendations from participants to remedy their feelings of unpreparedness for crises (Olinger Steeves et al., 2017).

Liou (2015) highlights readiness, response, and reflection as the main themes discovered while studying a PK-12 school's crisis preparedness and management of a crisis. Interviews were conducted with participants being given a summary of a case that happened years prior (Liou, 2015). Questions were asked that reflected on the response to the crisis and what worked or did not work (Liou, 2015). Responses to interview questions highlighted the importance of readiness and awareness to signs that a crisis may be imminent (Liou, 2015). Frequent drills can help crisis teams to better plan for situations through feedback (Liou, 2015). Response is the second theme to emerge (Liou, 2015). Communication, flexibility, and collaboration are critical responses to crises (Liou, 2015). Lastly, reflection and debriefing post-crisis can help evaluate the team's response to the crisis and update crisis plans as needed (Liou, 2015). Liou (2015) emphasizes a "one-size-fits all" does not exist in managing a crisis (p. 280).

### ***Higher Education***

In Gigliotti's (2016) qualitative study on higher education leaders, the researcher focused on sensemaking, communication, and reflexivity as a way to glean one's leadership identity. The study allowed for higher education leaders to revisit their own unique crisis situation and make sense of their experience (Gigliotti, 2016). The crisis situations ranged from "acts of campus violence and deadly ice storms to student crimes and faculty protests" (Gigliotti, 2016, p. 190). Gigliotti (2016) emphasizes that although each crisis differed, each situation highlighted the "disruption in the normal stream of experience" (p. 190). From the seven interview

respondents, the four leadership themes that were conveyed were: (1) President as comforter, (2) President as caretaker, (3) President as institutional voice, and (4) President as man of steel (Gigliotti, 2016). The act of self-reflection through the sensemaking process allows leaders to “better navigate the inevitable crises—or opportunities—of tomorrow” (Gigliotti, 2016, p. 198).

Fortunato et al. (2018) studied crisis leadership within higher education. The researchers analyzed the racial incidents that occurred at the University of Missouri in 2015 during the same time of the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri (Fortunato et al., 2018). Fortunato et al. (2018) discovered four areas that were of importance to crisis leadership:

- 1) the development and maintenance of strong relationship with key stakeholder groups;
- 2) the ability to predict, recognize, detect, and address issues that may rise to the level of crisis as defined by stakeholders, particularly the historical context and national issue context variables;
- 3) the skill to craft timely, sensitive messages and effectively utilize interpersonal and mediated channels of message distribution and retrieval, especially social media, so there is adequate information flow to and from institutional leaders allowing them to learn of, understand, and address stakeholders’ concerns as they emerge; and,
- 4) the ability to identify and analyze lessons that can be learned from the situation and implement correction actions to possibly prevent recurrence of a similar crisis type. (p. 516)

Two-way communication continues to be at the forefront of crisis leadership and management (Fortunato et al., 2018).

## *Natural Disasters*

School leadership have also faced crisis situations involving natural disasters. A tornado swept through rural Alabama in April 2011 (Bishop et al., 2015). Bishop et al. (2015) interviewed nine school leaders with four themes arising from the data. Managerial aspects such as organization, planning, responsive efforts, and communication were crucial (Bishop et al., 2015). Key crisis leadership characteristics that were identified in this study were decisiveness, accessibility, caring, and mission-focused (Bishop et al., 2015). In terms of crisis support that was provided after the fact, counseling services were provided as two teachers and one student were among the victims (Bishop et al., 2015). Lastly, preparation was the last of the four themes which the districts lacked as they did not have any type of crisis plan in place before for severe weather (Bishop et al., 2015).

Another deadly tornado event devastated Joplin, Missouri in May 2011 (Goswick et al., 2018). Goswick et al.'s (2018) case study on the Joplin School District identified several key lessons learned by school leadership following a natural disaster event. Not only was the school district left with dealing in the aftermath and destruction buildings and the town, but district leaders also dealt with the traumas with regard to loss of life within their community and school community (Goswick et al., 2018). In an attempt to identify guiding factors which could possibly be used by other K-12 school leadership to prepare and respond to similar events, researchers found planning and preparation, reflection, communication, and having a network of relationships were key in dealing with this crisis (Goswick et al., 2018).

In 2017, Hurricane Harvey and its destruction devastated the Gulf Coast of Texas (Hemmer & Elliff, 2019). Hemmer and Elliff (2019) used Heifetz's (1994) technical and adaptive framework and Weick's (1988, 1995) sensemaking to uncover the experiences and

reflections of seven superintendents in the Coastal Bend area. The study went through the stages before, during, and after Hurricane Harvey hit the Coastal Bend with each of the superintendents (Hemmer & Elliff, 2019). Hemmer and Elliff (2019) organized the qualitative interview data into three key themes, (1) district vulnerability, (2) leadership development, and (3) networks of collaborations and advocacy. Superintendents had to quickly take action on certain situations, with some situations being out of their control (Hemmer & Elliff, 2019). Superintendents were able to use prior experiences and skills to help ease navigating through the crisis as hand, while learning and adapting newly acquired leadership skills (Hemmer & Elliff, 2019). Through pre-existing relationships, superintendents were able to collaborate with each other before, during, and after the crisis, especially when it came to policy regulations (Hemmer & Elliff, 2019). Having a network of relationships was vital as they each were experiencing the same crisis together.

In 2010/2011 five major earthquakes in New Zealand caused principals of several schools to lead during a crisis in which they felt unprepared (Mutch, 2015). Interviews were conducted with principals to illuminate their experiences throughout the disaster (Mutch, 2015). Mutch (2015) found there were three factors that played into their response behaviors and decisions, (1) dispositional, (2) relational, and (3) situational. The dispositional factors that influenced principals concerned their values, beliefs, and expertise (Mutch, 2015). One principal emphasized their use of distributed leadership and how the leadership style was evident in her crisis responses efforts (Mutch, 2015). The relational factors included the “sense of community,” clear communication, and collaborative efforts (Mutch, 2015, p. 192). Lastly, the situational factors referenced how principals responded to the various situations and decision making through flexibility and creativity (Mutch, 2015).

Howat et al. (2012) studied a school district in Louisiana and examined how districts recovered after several hurricanes and discovered four critical themes. The first theme discovered was the importance of communication (Howat et al., 2012). Communication was vital before the storms in order to inform their communities of school closures (Howat et al., 2012). Following the storm, communication was crucial between district personnel and campus principals with regard to continue school closures or reopen as well as communication with city government (Howat et al., 2012). Information such as staff who evacuated or who had damage to their homes was key in determining whether to reopen schools or relocate (Howat et al., 2012). Resolving tensions was the second theme discovered (Howat et al., 2012). There was great disagreement on whether to resume as normal or get the community back on its feet first (Howat et al., 2012). The third theme that arose was coordinating with outside services (Howat et al., 2012). Services from organizations and agencies were essential in aiding the community (Howat et al., 2012). Supplies, counseling services, mental health support, and goods were donated to get people back on their feet (Howat et al., 2012). Lastly, learning from their experiences with Hurricane Katrina and Rita in 2005 helped them prepare for the next disaster, Hurricane Gustav and Ike in 2008 (Howat et al., 2012). Improved communication efforts, back up of important school data and records, and inventory of items were a few that were adjusted and enhanced (Howat et al., 2012).

### ***School Shootings***

Brown's (2018) case study described the events that occurred at a middle school in a rural southern town. The school shooting took the lives of four students, a teacher, and injured 10 others (Brown, 2018). A crisis such as this, requires quick response and decision making as it is occurring as well as providing support post-crisis (Brown, 2018). Brown (2018) emphasizes



learning from others' past experiences as it helps other school leaders prepare for crisis events. Brown (2018) suggests ensuring campuses have a crisis plan in place, along with a crisis planning team, crisis management team, and threat assessment team. Brown (2018) also highlights the need for decision making during the crisis. A series of questions should be asked to assess the threat level (Brown, 2018). Lastly, Brown (2018) stressed the need for support post crisis and recovery efforts.

### ***COVID-19***

Yukl and Mahsud (2010) posited “flexible and adaptive leadership is important when unusual events disrupt the work or create an immediate problem that requires leader’s attention” (p. 85). Quick and decisive action took place in Barbados and Canada when the first few COVID-19 cases were identified with the immediate response of the switch to online learning (Marshall et al., 2020). Training was set for staff and students to utilize Blackboard Collaborate and eLearning (Marshall et al., 2020). Other policies and protocols were set in place for online assessments and deferment of classes to aid students (Marshall et al., 2020). The four vital leadership qualities that were examined in this study and that are critical for any educational leader during a time of crisis are: (1) providing clear direction, (2) communicating effectively, (3) working collaboratively, and (4) engaging in adaptive leadership (Marshall et al., 2020). Marshall et al. (2020) posited the most important message educational leaders must communicate is that “a culture of change consists of great rapidity and non-linearity, on the one hand, and equally great potential for creative break-throughs on the other” (p. 35). Setting up a group of stakeholders where a new vision can be created and a needs assessment can be used to develop new goals and objectives through collaboration is key (Marshall et al., 2020).

Brelsford et al. (2020) gathered reflections from 33 teachers in southwest Texas school districts in an effort to review their school leadership's actions during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The three main themes were communication, accountability, and interpersonal relationships as they highlighted what worked and did not work (Brelsford et al., 2020). Reflections emphasized the success of weekly meetings with school leadership in communicative efforts to disseminate information (Brelsford et al., 2020). What was also evident for some districts was the lack of planning and being "reactive rather than proactive" and a lack of clear communication (Brelsford et al., 2020, p. 14). Regarding accountability, there was great flexibility to student grades and completion of assignments (Brelsford et al., 2020). With that being said, there were also districts that were "inflexible and unrealistic" continuing with the same expectations as in-person learning, a lack of technology, and students with special services who did not receive support (Brelsford et al., 2020, p. 16). Lastly, trust, respect, and "family" oriented relationships were exhibited by school leadership (Brelsford et al., 2020, p. 18). While on the other hand, some saw a lack of value and care from their principals (Brelsford et al., 2020). The key takeaways from this reflective article are for administrators to have a plan in place, establish relationships with everyone, provide much needed resources, and communicate clearly and effectively (Brelsford et al., 2020).

Harris's (2020) article regarding crisis leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic focused on the effects and leadership practices that have become increasingly evident in order to respond to the crisis and effectively continue to operate schools. Distributive leadership has come to the forefront during this time as its principles of "capacity building" of others and "collective management" are a necessity (Harris, 2020). Harris (2020) emphasized the collective

work educators are engaging in currently during this global crisis and how distributed leadership is emerging with the development of a “new chapter in educational leadership” (p. 325).

During April and August 2020, Kaul et al. (2020) interviewed principals from 19 states to identify the challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and how they addressed those situations. One thing is for sure, “they understood that their students and staff had to feel physically and psychologically safe before they would be successful in the classroom” (Kaul et al., 2020). Four themes emerged from interview data: “(1) a priority of basic needs, (2) technological needs to access teaching and learning, (3) the need for consistent, multimodal modes of communication, and (4) an instructional focus on social and emotional learning” (Kaul et al., 2020). First, the well-being of staff, students, and their families was critical (Kaul et al., 2020). Ensuring everyone was safe was priority number one (Kaul et al., 2020). Schools did face inabilities to make contact with a large number of their student populations especially those with high mobility rates (Kaul et al., 2020). Basic necessities such as money for rent and food were provided by some principals and collaborative efforts with non-profits aided some of these efforts (Kaul et al., 2020). Secondly, access to technology was a major problem highlighting the inequities in some communities (Kaul et al., 2020). Principals distributed technology to their students and searched for available hotspots and internet providers that would provide discounts for families (Kaul et al., 2020). Teachers were also part of this need as some also lacked internet service (Kaul et al., 2020). Some districts were not prepared which delayed online instruction (Kaul et al., 2020). Third, communicating to all stakeholders via phone, text, and newsletters (Kaul et al., 2020). However, with so much information changing daily, making videos, and utilizing social media tools became a new go to communication tool (Kaul et al., 2020). Lastly, teachers had to adjust and focus on social emotional learning (Kaul et al., 2020). One principal

described a “10-minute connection with every child, every family, every day” (Kaul et al., 2020, p. 6). However, other principals described the difficulties when it came to those learning remotely (Kaul et al., 2020). Kaul et al. (2020) discovered “in line with prior research on school leadership, principals who led through the onset of the pandemic recalled enormous responsibilities that extended far beyond the strictly ‘academic’ work of schools” (p. 6). A culture of trust was an important piece for principals to build within their network (Kaul et al., 2020).

