EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP'S COVID SHIFT: HOW SCHOOL
LEADERS UTILIZED THE STANDARDS AND BEYOND

A Dissertation
by
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Abstract

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP'S COVID SHIFT: HOW SCHOOL
LEADERS UTILIZED THE STANDARDS AND BEYOND

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The COVID pandemic was a traumatic event across the world. It brought about

significant changes in many different organizations, and many of the effects of the pandemic are

likely to not be fully understood for decades. Education was greatly affected and site-based

educational leaders had to react and make large-scale adjustments, in many cases, with only a

few days of notice. The educational leaders reacted to a global event in real time alongside their

peers and colleagues. However, they also orchestrated a new mode of leadership to guide their

schools during a dynamic societal and political era.

This study investigated the lived experiences of ten site-based school administrators in

Western North Carolina. It analyzes their answers to questions on how they led their schools

through turmoil and how much or how little they were guided by the North Carolina Standards

for School Executives. The research questions that guide the study are:

1. How did the work of school leaders change during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. What barriers (if any) did school leaders encounter while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic?

3. Did the COVID-19 pandemic influence lasting changes in the school leader's role and should the current leadership standards be revised to reflect these changes?

This qualitative research was analyzed through a constructivist lens with a phenomenological framework. Semi-structured focus group interviews with ten participants were conducted. The interviews describe the school leaders' collective reaction to different stages of the COVID pandemic. Participants discussed the pandemic from its onslaught in March 2020 through the ensuing years. They discussed a wide range of emotions and tactics that they employed to lead their organizations, which ranged from significant overhauls in systems to paying attention to minute details they had not had to pay attention to before. There was a feeling of discontent with the way that they, as educators and school leaders, had been able to provide support to their schools during that time. They would have benefitted from additional training in crisis management and mitigation strategies and more experience in mental health support before the pandemic. This research adds to a growing body of COVID-19 research focusing on how different school leaders managed the global crisis.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the committee that helped to work on this: Julie Hasson,

Ed.D; William Gummerson, Ph.D. and Chris Osmond, Ph.D. I would also like to acknowledge

the staff and students in Haywood County Schools. You are awesome!

Dedication

  I would like to dedicate this work to my family, who are a group of individuals grounded in teaching and understanding. You have always pushed me to be vulnerable in learning and to have a thirst for knowledge.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Public education has faced many challenges since it began. It has weathered many global and national events that disrupted the educational climate and caused various shifts in the way that the educational landscape would unfold in the future. The addition of leadership standards in the mid-1900s was an attempt to standardize how school leaders operated across the country. While these standards focused on educational leaders, or adults, they were research-based best practices meant to affect student learning.

Education maintained a fairly consistent trajectory throughout most of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and despite two world and other foreign wars, economic recessions and depression, natural disasters, and civil unrest, the progress of public education, as a whole, was relatively uninterrupted until the school closures that were a reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is likely that no event in human history affected schools and learning quite like the COVID-19 pandemic, and no event necessitated such drastic changes to the structure and standards of educational leadership.

The global pandemic heavily impacted every aspect of public schools, from access to materials, funding, and personnel. Educational leaders received directives that filtered down from the federal government to the state government, to local school systems, and finally, individual schools. At each governmental level, information was interpreted and disseminated in different and often contradictory ways. By necessity, the traditional education of children on public school campuses came suddenly to a halt. School leaders had to implement radically different instructional approaches and provide enhanced care for teachers, students, and their families, and they had to provide this support outside of the normal operation of public schools.

COVID-19 challenged the traditional practices of school leaders and the leadership standards that guided them.

In this dissertation, I examine how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the role of site-based leaders working in schools. I describe some fundamental concepts of educational leadership identified in the literature and analyze common themes and ideas from different scholars. I provide my positionality with the topic and discuss why this topic has deep personal meaning. I conclude by discussing the research questions and methodology used in conducting a focus group interview with leaders from K-12 public schools in Western North Carolina. The research helps to define how school leaders may or may not have operated differently during the COVID-19 pandemic, and why these leaders made the choices they did.

Definition of Terms

The terms listed below appear frequently in this dissertation, but they may or may not be easily accessible or initially understandable by the reader.