Reyes-Guerra et al. (2021) brought stories and experiences of principals from the start of the pandemic, March 2020, to the end of the 2020-2021 school year. The three themes that emerged were “the participants drew upon their individual reservoirs of shared leader qualities, they tapped into their schools’ strengths, and they made inter-school connections” (Reyes-Guerra, 2021, p. 4). Within tapping into their capacity as a leader, principals had to be great communicators with their staff and the community (Reyes-Guerra, 2021). Ensuring information was disseminated to staff and parents of the constant change and checking in on families personally (Reyes-Guerra, 2021). They also had to lead with great flexibility, creativity, and care, especially when information was constantly changing from one second to the next (Reyes-Guerra, 2021). To reach their students who weren’t learning or had trouble at home, principals were creative in how to aid their students (Reyes-Guerra, 2021). Principals also had to bend the rules and shift their priorities regarding policies and expectations of their students (Reyes-Guerra, 2021). Resiliency was key for principals during this time (Reyes-Guerra, 2021). Reflection on the current crisis helped principals manage forward (Reyes-Guerra, 2021). School strengths was the second theme that emerged where principals shared having a strong school community was essential because much of the outside community rely on schools for support

(Reyes-Guerra, 2021). Inequities were heightened during the pandemic where principals of Title-I campuses experienced more struggles and needs than their counterparts (Reyes-Guerra, 2021). People with expertise in curriculum, instruction, and technology were also key factors in the success and movement towards online learning (Reyes-Guerra, 2021). The last theme, inter-school connections, focused on the team of principals and district directors and the collaboration between them all that helped them get through the first phase of the pandemic (Reyes-Guerra, 2021).

### **Equity and Social Justice**

If there is anything we have learned from this pandemic and our schools, it is the inequities within our school systems and the need for social justice within our schools. “Equity requires that every student be supported with the resources necessary to successfully access what is needed to learn and thrive in an educational setting” (McLeod & Dulskey, 2021, p. 9). Theoharis (2008) found three characteristics of social justice principals that are vital to their work: “arrogance and humility, leading with intense visionary passion, and maintaining a tenacious commitment to her or his vision of social justice while nurturing and empowering their staff” (p. 12). A combined use of all three characteristics is what the studied principals embodied and what make them social justice principals (Theoharis, 2008).

The arrogance means that these principals have a headstrong belief that they are right; they know what is best, and they feel they are the ones needed to lead toward that vision. The humility comes from their continual self-doubt of their abilities and knowledge, their willingness to admit mistakes both publicly and privately, and their questioning whether they are doing any good in their positions. (Theoharis, 2008, p. 13)

Theoharis (2008) posited that passionate and visionary leaders evidence “caring so deeply, having such commitment, and maintaining sincere enthusiasm about this work that there is little separation between the leadership and the leader” (p. 16). These leaders “seek to change people’s beliefs and values from self-centered to other centered” (Theoharis, 2008, p. 16). Lastly, social justice leaders have a “fierce commitment to their vision of social justice” (Theoharis, 2008, p. 17).

School districts across the city, state, country, and world, differed in terms of readiness of resources to provide their students. The needs of students varied across schools and districts and the pandemic simply heightened those inequities, especially for economically disadvantaged and minorities. McLeod and Dulsky (2021) described the priorities of educators at the beginning of the pandemic being students’ basic needs of food security, well-being, and lack of access to technology and Internet. Reyes-Guerra (2021) found principals who of Title-I schools struggled more than those of non-Title-I schools in terms of distributing laptops to students in need. Reyes-Guerra (2021) also suggest “going back to old ways is no longer an option, a call to action for equity is the next logical step for system consideration, as was echoed by our participating principals” (p. 13). Furthermore, preparedness for the next phases of the COVID-19 pandemic will be crucial (Reyes-Guerra, 2021). Regardless of the overwhelming issues of equity and access of many students, their school leaders continued their best to support their students as best they could (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021).

Ladson-Billings (2021) posited that a “hard re-set” to our education system and learning as opposed to going “back to normal” before the pandemic (p. 68). The inequities and injustices of especially low socio-economically disadvantaged students must be addressed, and we must rethink the current approach to “culturally relevant pedagogy” (Ladson-Billings, 2021,

p. 71-72). The three aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy include student learning, cultural competence, and socio-political consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Ladson-Billings (2021) suggested a “re-set around technology, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and parent/community engagement that will support and promote students’ culture” (p. 73).

At the beginning of the pandemic, the use of online learning was an option for most districts, with some providing the technology and resources to their students (Ladson-Billings, 2021). However, some still did not have access to the Internet even if they had a device (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Ensuring students have access to technology and Internet is a must to re-set and ensure equity across the board (Ladson-Billings, 2021). A change in the curriculum is the second aspect to re-set to “reflect the culture of our students” (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 73). This aspect is reflective on the anti-Black pandemic of 2020 in which Ladson-Billings (2021) addressed. To re-set the pedagogy, “teachers must move beyond lectures and telling as teaching” (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 74). This is similar to Freire’s (2000) concept of the banking system where teachers fill students’ minds with information, a traditional approach to teaching. “Authentic discussion and debate strategies, cooperative grouping, and small group activities” (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 74) are all ways teachers can deliver the curriculum in a way that stimulates students’ critical thinking, problem solving, which allows students to collaboratively learn from each other.

In terms of assessment, high stakes testing took a halt as the pandemic emerged, allowing states to cancel tests for the academic school year (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Ladson-Billings (2021) envisioned a re-set for assessments involving assessing students based on what they know and continue to have “varied and regular formative assessment to determine how well students are understanding what they are taught, and an end of the year assessment would be keyed to

what was actually taught in their classrooms” (p. 74). These assessments should be “diagnostic” and not “punitive” as a way for teachers to monitor and adjust their curriculum and delivery of lessons (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 74). Lastly, when the pandemic emerged, for the lower grade levels, the level of involvement of parents in their child’s learning surfaced requiring them to help with online or remote learning (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Ladson-Billings (2021) suggests “in a re-set environment parents will occupy a central role in teaching and learning” (p. 75).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought many “unanticipated consequences” (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 75). High school students choosing more hours at their part-time jobs instead of remote learning, no access to technology or Internet, and mental health issues (Ladson-Billings, 2021). The pandemic created feelings of isolation, no access to food and safety, and structure (Ladson-Billings, 2021). For teachers, most were not prepared for online instruction and the pandemic forced them to learn the technology and re-think their delivery (Ladson-Billings, 2021). In return, teachers are now more equipped with utilizing the technology within the classroom.

### **Texas School Safety Center – School Safety and Security Standards**

While scholars the world over, began to address the pandemic crisis, state agencies were called upon to provide immediate guidance to schools and communities. Following is guidance from the Texas School Safety Center as an example. The Texas School Safety Center provides guidance for schools on general emergency and crisis management plans and preventive measures for any normal type of crisis event. This information relates to the importance of school campuses being crisis ready with a plan and how to mitigate situations, a crucial element of crisis leadership. With the effects of COVID-19 within schools as they reopen, a toolkit was provided as a means to better support those who enter schools.



## **Four Phases of Emergency Management**

The Texas School Safety Center provided a set of standards called the Texas Unified School Safety and Security Standards as a guide for school districts when they are to develop and implement an emergency management program (Texas School Safety Center, 2021). There are four phases the standards are grouped by: mitigation/prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery (Texas School Safety Center, 2021). These set of criteria ensure the safety of students, staff, and visitors should an emergency/crisis occur. The mitigation/prevention phase is to limit lives lost or property damage from the threat (Texas School Safety Center, 2021). The preparedness phase is having plans in place to be able to respond to the threat (Texas School Safety Center, 2021). Phase three is to use those emergency plans when in a crisis (Texas School Safety Center, 2021). Finally, phase four is to have supports in place to return to some normality (Texas School Safety Center, 2021). Within each of the four phases are standards tied to the respective phase (Texas School Safety Center, 2021).

## **COVID-19 and Mental Health Consideration Amid Reintegration to School**

Most recently, the Texas School Safety Center included a toolkit to how schools can transition and support staff, students, and parents impacted by the pandemic with mental health issues (Texas School Safety Center, 2021). As students transition back to school, some will experience difficulties and schools will need to provide supports. Due to COVID-19, students and families have experienced additional stressors such as the inability to provide basic needs, isolation, and increased mental or physical health concerns (Texas School Safety Center, 2021). Mental health issues were revealed for those who experienced Hurricane Harvey (Texas School Safety Center, 2021). The topics included in the toolkit include: (1) impact of stress and trauma, (2) re-engaging disconnected students, (3) abuse, neglect, and domestic violence, (4) bullying in

the classroom, (5) child and mental health awareness, (6) non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI), (7) substance use, and (8) developing resiliency (Texas School Safety Center, 2021).

### **Contribution of the Study**

This study will contribute to the existing literature and knowledge not only on crisis leadership, but crisis leadership during a pandemic. This study depicts how campus principal's traditional leadership approaches were affected or effective, identify which leadership practices were most utilized during the pandemic, and highlight the challenges principals faced during this crisis and how they managed situations they came across during the time. Due to the sample criterion for participants, one participant experienced a shooting on campus and a nearby jail escape while three others experienced Hurricane Harvey as an administrator and provided further insight comparing their previous crises' experiences and identifying any additional or updated key strategies that helped them be successful in this new crisis.

Overall, this literature requires leaders to draw upon a multitude of skillsets as noted across the literature in order to address times of crisis past and future. Moreover, this study is anticipated to contribute to the leadership literature informing the practice of principals and school leaders as it relates to future crises to provide a "lessons learned" aspect to the data collected as well as implications for the future.

## CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

### **Introduction**

This section describes the research methodology for this narrative case study regarding crisis leadership of principals during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. This qualitative approach allowed for the researcher to highlight the stories and lived experiences of K-12 principals during the COVID-19 pandemic and how they managed the crisis in their schools. This section discusses the research design, methodology including instrumentation, participants, procedures, as well as data analysis, and trustworthiness and credibility.

Providing context is important in qualitative inquiry. It provides “an account of some event or combination of events that occurred in the past, to provide background and context” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 165). The context and background of this study involves the world health crisis, COVID-19. Many aspects of life have been affected with the education system being one of them concerning this research study. Instruction has been affected and student achievement gaps are widening and will continue to exist for years to come due to a halt in instruction when the pandemic began as well as the sporadic instruction students received as many were still not back face to face during the 2020-2021 school year. Principals were challenged with the task of continuing business as usual at the same time dealing and managing the pandemic crisis in their communities.

### **Research Questions**

As there was limited research on crisis leadership in terms of context, a health crisis, a qualitative narrative study was used to highlight the lived experiences of K-12 principals. The questions developed for this research study uncovered strategies used to deal with crisis

management and leadership, as well as traditional leadership approaches that were also effective during the crisis. The overarching research question for this study was:

What are the perceptions of K-12 principals regarding their leadership experience relative to the pandemic?

### **Research Design**

A qualitative narrative case study approach (Patton, 2015) to this research study was best fitting due to the purpose of the study which was to glean the perspectives and lived experiences of K-12 principals during the COVID-19 crisis. In qualitative research, the best setting for a study to take place is in the natural setting as “human actions are significantly influenced by the setting in which they occur and that one should therefore study that behavior in those real-life natural settings” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 101). This research study involved in-depth interviews with a purposeful sample (Patton, 2015) of principals via Zoom while the participant was at their respective campuses or in their home office, a place that was natural for them. Through these in-depth interviews the researcher uncovered, illuminated, and made meaning from the participants responses and behaviors (Patton, 2015). Marshall and Rossman (2016) emphasized research in the natural setting is crucial for the researcher to glean a better perspective of the inquiry.

In qualitative research, the four most common methods used to collect qualitative data are “(1) participating in the setting, (2) observing directly, (3) interviewing in depth, and (4) analyzing documents and material culture” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 141). In this study, in-depth interviews “captured the deep meaning of experience in the participants’ own words” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 102). Patton (2015) established three types of interviews: informal, guided, and open-ended with the most used type being the guided interview where

structure is more evident. A semi-structured open-ended question format was used to guide the interviews (Bernard, 2006). As the interview and conversation flowed, additional questions were asked pertaining to a response from the participant that could provide insight into another realm. As a researcher, one must ensure to be open to flexibility in the research design of the study as it can evolve at any moment with the researcher “often making decisions in the field during the unfolding, cascading, rolling, and emerging” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 100).

## **Research Methodology**

### **Instrumentation**

It was important for the researcher to determine their role relative to participating within the setting. Whichever of the two, “full participant” or “complete observer,” the researcher had to determine how best to engage directly with participants and the setting to “build and sustain relationships” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 119). For this research study, the researcher was a “complete observer” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 119). Toma (2000) suggested good subjective qualitative data comes from the connections and relationships between researcher and participant where “rich description of contexts and experiences” can emerge (p. 177).

The instrumentation used for this qualitative narrative case study was the “human instrument” as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). There was no other instrument that would understand the participant’s words, meanings, and interactions other than the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As the sole research instrument, the researcher was careful and mindful to “adopting different lenses, filters, and angles as we view social life so as to discover new perceptions and cognitions about the facet of the world we are researching” (Saldana, 2015, p. 4). Marshall and Rossman (2016) concluded researchers must reflect on his or her own identity, voice, and values as these are foundations that can influence the study as “useful” or as “harmful

bias” (p. 117). As a current assistant principal and school leader, the researcher brought her own perspective into the study as the researcher has knowledge in educational administration and experience during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Making note of what may or may not have worked during the interview or observation and remind themselves of what to take into account when analyzing the data if any feelings, assumptions, or biases may have occurred while gathering the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This was done through peer debriefing with a colleague and reflecting on how interviews were conducted, how they went, and the data gathered (Erlandson et al., 1993b)

### **Participants**

One of the most vital decisions the researcher made for this study was the sample selection as credibility and trustworthiness would be defined by the results yielded (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Once the researcher defined the phenomenon of study as well as the site and population, then the researcher was able to determine the sample selection (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Gathering the sample was complex in light of challenges to access to principals who were still employed that had experienced Hurricane Harvey as well as the pandemic, thus why the criterion was amended to cast a wider net of participants. The researcher initially emailed six principals in the areas Hurricane Harvey affected, with no replies. The IRB was amended to change and take out the criterion of being a Hurricane Harvey principal. However, with the six participants that did agree to volunteer in the study, there were three that had experienced Hurricane Harvey and an additional participant that had experienced a school shooting to provide insight into having experienced a crisis prior to COVID-19. The study must “include a sample with reasonable variation in the phenomenon, settings, or people” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 109). The researcher searched for participants of all three K-12 levels to get

different aspects of the students they serve. The participants ranged vastly in terms of administrative experience as well.

Although there are many definitions of a case study, most agree case studies focus on “the centrality of contextualized deep understanding” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 19). Case studies provide rich, detailed information on the person, event, culture, etc. Researchers must ensure to carefully select cases. The purposeful sampling strategy to be used for this research study was criterion-based case selection (Patton, 2015).

As discussed earlier in Chapter I, purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015) was utilized to carefully select a sample of six K-12 principals in the South Texas region that dealt or currently dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Patton (2015) emphasized the use of purposeful sampling through information-rich cases as researchers “can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (p. 53). The criterion for this sample included former or current K-12 principals at a B-rated (or better) campus that services a great number of low-socioeconomic disadvantaged students. Due to the cancellation of STAAR testing and accountability measures for the 2019-2020 school year, the Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR) results are from the 2019-2020 school year which are based on the 2018-2019 school year (Texas Education Agency, 2021). It was important to capture these leaders’ experiences as to how they managed the COVID-19 crisis on their campuses and share perceptions of capacity-building they have experienced as leaders working through these crises.

## **Procedures**

This qualitative research study was semi-structured with 12 open-ended questions based on the literature pertaining to traditional as well as crisis leadership (Bernard, 2006). The average length of the interviews was between 45 minutes and one hour. The interviews took

place in the natural setting of the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). All interviews took place virtually via Zoom and were recorded through Zoom. Interviews were also recorded using the Otter application on the researcher's cell phone which allowed to record and transcribe the voice recordings. The interviews were then transcribed to a Word document. A pseudonym was established for the participant and the campus/district they worked for to preserve their identity. The researcher listened to the recording and adjusted to ensure the transcription was accurate to participant responses. Final transcriptions were sent to the participants for their final approval and edits. An excel document was utilized to then begin organizing the data into codes, themes, and patterns (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Saldana, 2016). Recordings will only be kept for a period of three years and will then be deleted. Ensuring the participant knew this information was also a crucial piece ensuring trustworthiness between the researcher and participant.

### **Data Analysis**

Transcription of the interviews were transferred to a Word document. The researcher listened to the recordings and made adjustments to ensure the transcription was accurate to participant responses. To ensure the researcher was correct in the transcription of the participant responses, the researcher sent a final copy to the participant for their approval and if any edits needed to have been made. An excel document was utilized to begin organizing the data into codes, themes, and patterns (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Saldana, 2016). "Coding is the transitional process between data collection and more extensive data analysis" (Saldana, 2016, p. 5). Saldana (2016) interpreted coding as "to organize and group similarly coded data into categories or 'families' because they share some characteristic—the beginning of a pattern" (p. 9).



A first cycle of coding included descriptive coding (Saldana, 2016). “Descriptive Coding summarizes in a word or short phrase – most often a noun – the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data” (Saldana, 2016, p. 102). The researcher began by going line by line on the Word transcription and copy/pasted each sentence or paragraph onto the Excel sheet that went together so a descriptive code could be given for each response. The researcher continued this for each of the participants interview transcriptions. The researcher went through once again after reading and re-reading the data to ensure that descriptive code went with the response. Marshall and Rossman (2016) emphasized the importance and time consumption of organizing the data. After doing so, the researcher immersed themselves into the data by reading and re-reading the data over and over so that no detail is overlooked by which then the researcher began coding the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The Excel sheet was sorted based on descriptive codes. Once the first cycle of coding was complete, the researcher debriefed with a peer/colleague to verify some of the initial descriptive codes. Then began the second cycle of coding of identifying overarching themes and patterns based on the most prominent codes appearing the most within the data and others that were not as prominent yet deemed important for future research were included. Themes were established with the aid of a colleague/peer. After the first cycle of coding, a second cycle of coding used was pattern coding (Saldana, 2016). “Pattern coding, as a second cycle method, is a way of grouping those summaries into smaller number of categories, themes, or concepts” (Saldana, 2016, p. 236). “Pattern codes are explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation” (Saldana, 2016, p. 236). Concepts and terms from Boin et al.’s (2013) framework as well as crisis and traditional leadership theories were also utilized to help organize data into themes. Marshall and Rossman (2016) referred to “‘telling the story,’ interpretation brings

meaning and coherence to the themes, patterns, and categories, developing linkages and a story line that makes sense and is engaging to read” (p. 228).

Patton (2015) described inductive analysis as “generating new concepts, explanation, results, and/or theories from the specific data of a qualitative study” (p. 541). “How you perceive and interpret what is happening in the data depends on what type of filter covers that lens and from which angle you view the phenomenon” (Saldana, 2016, p. 7-8). Saldana (2015) used the five r’s when looking for patterns within the data, “routines, rules, rituals, roles, and relationships” (p. 29). After identifying these “patterned activities” researchers applied meaning to them (Saldana, 2015, p. 30). It is “invaluable for generating the unusual insights that move the analysis from the mundane and obvious to the creative” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 221).

Saldana (2015) emphasized being empathic was to “put ourselves into our participants’ shoes and seeing life through their eyes” and “to connect deeply with their plight” (p. 85). Establishing rapport and building relationships with participants was vital when collecting research data as “most participants detect and reject insincere, inauthentic people” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 124). The researcher utilized her skills in building trusting relationships and sensitivity towards her participants during the interviews so that she could be “an active, patient, and thoughtful listener, and have an empathic understanding of and profound respect for the perspectives of others” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 124). The researcher sought to show the participants that she was fully present and engaged in the study. To accomplish this, the researcher sought to ease the participants’ guard and gain their trust by informing them about what the study is and what they plan to learn from it, as well as inform them of the researcher’s role and participation during observations and interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). However, it was not enough to simply build relationships, the researcher was prepared to deal

with complications that may arise within those relationships (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) including participants who did not respond to questions with much depth. The researcher then had to ask additional questions to get the conversation going or to elaborate.

Researchers must allow themselves to be flexible throughout the research process as many things emerge. Saldana (2015) emphasized that the researcher must be “open to continual revision of ideas in progress” (p. 26). Change was acknowledged as inevitable, and the researcher sought to adapt and be mindful of those changes to the system’s dynamics. Saldana (2016) described this approach as “making it better” (p. 26). Marshall and Rossman (2016) encouraged researchers to be flexible in the design with also having the “right to change the implementation plan during data collection” (p. 100).

### **Trustworthiness and Credibility**

The researcher established trustworthiness and credibility through various techniques. Trust was built first by the researcher with the participant by explaining the study, interview process, the recording process of keeping files for three years, and ensuring their identity and campus information would be changed using a pseudonym. This all helped establish trustworthiness. Erlandson et al. (1993a) stated “trustworthiness is established in a naturalistic inquiry using techniques that provide truth value through credibility, applicability through transferability, consistency through dependability, and neutrality through confirmability (p. 132). “Credibility needs to be established with the individuals and groups who have supplied data for the inquiry” (Erlandson et al., 1993b, p. 30).

Use of such strategies such as peer debriefing and member checking during and post-interview were utilized to establish credibility (Erlandson et al., 1993b). Member checking (Erlandson et al., 1993b) was used during the interview, after hearing a response from the

participant, the researcher would ask clarifying questions to ensure their response is what they meant. Participants would confirm the researcher heard them correctly and would sometimes elaborate with additional information for clarification or elaboration. When interviews were completed and the researcher was then reviewing the data, some audio recordings were not as clear, therefore communication was sent via email or text to confirm their responses as well. Once interviews transcripts were completed, the transcript was sent to participants individually via email for their approval or verification. Peer debriefing (Erlandson et al., 1993b) was used throughout the data collection process with a colleague/peer regarding the data that was collected. During the interview phase, the researcher would debrief with a colleague/peer on the data being collected in participant responses. Furthermore, after all data were collected from all interviews and the first cycle of coding had been completed, the researcher debriefed once again with the colleague/peer to verify some responses and their assigned descriptive code. The overarching themes and patterns based on the prominent codes that appeared in the data were then established with the aid of the colleague/peer.

### **Summary of Methodology**

The purpose of this chapter was to outline the research methodology that was used for this qualitative narrative case study to answer the three overarching research questions posed in this section. The research design, instrumentation, procedures, participants, data collection and analysis, and trustworthiness and credibility of the study were discussed in detail. The participants of this research study contributed and shared their lived experiences of managing the COVID-19 pandemic crisis within their schools and illuminated the challenges they faced. Following this section is Chapter IV, which highlights the findings and overarching as well as supporting themes that emerged through the data analysis.

## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to glean the experiences of K-12 principals in South Texas school districts during the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of crisis leadership as well as more traditional leadership styles that principals embrace, and how the act of leadership was transformed by the pandemic. This study is significant as the pandemic crisis in schools was the first of its kind, in some ways not only matching, but surpassing the challenges that other crises that have presented and been researched. This chapter includes the results of the narrative case study conducted to answer the overarching research question:

What are the perceptions of K-12 principals regarding their leadership experience relative to the pandemic?

This chapter also includes the background information of the participants from the purposeful sample (Patton, 2015) used in this study, while also providing a table to summarize this information. The themes that were uncovered in data analysis process are discussed in detail in this chapter as well as both direct quotes as well as vignettes from the individual interviews from which themes were derived but that also which support validation of those themes.

### **Participant Criteria**

The requirements for participation in this study were:

- (1) Be or have been a campus principal in a K-12 public school in the South Texas region during the COVID-19 pandemic
- (2) Be or have been a principal at an “A” or “B” rated campus in 2019
- (3) Be at least 18 years of age or older.

- (4) Be from a campus that serves a high percentage of low socio-economic students as specified by Texas Education Agency (TEA).

Six participants were interviewed individually for this study. The sample consisted of one elementary principal, two middle school principals, and three high school principals to gauge well-rounded experiences from all levels of K-12 schools during the pandemic. One participant was a former principal, although having experienced the COVID-19 pandemic when she was a sitting principal. The experience of the participants ranged from six to 21 years of administrative experience. All participant names and school/district names have been changed and provided pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants to establish trustworthiness. Table one below provides a summary of information regarding participants in this study.