- *COVID-19 Education/Pandemic Education:* The paper uses these terms interchangeably. They refer to the period from March 2020 until June 2022.

- *Mandated COVID-19 Shutdown:* Governor Roy Cooper ordered all North Carolina public schools to be closed for all students between March 2020 and June 2020.

- *Educational Leaders/School Leaders:* Site-based principals and assistant principals.

- *Virtual Learning/Distance Learning*: The mode of instructional delivery used by North Carolina public schools in varying capacities from March 2020 through the 2021-2022 school year.

- *Hybrid Education/Hybrid Learning:* Between August 2020 and June 2022, schools were allowed to operate in one of many combinations allowing students on campus and teaching students virtually at home.

- *North Carolina Standards for School Executives (NCSSE):* These are the standards that the Public Schools of North Carolina use to define standards of operation for school executives— principals and assistant principals.

- *Note*: The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) website provides several documents describing the North Carolina Standards for School Executives (NCSSE)—some list seven standards, and others list eight. The discrepancy lies in the addition of an Academic Achievement Leadership standard. School administrators in North Carolina public schools are currently evaluated using only the first seven standards. Therefore, the discussion contained in this paper will focus on the first seven standards: Strategic Leadership, Instructional Leadership, Cultural Leadership, Human Resource Leadership, Managerial Leadership, External Development Leadership, and Micro-political Leadership.

Rationale

The education community, like most of the world, was paralyzed by the COVID pandemic. Educators were forced into a mode of operation that they were ill-prepared to enter, nor did they always have the resources for success. We will likely not know the fallout from COVID-19 education for quite some time. However, information is starting to come to light on strategies utilized in schools resulting in varying degrees of success. Whether or not another pandemic event like COVID-19 will happen is yet to be seen. Nevertheless, research into the

strategies that educational leaders used during the pandemic is necessary and vital to the evolution of educational leadership and the development of future crisis-management strategies.

The data collected and shared in this study will become part of an ongoing body of research into effective and ineffective school strategies as a reaction to the extreme stresses of pandemic education. Everyone in public education experienced the effects of COVID-19 in some form or another. There is value in identifying how educational leaders in different schools operated during this time and what strategies they found to be effective.

Statement of the Problem

Educational leadership has changed drastically since its inception, and it has evolved partially through a focused effort to create leadership standards. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) has adopted the national leadership standards and has created their own *North Carolina Standards for School Executives* (NCSSE). However, during COVID-19 education, these standards did not fully address the role of the school leader.

Site-based school leaders were forced to seek out alternative leadership strategies that could attempt to guide them through an educational crisis they were not prepared for. After pandemic education ended, the needs of schools and the operational strategies used to guide educational leaders did not suddenly return to normal. As such, the NCSSE no longer addressed the role of the school leaders. Post-COVID, there is a need to re-examine and restructure the NCSSE in order to accurately reflect the role of the school leader in North Carolina public schools.

Researcher's Background and Personal Perspective

In March of 2020, when Governor Roy Cooper announced the COVID shutdown for schools in North Carolina, I was in my fourteenth year in the North Carolina education system. I

began teaching high school English and then became a Physical Education teacher. I also served as a coach, team leader, bus driver, Driver's Education instructor, and associate athletic director. In my thirteenth year, I was promoted to Assistant Principal and Athletic Director at the high school level. I was in my second year as an assistant principal when the pandemic hit.

Going into the summer of the 2019-2020 school year–the summer after the shutdown–I became the principal at the middle school that fed the high school I was at previously. In North Carolina during the 2020-2021 school year, North Carolina schools operated in a hybrid format, where some students were in school, and some students were at home participating in virtual instruction. The following school year, 2021-2022, students were allowed back in school, but there were still quarantine and social distancing protocols in place for most of the school year, and everyone in the school was required to wear a mask until February of 2022.

My experiences in different roles throughout COVID education give me a unique perspective on school leadership during the pandemic. Initially, I was an educational leader at a place I had, up until that point, spent my entire career. I then took a job as a principal in a new school, and I had to lead a staff and student body, many of whom I had never met before, during a highly stressful time. I experienced the pandemic from multiple different viewpoints. My experiences with leadership during the pandemic, explicitly relating to schools, provided me with a framework for investigating the unique phenomenon of leadership during COVID.