**Table 1**

*Participant Personal and Professional Information*

| <b>Participant</b>     | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Ethnicity</b> | <b>ES, MS, HS</b> | <b>Campus Rating</b> | <b>Years of Admin Experience</b> | <b>Experienced Hurricane Harvey</b> |
|------------------------|---------------|------------------|-------------------|----------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Dr. Alma Diaz-Lopez    | Female        | Hispanic         | ES                | B                    | 21                               | no                                  |
| Dr. Mary Franco        | Female        | Hispanic         | HS                | A                    | 6                                | yes                                 |
| Mrs. Stephanie Jones   | Female        | White            | MS                | A                    | 14                               | yes                                 |
| Dr. Roberto Martinez   | Male          | Hispanic         | HS                | B                    | 11                               | yes                                 |
| Mrs. Christine Tyler   | Female        | Hispanic/Black   | HS                | B                    | 7                                | no                                  |
| Mrs. Sandra Villarreal | Female        | Hispanic         | MS                | B                    | 15                               | no                                  |

## **Participants**

### **Stephanie Jones, Rose Middle School, Jackson ISD**

Mrs. Jones has 20 years of experience in education and 14 years as an administrator. She began her career as an elementary school teacher and then taught middle school. She became a middle school assistant principal for four years and then was principal for 10 years. She has always worked at Title I campuses throughout her career. After the first full year of COVID-19 in schools, 2020-2021, she decided it was time for a change and is currently working for the Education Service Center in her region. Mrs. Jones said,

My daughter graduated from high school and so I started venturing out looking for something new and different. And I had already survived Hurricane Harvey and survived the pandemic long enough that it was time for something different, but still wanted to do something in education.

### **Christine Tyler, Billings High School, Billings CISD**

Mrs. Tyler has 14 years of education experience and seven years as an administrator. She began her career as a special education teacher and coach for volleyball, basketball, and track for five years. After those five years, she became the middle school counselor at her same school and continued for about three years. She then wanted to pursue leadership and became an assistant principal for three years. She was able to move into the principal position in the middle of the year after the principal retired and finished out the school year. The past two years she has been the high school principal.

### **Sandra Villarreal, Chula Vista Middle School, Fresno ISD**

Mrs. Villarreal has 20 years of experience in education and 15 years administrative experience. She was a teacher for five years who was highly involved as grade team leader. She

became an assistant principal thereafter and filled a dual role of assistant principal and curriculum assistant. She spent five years as an assistant principal and then principal for five years. She moved to her current district and has been a principal there for five years. She also shared that she is married with two children, and now welcomes her first grandchild. Mrs. Villarreal said she is, “so very actively involved in their lives and in my work life, and I, I do my best to balance both.”

**Dr. Alma Diaz-Lopez, Forest Hills Elementary, Newport ISD**

Dr. Diaz-Lopez has over 30 years of experience in education ranging from children aged three years old to college students. She was a teacher for five years, four years implementing a school wide program from John Hopkins University, and 21 years of administrative experience as assistant principal and principal. She is the current principal at an elementary school that serves students pre-K through fifth grade, while also being a professor at the university in her area. Dr. Diaz-Lopez said, “And so I love everything having to do with teaching and learning. And I found my niche, and this is what I do on a daily basis.”

**Dr. Mary Franco, New Rock Early College High School, New Rock ISD**

Dr. Franco is in her 18<sup>th</sup> year of education, six years experienced as an administrator, and currently is the new principal at the high school. She began as a math teacher, counselor, assistant principal for three years, and then was a middle school principal for two years up until her current position. She recently finished her doctoral program and passed her superintendent exam. She has three children and four dogs.

**Dr. Roberto Martinez, Oceanview High School, Oceanview ISD**

Dr. Martinez is in his 23<sup>rd</sup> year of education. He began as a band director for about 12 years and is now going on his 11<sup>th</sup> year in administration. He has been an assistant principal at



5A, 4A, and 3A high schools and principal at a 2A and now a 3A high school. He is married with a daughter in high school. Dr. Martinez said,

And so the biggest thing is, biggest - I mean, for me, it's been the kids are kids. And so, the biggest thing is, is how do you get them to get to do even more? How do you get your staff to really help the child and making sure that the child is the reason we're here.

### **Data/Themes/Patterns**

After having interviewed the participants in this study, some codes and themes were more frequently referenced than others. Some codes were not as common across all participant experiences although could possibly lead to further studies. The following is a discussion and evidence of the main codes and themes that emerged from interview data. There are a total of five main themes that emerged through analysis of the participant data: (1) crisis informs leadership, (2) crisis reshapes leadership approaches, (3) crisis hones leadership skills, (4) crisis required addressing social emotional realm, and (5) crisis reshapes instruction.

#### **Crisis Informs Leadership**

The crisis informs leadership theme emerged across the participant responses as they spoke about various past experiences with other crises as well as their current experiences during COVID-19 thus helping inform their outlook on leadership during the pandemic. The actual experiences of participants as well as insight about their preparation and planning were key components that contributed to how crisis informed leadership during COVID-19.

**Figure 1**

*Crisis Informs Leadership*



***Crisis Events and Experiences***

Two out of six participants spoke about the COVID-19 illnesses and deaths that affected their campuses or personal lives. Mrs. Jones was thankful that most of the COVID-19 illnesses experienced by her staff were very mild. However, in August is when the area saw an uptick in more and severe cases, the town she worked in was so small, the loss of 15 people in the community was significant. She also experienced the death of one of her best friends and counselor at her previous campus. She said, “it was a challenge for us, because she is also my best friend. So, it was very difficult, you know, like, I can talk about it today. And you know, some days, I can’t talk about it.” She shared that the campus staff often asked specifically for Mrs. Jones instead of district crisis counselors.

They wanted a familiar face. They wanted someone that they could just visit with that knew Jessica that knew the campus, you know, and things like that, because they did bring people in, but they didn't want to talk to those people. You know, they want to talk to me, because they knew me, they felt comfortable. They trusted me, you know, that type of thing. And so, I think it was good, actually for myself mentally and for the staff.

Dr. Martinez also experienced the death of a family member to COVID-19 as well as other community members such as parents of students. He said, “it’s sad because at one point it was happening very often.” On social media, he would see friends and family losing loved ones. He spoke about how the school community also began to collect donations to the help families in need.

There were also additional crisis events and experiences four participants spoke about they also had to deal with at the same time during the COVID-19 pandemic, the winter storm of February 2021. Participants also spoke about other crisis events such as hurricanes, rainstorms, and school shootings that they have experienced during their leadership prior to COVID-19 that shaped how they managed crises later. During the hard freeze, freezing temperatures covered the entire state of Texas causing major power outages and bursting water pipes for an entire week. Mrs. Villarreal said, “When February came around, we still had only about the 15 to 20 kiddos, no more than 20 coming you know, to the to the campus. So, we have no internet connection. We have no power, no running water.”

Dr. Martinez was thankful for his experience during the freeze but knew how much others suffered during that time. Mrs. Tyler and Dr. Diaz-Lopez spoke about the resiliency of their staff during the hard freeze about how her teachers were holding class on jet packs due to no electricity. Mrs. Tyler said,

What we also provided were those jetpacks, just to help them keep their electronics available for support and assistance. For those people whose electricity remained off for a while, those are the ones that I would try to keep constant communication for just to see if they needed anything.

Mrs. Tyler even spoke about the resiliency of her administrative staff who had to return to work in the cold and without electricity. She said,

Going back to the ice storm when we lost electricity. We, I'm talking about the principals and assistant principals, had to go back to school, even though all electricity was off. And I talked to you about persevering and hard work ethic. It's that so we had to do on a daily basis.

Dr. Diaz-Lopez mentioned how one of her staff members did not have electricity for a week and how some teachers were teaching in their cars. She said,

I had others who a teacher you know, it was a for about a week. I think one of the poles fell and so, you know, she didn't have internet she didn't have electricity. I had some teachers who told me that they were in a car . . . I mean, trying to teach so that to me, that was wow.

Participants also spoke about their experiences with Hurricane Harvey, Dr. Franco, Dr. Martinez, and Mrs. Jones who all had direct experiences with Harvey. Dr. Franco how school was in session when the order was given to evacuate the area. They had to finish school lunch periods and then they shut down the school and sent their students home. She said,

It that was the most traumatic thing I've ever been through in my life. Yeah. And which is why I moved from Hawkins because I didn't want to go through another hurricane because Hawkins is right on the coast, so I didn't want to go through it again. So, we moved.

At the time, Dr. Martinez was the executive director of instructional operations for a charter school organization which had multiple charter schools in several cities across Texas, some having been hit by Hurricane Harvey. He mentioned,

That was an entirely different role as a central office person then it was trying to get the supplies over and that was a very difficult in itself, because of the fact that you couldn't get anything out there. And so even trying to work with different partnerships out there trying to get partners and going, getting things over there. So that was a little bit difficult.

Mrs. Jones spoke about the PTSD students had even after Hurricane Harvey saying, “I think that one (sic- Hurricane Harvey) was extremely difficult because even after that, if it started raining, kids were panicking. She also said that she became more compassionate during that time because so many people lost their homes and businesses.

Mrs. Villarreal had also experienced two crisis events while being principal, one being when inmates escaped a nearby jail and a school shooting on campus. During the jail escape, the school was put into a reverse evacuation, and everyone had to come back into the campus, while having other events on campus going on. The latter was after school when two of her students were shot and no one had no idea where shots were coming from. Another reverse evacuation was put in play. She shared some heart wrenching comments made by the students who were waiting for medical attention. She said,

That's something that I'll never forget. I had never seen a bullet hole in a human body. Never, Never. And so when you hear children talk about how um “que me duele, me duele” (it hurts it hurts) “cuando llegue la ambulancia” (when does the ambulance get here) yeah.

### ***Crisis Preparation***

Although only three participants spoke about crisis preparation, it was the three that had most experience with crisis events. Mrs. Villarreal spoke about practicing drills as being the most important and her experience with the jail escapees and shooting on campus had helped her learn

and better prepare for a future crisis. She said, “the more that we practice those type of drills, they're better prepared than if we had not.” Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, Mrs. Villarreal also thought,

What's important to note from this, is that our experiences shaped us. And so, we should use this time to be able to help us as we continue to navigate forward, you know, we've got to be ready, in case any other crisis comes our way.

Dr. Franco also spoke about her experiences with Hurricane Harvey and how she took that experience to better prepare for the new campus she went to which lacked an adequate emergency operations plan and is usually handled by the maintenance director. She said,

I took that on as a principal because I felt, um, I've survived so many catastrophes that I wanted to make sure it was done correctly. So, I redid the entire emergency operations plan for the district. And then we held we actually simulated some real-life drills that could happen. We did a hurricane drill and evacuation off site.

Dr. Martinez spoke about knowing something was coming with COVID-19 but did not know the extent. He mentioned how the district attorneys advised the superintendent to let the staff go and get prepared at home.

### ***Planning***

Three of the participants spoke about what went into planning for COVID-19 and the continuation and/or return to school. Mrs. Tyler said during spring break all administrators were called in to the district office to plan for hours on end on how they would return and were asked to create handbooks. She said,

We literally came in during spring break, she (sic-Superintendent) called all principals in during spring break, and we sat together every day for anywhere from 8 to 12 hours,

planning, planning, planning, creating handbooks, talking about how we're going to come back.

Mrs. Jones spoke about her summer when her district built their policy for the upcoming school year. She said, “We were very upfront with what the policy was, and we were very good about following it.” She said any time there was a change to something, they communicated those changes and “everyone knew what their role was in the in the organization.”

Dr. Martinez elaborated on how his district worked with the education service center to train staff members on Google classroom during that spring break COVID-19 initially began and extended the spring break for students so teachers and the district could be prepared. Zoom meetings were held so everyone knew how to utilize Zoom. During the summer, his team and district also met weekly to plan and strategize.

We were meeting on a weekly basis and just staying very limited so that even when we met in our district, all the team which is our leadership team is there 16 members, which is all of the directors plus all the campus principals and in the superintendent. So we would meet and that's where we would strategize with the planning for the district. Technology was a big issue and so planning for and getting the devices out he said, “was a real big focus.” As they received more devices, they issued out those devices to families.

### **Crisis Reshapes Leadership Approaches**

Participant data revealed that the pandemic influenced their leadership approaches in significant ways; that is, this singular event, the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped leadership focus. Campus principals shifted their leadership emphasis to two areas including: building capacity and distributing the leadership. Servant and situational leadership were present in the data but not substantially enough that they were a main coding pattern.