Current Research Findings

The research on COVID-19 and its effects on educational leadership is very much an emerging field. Pandemic education, as defined in this dissertation, lasted just over two years. Many educational leaders, including the participants in the research study described in Chapter 3 of this document, are familiar with the short-term struggles that school personnel and students

faced as a result of the pandemic. However, the long-term effects of the school shutdown and a quick re-entry into schools will continue to be defined by pandemic research that focuses on educational leadership.

Due to lockdown and distancing protocols, the role of academics in schools was forced to change within only a couple of days. Because of this rapid change, school leaders had to begin finding ways to support the needs of their staff and students immediately. Dumulescu and Muțiu, (2021) studied the characteristics of academic leadership in higher education during the COVID-19 crisis. They found three main themes that emerged through inductive analysis of focus group interview transcripts: the leader's personal attributes, unity through decentralization, and opportunities to reinvent the university (Dumulescu & Muțiu, 2021, p. 5). This study showed that a combination of factors, including educational leaders' personal traits and organizational abilities, were important factors in mitigating drastic changes in the academic expectations of and abilities of students in higher education during COVID-19 education.

There is evidence in the scholarship that the role of educational leaders changed during the pandemic. Dablo et al. (2023) describe the challenges school leaders were faced with due to economic and community distress, increased job complexity, and internal challenges in maintaining instructional integrity. The researchers recognized that managerial tasks were not synonymous with leadership, and that the school leaders they studied had to be flexible and innovative in leading schools through a *new normal* (Dablo et al., 2023, p. 97).

Abiola and Oduol (2021), focusing on schools in Nigeria, showed that school leaders faced many stresses as a result of drastic changes precipitated by the pandemic. They reported frustration with technology, financial instability, and inadequate time to complete the regular parts of their jobs in addition to the managerial tasks that were added because of the pandemic.

They also showed that school leaders had to make adjustments to their leadership styles, focusing on delegation of tasks, reprioritizing time, utilizing digital communication methods more, and finding new ways to foster relationships.

In normal operation, school leaders are faced daily with many challenges, and during the pandemic, school leaders faced challenges more rapidly than ever before (Özdaş & Demïr, 2023). One of the major challenges was trying to maintain instructional integrity where there was little or no prior planning for the implementation of distance education. Özdaş and Demïr (2023) reported that two-thirds of school principals they interviewed found the educational practices used in distance education to be insufficient. This was due to many factors, including the lack of knowledge and resources to set up distance education, little to no training of teachers specific to distance education, and a lack of infrastructure specific to this type of teaching and learning.

Purpose, Questions, and Methods

The purpose of the study described in this dissertation is to add to an emerging body of scholarship focused on educational leadership specific to COVID-19 education. Specifically, this research details the lived experiences of site-based educational leadership in K-12 public schools in Western North Carolina. The research was guided by three research questions:

1. How did the work of school leaders change during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. What barriers (if any) did school leaders encounter while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic?

3. Did the COVID-19 pandemic influence lasting changes in the school leader's role and should the current leadership standards be revised to reflect these changes?

These questions helped to provide focus in my literature review, methodology, participant selection, data analysis, and recommendations.

Research Methods

I conducted research from November of 2022 through March 2023 by sending an initial survey to all school administrators in five Western North Carolina school districts. Data collection from 52 respondents to the initial poll helped guide the creation of questions in two focus group interviews. I coded the transcripts from the focus group interviews and follow-up interviews using inductive and deductive analysis to identify themes from the interviews.

The focus group interviews included ten participants from six different school districts in Western North Carolina. There was a varying degree of administrative experience and overall experience in education. However, all participants had experienced COVID-19 education as educators, and all participants were site-based administrators at the time of the study. Initially, there were two separate interviews with five participants in each session. Two weeks later, there was a follow-up with two different groups to ask clarifying questions and member check.

The data was looked at through a constructivist lens with a Phenomenological framework. A constructivist lens helps to create new data while building on a construct–educational leadership–that had already been created. I used phenomenology as an approach to qualitative study. The event, or phenomenon, of COVID-19 education was experienced by everyone in North Carolina public schools. Individual experiences, if analyzed separately, could create a subjective storyline of how educational leaders operated during this time. However, when these experiences were collected and analyzed together, they created objective data that painted a larger picture of how site-based administrators led through COVID-19 (Larsen and Adu, 2022).