**Figure 2**

*Crisis Reshapes Leadership Approaches*



***Overview***

Participants referenced and discussed the leadership styles and approaches they find themselves generally utilizing the most as leaders prior as well as during the pandemic. For Mrs. Jones, she focused on taking miscellaneous items off teachers' plates per her superintendent. Her superintendent told her, "y'all are gonna have to take more off their plates, and you can't be as hard on them as you would." Mrs. Jones continued, "And so with my leadership style, that was difficult." As a leader Mrs. Jones focuses on Stephen Covey's quadrants and the *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* during this pandemic crisis. She said she had to reevaluate what was important/urgent and what was not. Dr. Franco mentioned she recently moved into this new position and campus and has reflected on leadership. She feels she takes on more a collaborative leadership style as she sees it as a teamwork. She also believes in "*setting expectations but also modeling those expectations.*"

Dr. Diaz-Lopez acknowledges the shift from managerial to now building "interdependence" from her staff and creating a team. She believes, "you cannot lead a community of learners by yourself. You know, that's very important. And if you don't master that, it's going to affect the children's academic progress as a result." Dr. Martinez believes in



treating those how you want to be treated. He also feels that leaders must be able to get in the trenches with the staff and help where needed. He also says it's about "*thinking on your toes and being proactive.*"

### ***Building Capacity***

Many of the participants spoke about building capacity within their administration team, faculty, and staff. During the period where COVID-19 influenced daily life in schools, many teachers and staff had to take on extra duties related to COVID-19 and needed the help of everyone on their teams in order to get the job done. Mrs. Jones mentioned how everyone had an important role in their work.

You had involvement with, you know, teachers and I've made everyone a leader in some way. I didn't just have a department chair. Throughout the school year, every employee on the campus had some leadership role in something because I wanted them all to have a part. Everyone played an important role in what we were doing.

Mrs. Tyler spoke about the importance of building a team of problem solvers that can develop their own solutions to issues. She felt this was one way to grow her team where they could come up with solutions and all work together. She also used reflective practices with all her staff when they come to her with information or suggestions. For example, when reviewing data during Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings, she asked faculty to reflect on various data points and share their insight so that they can work through it. She said, "I use reflective practices with my staff members. And then also with my administrative team, just basically trying to build them up." She ensures to build capacity by developing problem solvers with all staff.

Mrs. Villarreal elaborated on her coaching style to build capacity within her team

and especially her administrative team. She uses WhatsApp as a chat platform between her and colleagues where she does sideline coaching. She explained, *“when I see some conversations going back and forth, I offer my administrative staff some coaching on the side, I’ll side text them and I’ll say, Okay, if they’re asking you this, what else can you offer for them?”* She also spoke about the duties different leaders have on her campus and how their leadership plays an important role. Grade level team and department chairs have different roles on her campus, and she acknowledges she cannot do it alone and has her team help her through distributing tasks. Mrs. Villarreal shared how she values the feedback from her administration team and encourages them to build their own style of leadership. She invites feedback and input but also shares her experiences and how she handled situations. She said this approach seeks to, *“tap into everybody’s strengths.”*

Dr. Alma Diaz-Lopez referenced building capacity many times throughout her interview. She explained the sense of urgency everyone felt to grow in their role as COVID-19 forced everyone out of their comfort zones. Many of her staff were having to learn Google classroom and shift their teaching between synchronous and asynchronous learning. She said it was difficult for herself and her team to learn on the run, but because they were forced to learn new modes of instruction, they were better for it. Building autonomy and seeking to tap into faculty and staff’s strengths to help one another, was also important to Dr. Diaz-Lopez and she believed that was one of her main leadership styles. Leaders emerged when given the opportunity and Dr. Diaz-Lopez tapped into the strengths of individuals so they could build up others. For example, she mentioned a teacher with poor classroom management skill. *“All of a sudden that classroom management was removed, and she has all these talents that she had were important. They became important now to in order to help grow my staff.”* She mentioned this several times

throughout the interview, “You know, building autonomy, interdependence, that’s more my leadership style, through giving faculty and staff more autonomy, this helps them building collegial leaders.”

### ***Distributed***

Five of the participants shared experiences where distributed leadership was an approach they utilized because of the amount of additional work these campus principal participants had been given along in addition to the already daily tasks on their campuses. Mrs. Jones spoke about how she handled anything dealing with COVID-19 such as contact tracing and sending out notices, while her assistant principal continued with his regular assigned duties. At one point she had to ask for help from her assistant principal with contact tracing as it seemed to happen every Friday and had to work well into the weekend. She said,

It did get to a point to where finally I said, ‘Okay, we’re gonna trade weekends.’ I can’t do every week, because I’m telling you, every Friday, somebody tested positive. And I said, No, this Friday is going to be your weekend to do contact tracing.

She also spoke on how she burned out while trying to take care of everything herself. She did have her assistant principal, counselor, and secretary help with some of the tasks such as home visits.

Mrs. Villarreal believes in distributed leadership as a means of building capacity so that the campus can continue to be successful after her leadership role is over. “I still want to be able to have my department heads and my administrators my counselors be able to lead.” She wants to ensure the staff continue to lead and maintain the success they have reached. She has built up her team and developed leaders around her, saying “my approach has been to distribute leadership, knowing that I can’t do this by myself.”

Dr. Diaz-Lopez addressed how she could not be everywhere while meetings were going on and teachers needing help instructionally. She said that while she has always sought to lead this way, COVID-19 heightened the need to do so. She said, “I couldn’t do everything by myself. Not even under normal circumstances. I know that but boy even more so during COVID.” Dr. Diaz-Lopez also relied on her team’s strengths to help each other out with technology, instructional strategies, etc. She said, “we were always having to collaborate, always having to talk and reach out to each other, and show vulnerability to each other and grow each other in the areas where we have gaps.”

Dr. Franco spoke about the meetings her team of 12 had every day trying to go over responsibilities of each department including activities for which she uniquely had responsibility as well as tasks she needed others to complete. She emphasized, “there’s only so much time in a day and there was 100 million things going on. And so we did, all of us had to let go a little bit and delegate or else things would not get done.” As Mrs. Jones mentioned in her interview, she continued to do everything herself, which caused her to burn out, Dr. Franco acknowledged this as well and said she had to learn to delegate tasks. She said, “I learned there’s no way one person can do it all especially in a time like this where so many people are depending on us for answers and information. But we all divvied it up.” For example, she went to her counselor to get social emotional learning out to students.

Dr. Martinez explained his two assistant principals continued their normal duties as assigned splitting up discipline and T-TESS evaluations, etc. He utilized all staff to help with technology issues on campus and in the classrooms, as well as distribution of devices to those students remote learning. For example,

We all took a role between our counselor between our college career director, and our assistant principals, we all made contact and even helping the teachers. So there was a lot of times where we were running back and forth. ‘Hey, I’m having issues with technology’ and things like that. Working with our tech, our campus technician, just to make sure that we had to connectivity and sometimes we didn’t.

He also added that office staff, secretaries, registrar, attendance clerks, and the parent liaison were also making calls home to families about getting their kids online. If a student needed a device, a staff member was sent out to deliver one using COVID-19 protocols.

### ***Servant***

Five of the participants referenced servant leadership as one of their key leadership approaches. They all spoke about being there for their staff and students and serving them in all capacities. Mrs. Jones shared “I felt like I was a servant leader at times. You know, I was there for them.” She said she did many things for her teachers that no other principal would do. Mrs. Tyler also said, “I think servant leadership is one that I have always strived for. I try to serve everybody. I mean, my students, the community, parents, that was my motto, when I went into education as administrator.”

Mrs. Villarreal mentioned how it seemed like she utilized servant leadership more during the pandemic saying,

They’ve needed a lot more, whether it’s a conversation or supplies, a different perspective. I feel that I sometimes I joke, and I say that I feel like I’m everybody’s mom here, you know. And so the servant leadership, I think, has, has been taxed a little bit more. But I think that has been more important at this time. I find I’m having to divide

myself even more, to make sure I'm meeting everybody's needs. That starts from my administrative staff on down.

Dr. Diaz-Lopez felt her staff saw her more as a servant leader during the pandemic because she was there to support her staff. She focused on building trust with her staff so they were able to go to her for help. She said, "I did not have all the answers, but I could support them and help get them there. I'm here to support because we want the same thing we want the students to succeed."

Dr. Martinez strives to be a servant leader especially for his community. He believes in having that open door policy for all saying, "Don't just say that you have an open door but actually make sure that the open door is there." Many of the participants explicitly named servant leadership as one of their go-to approaches; however, did not go in depth as to how.

### **Crisis Hones Leadership Skills**

Participant data heavily discussed the importance of communication and collaboration with all stakeholders. Communication is a crucial element coming from the leader in all directions such as staff, students, parents, community and to the district. In addition, due to the uncharted territory of dealing with a health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, collaboration was an important skill leaders relied heavily on with their teachers and staff. Flexibility was an additional skill leaders needed to adapt to the various situations they dealt with.

**Figure 3**

*Crisis Hones Leadership Skills*



***Communication***

Communication is a crucial aspect to crisis leadership and leadership in general. Administrators must communicate with staff, students, and parents on a daily basis and especially during COVID-19. Building relationships, establishing trust, and transparency were also important elements so leaders could communicate effectively.

Mrs. Jones spoke about communicating as much as she possibly could and with information that she was allowed to give out due to COVID-19 confidentiality. COVID-19 brought many fears for staff, students, and parents and it was being honest with what the current situation was on her campus. She said, “I think that what they appreciated is that we weren't hiding, they didn't feel like we were hiding positive cases from them. You know, we were upfront and honest.” She also had to inform parents of what the COVID-19 policies were saying, “we were very upfront with what the policy was, and we were very good about following it.”

Mrs. Villarreal emphasized how communication was crucial for building strong teams and how communication has been the cornerstone of her success as a leader. “I think that's been

part of the leadership style that I've brought with me is having that open communication.” Her reasoning being “it's very important for us to explain the why behind anything, the what will come. But the why is very important, because people are more apt to follow change, if they understand.” She also spoke about how sometimes the original message can become unclear after going through several people, therefore, she focuses on clear communication.

“Communication is key. I tell the staff, all my staff, communication is something that we will always strive to get better at.

Dr. Franco also believes due to the pandemic, her communication became more thorough than ever. Building relationships and checking in with staff professionally and personally was part of her practice. She would tell her staff,

Tell me what's going on with you. Tell me what's going on in your classroom. Tell me what's going on in your world. They all had their own things they were going through. So it was starting from scratch on team building and trust as well as improved communication. And I learned a lot. The pandemic taught me a lot, honestly how to be a better leader.

She also spoke about how in the beginning of the pandemic she tried to communicate with the information she was given including that she didn't have all the answers. There were many unknowns at the beginning and with everyone not being able to be on campus, Zoom meetings were the go to for communication and information to staff.

That's hard because I don't have the answers and you know, with COVID we don't so it was being very transparent and telling them I don't have these answers. I don't know how long this is going to last. We may be remote today and back in person tomorrow. I don't know, but we're taking it one day at a time and so I really just had to let my wall down



and let them see me that I'm in the same boat with them. I'm trying to navigate this with them.

Dr. Martinez prioritized communication and wanted to ensure no one was blindsided with changing policies and that faculty and staff were included in the conversation when changes were discussed. When it came to the community, Dr. Martinez ensured he communicated with them as well, so they were in the know.

My biggest thing was just continuing to keep the community in the know, that collaboration, that communication, you know, and pushing and making sure that hey, there was not going to be a surprise.

When the district began to bring students back into schools slowly, Dr. Martinez had conversations with parents regarding students who are playing in extracurricular activities such as sports, as they would be the ones allowed in the first wave of students to re-enter schools. Dr. Martinez would explain to parents the rationale for students who were in extracurricular such as sports, they should be able to come to school since they are coming to campus for sports already. Dr. Martinez communicated through several forms of communication such as a phone tree (Google phone), social media, and school website so that parents did not have to go searching for each of their child's teachers as they were all in one document. In communicating with staff, he held weekly meetings on Fridays through Zoom with teachers for information.

### ***Collaboration***

Collaboration has been a key skill that most of the participants spoke about. It was important to ensure all voices were heard, everyone was involved in decision making, and that teamwork was promoted among all staff members. During COVID-19, collaboration was a crucial element as it was uncharted territory for all educators.

Mrs. Jones's goal when making decisions was to make sure it was what was best for the students, which sometimes was not the easiest decision to make. She ensured collaboration by including everyone and their opinions on the topic. She said, "my goal was definitely to make sure that everyone's voice was heard. And then we brought all the decisions to the table."