Both inductive and deductive analysis were used to understand the data. The use of two different types of analysis–inductive and deductive–allowed me to uncover a variety of themes

that emerged from the data. The inductive analysis uncovered themes that became apparent through consistency in participant responses–Preparing for the Unknown and Uncertainty, Increased Workload and Taking on New Responsibilities, Lack of Resources, Instruction on the Back Burner, Different Approaches to Schooling, Increased Exposure to Technology, Inequity, and Ineffective Home Education. The deductive analysis related participant responses in relation to an existing protocol–The North Carolina Standards for School Executives.

Overview of the North Carolina Standards for School Executives

In 1987, the National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration (NCEEA) determined, based on scholarship and political pushes for alignment, that there was a need to define the role of the educational leader. Many organizations, made up of educational experts in the field, attempted to align educational leadership expectations and describe what an educational leader's role should be. In 1996, the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) published the first set of national standards for school administration. These standards were adopted by many state educational agencies across the United States, including The Public Schools of North Carolina.

The North Carolina Standards for School Executives were initially created in 2006 when The Public Schools of North Carolina adopted their own standards in 2006 for public school principals. These standards–Strategic Leadership, Instructional Leadership, Cultural Leadership, Human Resource Leadership, Managerial Leadership, External Development Leadership, and Micropolitical Leadership–were designed to create a framework for North Carolina school principals and assistant principals to operate under. Site-based administrators are evaluated annually based on these seven standards.

Usefulness of This Study

The COVID-19 pandemic is still relatively new. The research surrounding it is also emerging, particularly regarding the role of the school administrator during pandemic education. This study details the unique perspectives of site-based public school leaders in several neighboring counties in Western North Carolina. It is unique because it details the ways these school leaders navigated the ever-changing landscape of pandemic education. Even though each school leader worked through the pandemic and many of the accompanying mandates passed down from the different sections of the government, they had to determine the best courses of action for their own schools. They worked within the bounds of the North Carolina Standards for School Executives they are evaluated on and, in some cases, worked outside those boundaries to meet their organization's needs. An analysis of this process and an open discussion with those intimately involved will be valuable to the COVID-19 analysis research.

Chapter 1 Summary

In this chapter, I described the purpose of this study, the rationale, the research design, and the usefulness to the field of research. The COVID-19 pandemic was a shock to the educational system, and it showed just how vulnerable education was to a major disruption. The school leaders that are part of the study analyzed in this paper are part of a unique system that took part in holding the educational structure of public school together when there was no practical set of guidance available. The discussion in the next chapter will show that there is a great deal about traditional leadership strategies and the building of educational leadership standards in the conventional literature. A detailed analysis of the processes that educational leaders underwent, and how they chose to utilize or ignore the standards during a crisis, however,

is currently beginning to emerge in the literature. An analysis of these processes is both useful

and necessary for the future of public education.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I will briefly define the evolution of the modern school leader in American education. I will then outline the creation of the national standards for school leaders and North Carolina's adopted standards. Next, I will discuss the traditional and nontraditional leadership styles detailed in the supporting literature as styles used by educational leaders during COVID-19 education and other educational crises.

The paper, as a whole, is an analysis of the ways site-based educational leaders were able to lead their schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following chapter is an analysis of literature on the field of educational leadership, including a timeline of leadership standardization and a listing of different types of educational leadership. During normal times, these school leaders are guided by a set of universal standards, the North Carolina Standards for School Executives (NCSSE). In order to understand the choices some of these school leaders made with regard to the NCSSE, it is important to first understand how these standards came to be, and how they have evolved over time, and then detail additional leadership strategies that are not listed as part of the NCSSE.