Mrs. Tyler emphasized the collaboration between central office and campus administration as well as between campus administration and campus staff. "I think that we truly did really well as a district just because we've all worked collaboratively." There was much collaboration between campus principals and the superintendent in decision making.

Prior to COVID, my Superintendent worked, she worked in isolation with her central office stuff, the goal of center offices to support the campuses. However, during that time in March, and I think it was 2019. I don't even remember the years because they've all blurred, but that year that it (sic – COVID-19) hit we, our superintendent used our principals, we were very cohesive, she started leaning on us to help her make those decisions as a superintendent.

Mrs. Tyler also spoke about how she collaborated with her campus team to garner their ideas and opinions to then take back to the district team and superintendent. She emphasized how coming from a smaller district, working collaboratively was crucial to their success as a district.

Because we are a very small district, we're still working together to support every single student and I think we're just in a really great place. And I think that has a lot to do with the leadership that we have, our superintendent. Just working collaboratively with each other to push forward and persevere through one of the most difficult crises that we've experienced.

Mrs. Villarreal believes in getting input from her staff and having those one on one conversations. She explained to her staff that even though she may be the sole decision maker, she always sought their feedback and feels utilizing this leadership skill during COVID-19 has helped.

I think has helped us still continue to work through this time, you know, because teachers have to feel that they can come to one of them as well you know, when they need something because ultimately, our teachers are with the students and we have seen how overwhelmed you know, it has been this this year.

Dr. Diaz-Lopez spoke about how she had to lean on her staff to help each other during this time and through building relationships and trust she was able to collaborate with her staff. She said, “it came through conversations through collaborating with individuals during those discussions in building that trust in those relationships with the staff.” Everyone had to reach out to one another and help each other grow. Several of her staff members showed strengths in certain areas and they each helped other grow in those areas through collaboration. “Because we were always having to collaborate, always having to talk and reach out to each other, and show of vulnerability to each other and grow each other.” This statement also was evidence of building capacity within her team as stated earlier.

Dr. Franco believes in collaboration and teamwork and generally uses these styles and skills as a leader. She also comes from a small school district where there are not many individuals for certain roles in which everyone must work together.

We learn to lean on each other, work with each other. And so what I've noticed, as of course, no two people are the same. We all have different ideas. And my idea is not always going to be the best. I don't know everything there is to know in education, so

always hearing it from a different perspective, even today. Let me hear from everyone.

It's a collaboration.

In Dr. Franco's storytelling, she provided some background context in the small district she comes from where the pandemic caused two neighboring campuses to lean on each other when a relationship never existed before.

Well, um, for one, we had to learn to lean on each other more than ever. And so I'll give you a little bit of history where I was in Lyndale, the middle school and the elementary are on the same piece of land like they're walking distance apart. But there was a huge divide between the two. The teachers didn't get along. There was just no unity among the two campuses. So with the pandemic, one of the things that we talked about often was something good that came out of it is that there had to have been a lot of collaboration.

### ***Flexibility***

For leaders during the pandemic, it was important to be flexible. Mrs. Jones compared when she began her career she very much operated in black and white. With the pandemic, she had to learn to be flexible and that each situation was different. She had to find flexibility while "still having a structure and still having procedures in place." She emphasized having even though you may have several prepared plans, at some point they will all get thrown out and have to create a new plan on the spot.

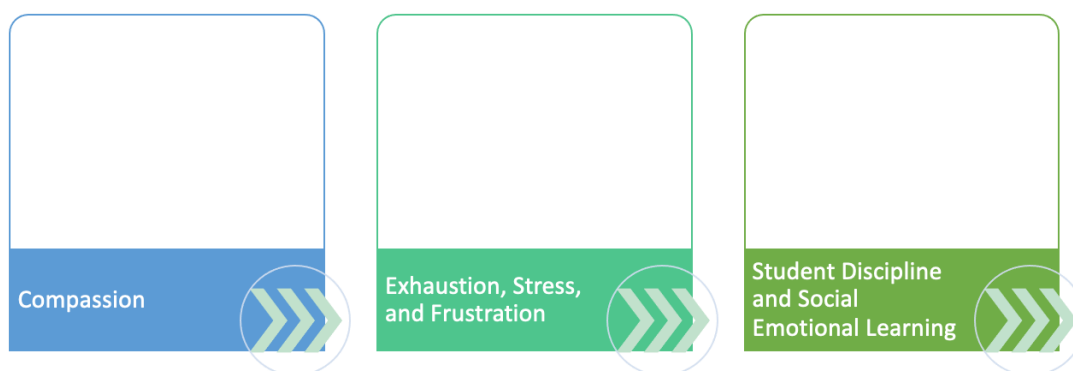
When it came to instruction, Dr. Franco had to explain to staff that they needed to be flexible with their students. Online learning was new, and students did not have a teacher in front of them. She said, "they needed reassurance that it's okay to give the students slack."

## **Crisis Required Addressing Social Emotional Realm**

Participant data showed the effects of dealing with COVID-19 in schools which brought on added stress and frustration especially for teachers and principals. It also affected students in terms of discipline in which principals had not seen before as well as addressing the social emotional learning aspect for staff and students to help deal with COVID-19 effects. Principals additionally found more compassion within themselves during these troubled times.

**Figure 4**

*Crisis Required Addressing Social Emotional Realm*



### ***Compassion***

Two participants spoke about being compassionate during the pandemic. This was a time where many people were getting sick, passing away from COVID-19, or had family members who were sick and dying.

Mrs. Jones spoke about how she was not as compassionate pre-COVID as she is now. She had to look at everything going on through a different lens. She knew how other people were suffering from COVID-19 and realized when employees needed a personal or mental health day, she gave them that. She also mentioned how her experiences contributed to her being more compassionate towards everything and everyone when one of her employees ended up losing a

son that was not COVID-19 related. Mrs. Jones also experienced Hurricane Harvey, which she felt was more difficult than having dealt with COVID-19. COVID-19 was not as prevalent in her area, but Hurricane Harvey was, and that experience also shaped and made her more compassionate. She compared the two and felt Hurricane Harvey had more effects on the town than COVID-19.

That (sic – Hurricane Harvey) was difficult, because people lost their homes, their livelihood, you know, their jobs that they used to have that building is no longer there, that company went out of business. So that was a completely different type of, I think I had to be very compassionate for sure. As far as because we had people from staff members who had zero damage to staff members who had nowhere to live, like and I was expecting them to come to work, like, how was I going to get them to work when they didn't even have a house to live in?

On the other side, she also saw how her community parents were also more compassionate with her staff once they saw how much her staff does for her students. She said, *“I think it definitely, the parents were able to see how much these teachers were doing for their kids that they didn't realize.”*

Dr. Martinez spoke about how there was much unknown and being compassionate about what someone was going through. From teachers to cafeteria staff were getting sick. He felt he was more compassionate about them recovering and making back to work.

So it's not to say I wasn't passionate about my job before, but it's been more empathetic of what people are, what are people going through and taking some time for them to breathe and giving them the time, but also reminding them we still got a job to do you still got to get this going.

### ***Exhaustion, Stress, and Frustration***

This pandemic has created extra stress, exhaustion, and frustration to an already stressful job for all involved, district leaders, campus leaders, staff, students, and parents. Mrs. Jones shared how her staff were exhausted and “worked well over their time” which affected,

The way they were showing up to work, the way they were arriving late to work, you know, not planning, like, they should be in their PLC meetings if I wasn't there to babysit, or, because they knew that the rope had been loosened and things didn't have, they had gotten to a point to where they were exhausted.

For Mrs. Jones, the stress ultimately helped her decide to leave the campus and look for another job. She said, “it was mentally draining on me. I would definitely say I thought I can handle a lot of stress. But I knew that I couldn't keep going. And that was another reason that it was time for me to get out and get a change.” At one point she had a breakdown at a staff meeting and finally told her staff. “I had written out a script, and I said, ‘Guys, I need help’ like, and I started bawling. I said, ‘I cannot do everything anymore’. You know, I said, ‘I understand we're all stressed out’.” She also said she felt the frustration coming from teachers and how inconsistent students were with attending class in person, but still was able to make it campus for sports.

But the teachers at that point, were just frustrated because the kids were allowed to play basketball, they were allowed to play football, they were allowed to play volleyball, but they didn't have to come to school. So that at the middle school was a huge factor.

Mrs. Villarreal had also seen the exhaustion in her staff within the first three weeks of school. “It's taking a toll on our students and our staff, social, emotional, and mentally. I have never seen so many of my teachers, exhausted after the first three weeks of school, they're mentally exhausted.” Dr. Martinez also spoke about the stress students had on his teachers.

Students misbehaving and with his school which practices corporal punishment, several principals in his district found themselves walking around with a paddle more.

Dr. Franco shared how her teachers were also parents as well. Their stress was during the day with their students and when they came home, they had to catch up their own children in their schoolwork. Mrs. Tyler shared her frustrations with decision making when they were navigating through the unknown.

There was a lot of frustration with our administrative team because you had to make decisions. And it was very difficult to make decisions when you didn't know what to do. We didn't know kids were not coming back. We didn't know that the entire state was going to get shut down.

She also mentioned her own personal frustrations with work.

I was very internally very frustrated. When I'm at work, I did not express that in any way, fashion or form. But when I got home, I was very, very frustrated, I was frustrated at the fact that decisions were not being made. And then decisions were not being made quick enough. And every day that we're lingering, it's affecting the kids. So I go in very, very frustrated with that, then I came to realization that there's things that I cannot control, I cannot control the pandemic, I cannot control the fact that we cannot force every student to come back.

### ***Student Discipline and Social Emotional Learning***

Three participants spoke about the rise in discipline they have seen since the pandemic began and students were now back to school and the need for social emotional learning. Mrs. Villarreal shared,



The rise in discipline from students is like, no other. You know I'm at a middle school. It's common. We know that, you know, it happens everywhere. But it seems that the conversations we're having with others, and not from just here in our region, you know, it's from all over. And I think we're trying to adapt as best as we can.

She also emphasized the need to provide,

Social emotional education for our students, you know, let's get them back into okay, this is the way we behave in school. What may have worked two years ago, you know, with discipline, and I'm just using that as an example. It's not working this year. It's very different.

Dr. Franco also saw the same rise in her campus. "The social emotional, they are having trouble relating to each other. I've had more fights in the beginning of this school year than I've had in five years in administration." She also said, "They're having to learn to deal with each other all over again to interact with each other, but also how to deal with the emotional things that are going on in their life."

Regarding staff, Mrs. Jones provided a social emotional learning activity during a staff meeting when they returned from winter break.

When we came back in January, we talked about broken dreams. We all have like the ceramics and then we broke them. And we did this mosaic and talked about it was gonna take all of us like, we are never going to be what we were pre-COVID. We were never going to be the campus we were pre-Harvey, you know. But we all had these broken pieces. And we talked about how each of these broken pieces were going to put us back together. But it was going to take all of us and I couldn't do it alone. And so, it was kind neat like it was kind of a social emotional learning event, I guess, that we did as campus.

Mrs. Villarreal also relies on her counselors to provide social emotional learning for staff as well to ensure wellness as everyone is affected by this pandemic differently.

It's also important for our social emotional learning of our staff, as far as administration, counseling, all the people that we have in our leadership team that are non-teaching professionals, because if they're working with others, you know, they also need that wellness, you know. We're always making sure that we're tapping into, because during a crisis, people are affected very differently. And I've seen that even in the conversations that I have with different people, it's some are needing more than others.

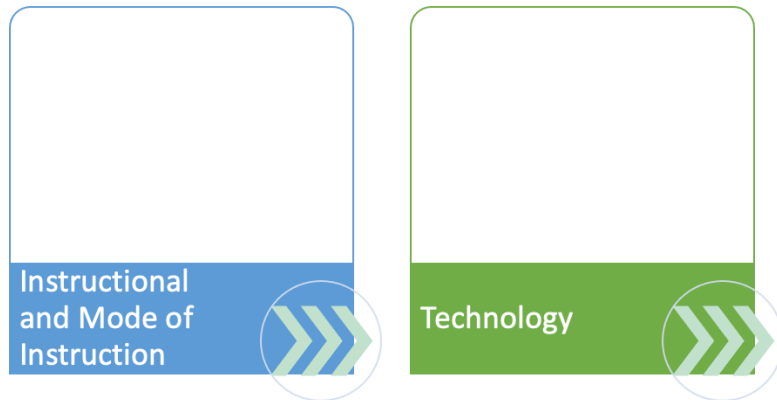
Dr. Martinez has two mental health specialists that come to his campus to have those social emotional conversations with students and help them grieve. He said, “we were having conversations with them. We were trying to talk to kids, we brought in social emotional staff members to kind of help with that kind of conversation.” He mentioned there was little opportunity to provide this support when school was remote.

### **Crisis Reshapes Instruction**

The participant data revealed instruction was an aspect of education that was disrupted and affected how teachers taught and students learned. With two different modes of instruction simultaneously, teachers struggled and had to learn on the go. Another aspect of remote learning was the increased use of technology and the issues that arose with it.

**Figure 5**

*Crisis Reshapes Instruction*



***Instructional and Mode of Instruction***

Instruction was impacted by COVID-19 in many ways. When COVID-19 hit in March 2020, students did not return to finish the school year. Schools and teachers did the best they could as far as teaching and helping students finish the school year. When the 2020-2021 school year began the mode of instruction was synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous meaning the teacher taught live during school hours through Zoom or other means of video conferencing, and asynchronous where the students completed their work at their own pace and did not attend live video instruction.

Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Tyler both saw their teachers struggle with keeping that instructional balance of face to face, synchronous, and asynchronous students. Mrs. Jones explained her teachers taught both face to face and synchronous until January. She told her staff, “That’s where we had to find the balance, okay, guys, I still need y’all to do your jobs. But we cannot have the same expectations that we have in a normal school year.”

Ms. Tyler spoke about the difficulties her teachers had when teaching simultaneously with students online and students face to face and problem solved the issue to help her teachers.

To resolve that issue I basically, all of our core teachers, I didn't allow them to do both. So they had sections where they were teaching face to face. And then they had sections where they were teaching virtual students. The one I could not fix was CTE, just because the number of classes that we offered, there was no way that I can let our CTE teachers do one or the other because they had so many preps. So those teachers did have to teach simultaneously, which was a big struggle.

An upside to online learning as Mrs. Villarreal saw it, was that it was a lot easier to jump from a Google classroom to a meeting with teachers online.

I noticed through the pandemic and the remote learning was that we were able, all administration, was able to click out of a Google classroom, Google meet session and say, 'Okay, now I have a meeting with teachers', and go right over, right. And so that connection with teachers was really great during our remote learning.

Dr. Martinez spoke about the continuation of instruction when COVID-19 first hit. He wanted to ensure students were receiving their high school credit they deserved through various means such as Edgenuity, an online program that provides lessons to students, and Reading Plus.

We still wanted to make sure we still finished up our last six weeks, basically continuing off and getting what they needed to receive so that we could say, 'well, we're gonna give a credit'. We're gonna give a credit because they learned the content and they saw the content. So we didn't go to letter grades, things like that, with stayed on them with numeric grades. But basically, we added other programming.

As far as this school year, Dr. Martinez spoke about a diagnostic benchmark test his students took to determine the instructional gaps present. Dr. Martinez is proud of the fact that there are still some successes that he sees within his data that they recently took on a benchmark.

We had benchmarks where we wanted to be as not as high as where it's at, but it's still better than a lot of other people. And so even despite the losses that we did face because of the synchronous instruction because of the movement, and because I constantly was pushing, you know, and the thing was always that it wasn't just me pushing, it was the team, my admin team pushing too as well. And also trying to provide that support and being there for the teachers having those conversations individually.

Dr. Martinez also explained additional supports and resources he is providing his students such as an RtI (Response to Intervention) period where students are working on TSI, SAT/Act prep, and Reading Plus. Keeping class sizes low is important to him because “If the teacher can have a manageable classroom, then they're gonna be able to provide that individualized instruction.”

Dr. Diaz-Lopez spoke about the instructional gaps she noticed from students being at home with online learning and the challenges she faces to fill those gaps, which she will tackle by doing her research.

So we've got to find those answers. Because the gap there, challenges me as the leader, you know, to go out there and research you know, look at ways to engage the students.

Whether it is now if the new way, the new normal is with technology, then then we're going to get that done.

She further explained that for students, the last time students had a normal school year was over two years ago as the past two years have been nothing but abnormal for them. Thus, students are behind two or more years.

### ***Technology***

Technology was an important factor for providing instruction to students with some districts or schools seeing a lack of either technology or internet service. Some schools were

prepared due to one-to-one device efforts such as Mrs. Tyler's district. However, the issue of being in a rural district was internet service. Her assistant principal suggested MiFi for their students which is similar to a hotspot. Her district approved the suggestion and began to provide MiFis to students who needed access. The other issue was concerning her teachers.

Teachers were using their devices more on a substitution level. And that's a Samara model. I'm not sure if you're familiar with it, but they were using it basically the basic level. So we had to work through helping teachers use their devices appropriately to help provide instruction virtually.

Mrs. Villarreal had also seen the need for WIFI for her students. She spoke about her district who installed WIFI in school buses and would place them in certain areas. However, it was most difficult for those neediest due to terrible roads where buses could not go. Those parents had to get hotspots from the school. Even then parents who did not have vehicles to go to the school and pick up a device, Mrs. Villarreal would send her community liaison.

For Dr. Diaz-Lopez, she has seen the transformation in the classroom with an increased use of instructional technology.

As an instructional leader, you know, now coming back out of COVID, you know, the classrooms look very different. Things that you heard in the past about flipping the classroom, using more technology to engage the students, that's become a practice now. You know, I was just in a classroom Friday, doing an observation on a teacher and, you know, I was very impressed. It was a second-grade classroom and the teacher, you know, was teaching her lesson and so forth. And so, in order to check for understanding, you know, she just asked the students to bring up their iPads. And so right away they, it was

not the iPads, it was the Chromebooks, they very easily got into the app that she had asked them to get into and checked for comprehension.

While on the other hand, she also had teachers who were not as technologically savvy which were her veteran teachers. Dr. Diaz-Lopez herself had to learn it so she could then lead and support her staff. She said, “You're having to learn it. I had to learn it. And I had to take that leadership role and, and model those things for my staff. And so that was that was very difficult.” Everyone had to learn the new technology, administrators, teachers, staff, students, and families.

Dr. Martinez mentioned the issues with devices within his district in the beginning. They were limited on devices and families with up to six kids in a household, they were only able to do one device per household. When COVID-19 first began, he explained, “that's why Pre-K through eight stayed asynchronous and high school stayed synchronous because of the fact that we were limiting.” Fast forward to the current school year, Dr. Martinez spoke about the updates and advances on technology that have made it more difficult for students to cheat while being online through the use of a lockdown browser.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the results of the data analysis and how they are tied to the research questions this study sought to answer. Six participants, principals of elementary, middle, and high schools in South Texas were interviewed for this study. Administrative experiences ranged from six to 21 years. The interview questions followed a semi-structured format (Bernard, 2006) in which the researcher was able to gather the leadership approaches and experiences of these principals during the COVID-19 pandemic. Out of approximately 100 descriptive codes, 19 codes emerged as prominent codes. Those 19 codes were organized into the five themes (1) crisis informs leadership, (2) crisis reshapes leadership approaches, (3) crisis hones leadership

skills, (4) crisis required addressing social emotional realm, and (5) crisis reshapes instruction.

This chapter shared the emergent themes from participant data, while Chapter V provides a discussion of the themes discovered from the data of the study and recommendations for future research.



## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

*The most important message educational leaders must communicate is that ‘a culture of change consists of great rapidity and non-linearity, on the one hand, and equally great potential for creative break-throughs on the other’ (Marshall et al., 2020, p. 35).*

### **Introduction**

This research study followed a qualitative narrative case study approach (Patton, 2015) to gather descriptions of the lived experiences of K-12 principals who dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic in their schools as it relates to the leadership theory/approach, crisis leadership. A purposeful sample (Patton, 2015) of six principals were interviewed in depth (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) using the researcher as the instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher is a current assistant principal and school leader, so insider knowledge was brought to the study (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007).

The sample included former and current K-12 principals at a B-rated or better campus that serves a high number of low socioeconomic disadvantaged students. The sample consisted of five female principals and one male principal, one elementary, two middle school, and three high school principals. The range of administrative experience was six to 21 years of service. Three principals had experienced Hurricane Harvey as an administrator. Pseudonyms were given to participants to preserve their identities and campus/district affiliation. The study took place through Zoom interviews for no more than one hour. Member checking and peer debriefing (Erlandson et al., 1993b) were utilized to throughout the process to establish credibility.

This chapter includes a summary of the literature, an overview of the results, and a discussion of the established themes as they connect to existing literature on traditional

leadership approaches, crisis leadership, and key leadership skills found necessary to lead campuses during this COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter will also include the contributions of the study, recommendations for future research, and a short summary.

The questions developed for this research study uncovered strategies used to deal with crisis management and leadership, as well as traditional leadership approaches that were also affected or effective during the crisis. The overarching research question for this study was:

What are the perceptions of K-12 principals regarding their leadership experience relative to the pandemic?

The five main themes that encompassed the study findings from the participant data were: (1) crisis informs leadership, (2) crisis reshapes leadership approaches, (3) crisis hones leadership skills, (4) crisis required addressing social emotional realm, and (5) crisis reshapes instruction. The responses from participants are primarily about their own leadership during the pandemic, as well as experiences with and of district leadership, staff, and students. All the themes and elements highlighted the experiences of the majority.

### **Connections and Contributions**

The existing literature on crisis leadership varied between crisis preparedness and crisis leadership skills. The Boin et al. 10-point framework provided leaders with tasks to ensure successful management of a crisis (Boin et al., 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic was a crisis that was sudden but ongoing for at least one year and a half. Two years later, we are finally realizing the impact post-pandemic. The following are key takeaways from the data gathered from this study and the connections and contributions to existing literature.

One of Boin et al.'s (2013) essential tasks was communication. This sub-theme of communication was evident through participant response data. Principals had to communicate

daily to their staff, students, and community. While principals were limited on releasing specific identifiable information regarding COVID-19 in schools, principals had to establish trust and transparency with all stakeholders when it came to positive cases on their campus and district policies. Kaul et al. (2020) found building trust within their network was essential as well. Similarly, Dr. Franco from this current study said she had to “starting from scratch on team building and trust as well as improved communication.”

Principals wanted to ensure they had open and clear communication with all staff, students, and families. Having clear communication was key for majority of principals as Boin et al. (2013) posits that any miscommunication could lead to further issues. At times, principals did not have enough verifiable information and did the best they could to keep their staff and community informed in the beginning of the pandemic as they navigated the unknown. Having clear communication is supported by the current study in which Mrs. Villarreal said, “that's been part of the leadership style that I've brought with me is having that open communication.”

Different forms of communication were used such as Zoom, Google, Microsoft Teams, social media, and school websites. Leaders had to rely on other technological forms of communications especially when staff and students were at home and practicing social distancing when they returned to campus. Some of the communication forms used during COVID-19 such as Zoom, Teams, and other conference software were a first for everyone in which everyone had to learn.

Kaul et al. (2020) found principals communicated with all stakeholders using videos and social media since information was constantly changing daily. This was the quickest way to get important information out to stakeholders. Dr. Martinez asserted that his use of varied

communication tools such as social media, a google phone tree, and the school website to get information out to his stakeholders were crucial tools in facilitating communication.

This study contributes to the existing literature as new forms of communication were learned and utilized when social distancing protocols during the pandemic were put in place. Teachers had to learn how to teach and communicate with their students in person and at home. It was one thing to communicate and simply speak to people on the other side of the screen. However, teachers had to find the best ways to deliver instruction through technology. The same applied to principals. Utilizing various forms of communication with their staff and community being adaptable was crucial. Leaders had to model and utilize these new modes of communication for meetings with staff, students, and parents. In this study, Dr. Diaz-Lopez stated, “I had to learn it. And I had to take that leadership role and, and model those things for my staff. And so that was that was very difficult.” These forms of communication such as Zoom, and video conferencing became the norm for everyone and is now post-pandemic is an additional tool for communication.

In addition to the criticality of enhanced and new ways of communicating, distributed leadership was a prominent theme among participant responses. A more distributed leadership approach was utilized during the COVID-19 pandemic and building everyone’s capacity to lead as associated with distributed leadership became a way of doing business to keep schools running. During the pandemic, principals realized they would not survive working in isolation or taking control of everything. This view is supported by Harris (2012) who focused on the leadership of the principal to build capacity in their followers. For example, in this study, Mrs. Villarreal emphasized her approach to leadership and stated, “my approach has been to distribute leadership, knowing that I can’t do this by myself.” It was an “all hands-on deck” approach

while navigating this health crisis. Principals could not be effective in their job by working in silos and had to rely on their leadership team or other staff members to take on some of the extra duties. Distributed leadership and building capacity were already approaches and skills used by many of the principals; however, it was referenced and utilized even more so as principals had the addition of directives and tasks of establishing COVID-19 protocols, dealing with positive cases on campus, the social emotional welfare of their students, and still providing effective teaching through new modes of instruction such as remote learning.

Principals had to build up their administrative team and teacher leaders in order to utilize their skills to build up others. In the current study, Dr. Diaz-Lopez stated she had to tap into individual strengths so they could build others up. Principals had to rely on their administrative team to take care of their normal duties and plus more. All staff members were helping and supporting each other during these difficult times such as providing help and sharing their skills with technology or instructional technology resources. Teachers who were technologically savvy helped principals and other teachers navigate the new mode of instruction as Dr. Diaz-Lopez from the current study, described not knowing much about technology. She also described having specific people on her team to help others with curriculum and instruction. This data supports Reyes-Guerra's (2020) findings of principals having people with essential skills in curriculum, instruction, and technology critically contributing to the success of online learning.

Through building capacity, principals, teachers, and staff members grew each other and was not necessarily from the top down. Harris (2020) also posited distributive leadership during the pandemic was emerging as a "new chapter in educational leadership" (p.325). The data from this study contributes to the existing literature of distributed leadership as educators were

engaging in a new form of distributive leadership. Collectively educators worked as a team and helped build capacity within each other to continue business as usual during the pandemic. What Mrs. Jones realized too late was that she needed to utilize her team more during the pandemic which caused her to burn out quickly, ultimately causing her to change roles and leave campus administration all together. Had she known this before, she would have utilized her team more. This data contributes to the literature in that during a crisis, leaders must utilize their leadership teams to take care of the tasks as hand and they cannot do it alone. Tapping into one's individual strengths will be a crucial piece when it comes to managing a crisis successfully.

Harris (2012) also posited principals were no longer the sole decision maker or sole transformational leader and collaboration between leader and followers was a critical piece within distributed leadership. All principals collaborated with their own campus teams and for some district teams with their superintendent. Reyes-Guerra (2020) found that collaboration between district directors and their team of principals is what helped these principals and schools get through the first phase of the pandemic. Similarly, findings from the current study support Reyes-Guerra's (2020) in which Mrs. Tyler discussed how collaborative her superintendent was with campus principals in in the decision-making process. Mrs. Tyler said, "I think that we truly did really well as a district just because we've all worked collaboratively." Principals ensured everyone's voice was heard, listened to everyone's ideas, and took ideas and concerns into consideration when making campus decisions as well as taking those ideas and concerns back to district leaders to make district wide decisions. Everyone had their own strengths and ideas in which through collaboration they were successful and helped each other grow.

Through discussions and conversations between principals and staff, trust and collegial relationships were built amongst everyone. In the current study, Dr. Diaz-Lopez spoke about

collaboration and said, “it came through conversations through collaborating with individuals during those discussions in building that trust in those relationships with the staff.” This view is supported by Kaul et al. (2020) who found having a culture of trust was crucial in creating these collaborative networks. Through collaboration, this helped principals and their teams to effectively continue their work with the new added pressures of leading and teaching through the pandemic. This collaboration was not limited to certain leaders or group of individuals. All stakeholders were included and collaborated to ensure everyone had a voice when it came to matter concerning their work. Although in a different context, Hemmer and Elliff (2019) found that superintendents during Hurricane Harvey collaborated through a weather crisis and having those relationships were vital.

This study enhances the existing literature concerning collaboration. Collaboration is an important element of distributed leadership; however, during the pandemic, principals collaborated with employees at all levels, including those in district offices and campus based to effectively lead and deal with the pandemic crisis. Mrs. Tyler spoke about her superintendent who included her leadership team of principals to help her make those tough decisions for the district and work through the issues. She spoke about how her superintendent normally had all the answers and during this pandemic she had to rely on her team for answers. Mrs. Tyler said, “just working collaboratively with each other to push forward and persevere through one of the most difficult crises that we've experienced.”

Finally, another contribution this study makes overall is the subject of crisis leadership during a health crisis which has not been studied before. However, just before this study was being conducted, new literature was being released as far as experiences and leadership during the pandemic concerning principals and teachers (Brelsford et al., 2020; Harris, 2020; Marshall

et al., 2020; Kaul et al., 2020; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021). This study adds to the existing literature on crisis leadership and a look on principals as crisis leadership primarily has focused on superintendents and leaders in higher education during a crisis.

This study focuses on a specific geographic region, South Texas, which is primarily majority Hispanic with principals of campuses serving high percentages of low-socioeconomic disadvantaged students. Three of the six principals in this study had experienced a previous weather-related crisis and one other had experienced a shooting on campus crisis. Even with having experienced different types of crises before, they were challenged by the context of the pandemic and had to navigate a completely new crisis. However, they brought some of their essential skills from their previous experiences to help them tackle the COVID-19 crisis.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Two of the participants saw an uptick in discipline issues while many of the participants saw the need for the social emotional learning aspect for staff and students to be addressed. As the researcher is a current K-12 administrator, the researcher has also seen this same increase personally. The researcher recommends that further research is needed in discipline and social emotional learning issues affecting students since they have been reintegrated back into school full time. Many students are having to reacclimate themselves to the school environment after having been at home for a little over a year and a half. Some staff and students have lost family and friends to COVID-19 and are in need of coping skills and counseling. As stated in Chapter II, the Texas School Safety Center (2021) provided suggestions for reintegration into schools and ways to provide support for families and students. Further research can explore these discipline issues and determine how to best approach addressing these issues. It will be interesting to see if the trends are the same in all parts of the state or across the country.



When COVID-19 hit the states in March 2020, the school year ended abruptly and students either had minimal or no learning at home. During the 2020-2021 school year, students had the choice of either returning in person or participating in remote learning. With COVID-19 fears in schools and communities, some students lost an entire year if they did not participate consistently in remote learning. A good majority of students already lag in terms of student achievement and lack of instruction for almost one year and a half. Instructional gaps have widened even more due to the pandemic. For a good majority of these students their reason was a lack of access to technology or Wi-Fi during the pandemic. Looking at it from a social justice perspective, these students' instructional gaps are widening even more so due to their lack of access. According to McLeod & Dulsky (2021), educators did their best during the pandemic to address the equity issues regarding technology access. Reyes-Guerra (2021) also found principals who of Title-I schools struggled more with distributing laptops to students in need. A second recommendation is to research longitudinally the student achievement of students or instructional gaps. The instructional gaps were already present pre-COVID-19 and are now even larger due to learning loss. It would be interesting to see how long it will take to close the instructional gap due to the COVID slide. More importantly, it would be beneficial to review the STAAR data from the most recent administration of the assessment to determine trends and areas of improvement.

A limitation of this study is the geographic area the sample of participants were taken from. South Texas experienced COVID-19 much differently than other areas of the state and/or country. Those who participated in this study were in highly populated areas with majority Hispanic as well as high percentages of low socioeconomic disadvantaged families. A third recommendation is to further extend this study to principals across the state or country as their

experiences differed vastly from one another. COVID-19 cases were higher in certain places of the state and country than others. A future study could include principals in highly populated areas with Anglo and/or African American families. As the CDC gave guidance for school health safety protocols, some school districts may have taken a different approach to protocols. The only way to get a more accurate and well-rounded picture of what principals experienced during their leadership is to further extend this study to areas in a different geographic region.

An additional recommendation includes expanding the study to include more questioning regarding servant leadership and flexibility. All participants spoke and referenced being a servant leader and providing support for their teachers, staff, and students during the pandemic; however, they did not provide enough evidence or examples of how they served. The same can be said about flexibility. Two participants referenced teachers and themselves having to be more flexible during the pandemic. In participating in the reflexive process and reviewing of participant data, after another cycle of coding, I believe that servant leadership and flexibility would appear more evidently. During the pandemic, principals had to be more flexible with the many tasks and directives they were given especially with information and protocols changing from one day to the next. The terms were used minimally so a future study could expand the line of questioning to explicitly address servant leadership and flexibility.

### **Conclusion**

This study sought to highlight the experiences of K-12 principals during the COVID-19 pandemic. What was found was an extension of already existing crisis leadership strategies and skills based on prior research, as well as traditional approaches such as instructional and distributed leadership. The COVID-19 pandemic was a first in terms of health crises impacting education and the world. No one was ready for a crisis quite like this one. The stories of

planning and preparation along with dealing with an ongoing crisis for a year and a half, will help future educators alike if another health crisis such as this were to occur. Additionally, these skills will enhance the leadership capacity as they move forward and past the crisis phase. The experiences of the participants will contribute to the extant literature regarding crisis leadership as a one-of-a-kind crisis.

Furthermore, education generally has taken a turn for the better as it impeded traditional teaching and learning styles and forced everyone to a more technologically advanced way of teaching, learning, and even communicating. As stated in Chapter 2 previously, Ladson-Billings (2021) proposed a “hard re-set” to our education system and learning as opposed to going “back to normal” before the pandemic (p. 68). Ladson-Billings (2021) suggested a “re-set around technology, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and parent/community engagement that will support and promote students’ culture” (p. 73). As a researcher and educator, I believe that the pandemic allowed for creativity and new ways of approaching teaching and learning which will now be utilized and leave a lasting positive impact on the future of K-12 education.

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## APPENDIX A

### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPLICATION APPROVAL



**Date:** October 05, 2021  
**To:** Gerri Maxwell  
**CC:** Gerri Maxwell, Katherine Teran, Vedika Salunke  
**From:** Office of Research Compliance  
**Subject:** Amendment Approval for Exempt Study

Dear Gerri Maxwell,

On 10/05/2021, the Texas A&M University IRB - Corpus Christi Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and approved the request changes for the following study:

|                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| <b>Type of Review:</b>         | <b>Amendment</b>   |
| <b>Title of Study:</b>         | CRISIS LEADERSHIP: EXPERIENCES OF K-12 PRINCIPALS IN SOUTH TEXAS SCHOOL DISTRICTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC |
| <b>Principal Investigator:</b> | Gerri Maxwell  |
| <b>IRB Number:</b>             | TAMU-CC-IRB-2021-0130  |
|                                | <b>Submission Number:</b> TAMU-CC-IRB-2021-0130-AMD-1.0  |
| <b>Risk Level:</b>             | Not Greater than Minimal Risk under 45 CFR 46 / 21 CFR 56  |
| <b>Type of Change:</b>         | Study change request, Revisions to study documents   |
| <b>Change description:</b>     | Changes are being made to the inclusion criteria to increase the participant pool.                             |

Updated inclusion criteria:

- o Current or former K-12 public school principals in the South Texas region during the COVID-19 pandemic
  - o At an A or B rated campus according to 2019 TEA accountability ratings
  - o Campus that serves great number of low-socioeconomic disadvantaged student
- Participants will be screened for eligibility as follows:
- o 2019 TEA accountability ratings
  - o 2019 campus demographics

On 10/05/2021, the IRB confirmed the study as changed continues to meet exempt category: Category 2: Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: i. The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; ii. Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or iii. The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by .111(a)(7).

**Approved changes may now be implemented.**

If you have any questions or concerns please contact us at [irb@tamucc.edu](mailto:irb@tamucc.edu).

Sincerely,

Rebecca Ballard, JD

## VITA

**Katherine Diane Teran**

### **EDUCATION**

Doctorate of Education (August 2022) in Educational Leadership at Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi, Corpus Christi, Texas. Dissertation title: “Crisis Leadership: Experiences of K-12 Principals in South Texas School Districts During the Covid-19 Pandemic.”

Master of Science (May 2013) in Educational Administration, Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi, Corpus Christi, Texas.

Bachelor of Arts (May 2009) in Sociology with a Minor in Mexican American Studies, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas.

### **ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT**

Assistant Principal, Corpus Christi Independent School District, August 2020 – present. Responsibilities include supervision and safety of campus staff and students, instructional supervision, discipline, community relations, and managerial duties.

Teacher, Corpus Christi Independent School District, March 2010-August 2020. Responsibilities included instruction of content TEKS, lesson planning, community relations, and supervision of students.

### **PUBLICATIONS**

None

### **PRESENTATIONS AT PROFESSIONAL MEETINGS**

None

### **ACADEMIC AWARDS**

None

### **PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIP**

Texas Association of Secondary School Principals

Corpus Christi Principals’ and Supervisors’ Association