Modern Educational Leadership

The first school leaders were not leaders at all but were teachers–mostly male–who were in charge of a one-room schoolhouse. Though these figures have gone into folklore as pioneers of early modern education, these educators' roles in the community were less than appealing (Rousmaniere, 2013). For the most part, they did not have a high standing in the community, and they were often mocked and ridiculed by townsfolk and the students. There are tales of teachers being beaten and bullied by students and parents alike. Early teachers worked in small

schoolhouses with sparse funding and very little support from the local government. One report represented an early nineteenth-century educator in an offensive manner:

> Man, who was disabled to such an extent that he could not engage in manual labor—who was lame, too fat, too feeble, had.... fits or was too lazy to work—well, they usually made school masters out of these, and thus got work they could out of them. (Rousmaniere, 2013, p. 9).

These early school leaders worked in isolation and had no affiliation with unions or professional organizations to provide support.

The roles of early principals and superintendents were not much different than teachers. In 1926, a national study of elementary principals sought to differentiate between the roles of *principal* and *teacher*. Not only did the study find it "difficult to tell where one stage ceased and the next began," it identified a host of different names for the principal: principal, head teacher, teaching principal, building principal, and supervisory principal (Rousmaniere, 2013, p. 30). Principal salaries were fairly low compared to other professionals with similar education and responsibilities, especially considering the early school principals filled many roles, ranging from teacher and supervisor to coach and custodian. The role of the principal needed to be defined in greater detail; the principalship would find momentum on the heels of the progressive education movement (Rousmaniere, 2013).

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, education was changing direction. The Progressive Education Movement saw a battle between two groups of educational progressives–pedagogical progressives and administrative progressives–with very different ideas about the purpose of education. The pedagogical progressives believed that education should connect subject matter to student lives which would, in turn, improve society (Schul, 2019). Administrative progressives

viewed schools as an extension of business and wanted to manage schools scientifically based on an efficiency model. The administrative progressives saw their desires overtake those of the pedagogical progressives, and as such, education has been dominated by standards-based accountability (Schul, 2019, pp. 66-71). Educational reformers also looked to redefine the role of the school leader.

Educational reformers and progressives sought to create a modern system of schooling and viewed the role of the principal as an important piece of that system. One of the points of emphasis of this movement was to solidify the principal as an authoritative figure in the schools, separate the office of the principal from that of the teacher, and "reinforce the authority of the principal as supervisor over teachers" (Rousmaniere, 2013, p. 31). The administrative progressives looked to solidify the principal/administrator as the one who would define the direction of the school and put into place bureaucratic management structures that became the framework for early educational leadership.

Standardizing Educational Leadership

Beginning with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESSA) in 1965, public schools that accepted federal monetary assistance were asked to produce quantifiable results. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was created to provide a large-scale focus on gathering data. While NAEP did set the stage for future accountability models, it was initially not designed to focus on standardized testing (Shepard, 2008). After *A Nation at Risk* was printed in 1983–a report underlining the need for educational reform in America–a commission was created to examine why America's schools seemingly missed the mark with student performance. The reintroduction of NAEP in 1988 created achievement levels to show what

"students should be able to do" (Shepard, 2008, p. 29). As a result, many states started creating standardized tests aimed at minimum competency.

Between 1983 and 1990, there was a national push to raise educational standards in schools. As a result, the governing bodies in education started heavily assessing schools, administrators, teachers, and students using a battery of metrics to uncover which schools were effectively teaching students and which were not (Rousmaniere, 2013). The era of standardization in educational leadership had begun.

Adopting Leadership Standards

Early educational leadership was very broad and mostly undefined. The creation of standards was an attempt to centralize leadership oversight and create accountability measures for school leadership. The creation of the standards was predicated on the "belief that the profession required a stronger and more unified center of gravity and that the profession was more than a conglomerate of various holding companies. There was also a need to focus on leading learning instead of leading organizations" (Murphy, 2017, p. 2). The following timeline provides a synopsis of the evolution of the national standards for school leadership:

- 1987 - National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration (NCEEA) reported a need for increased influence on school leadership preparation and creating a definition of educational leadership

- 1987 - National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) was formed as a reaction to NCEEA

- 1987-1996 - Funding was secured, and policies began to be developed to create standards for school leadership

- 1996 - The Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) published the first set of national standards for school administration

- 1996-2008 - Debates ensued regarding the efficacy, usefulness, and content of the ISLLC standards

- 2008 - A revised set of the ISLLC standards was published

- 2013 - A second revision to the ISLLC standards was published, and ownership of the standards was shifted to the NPBEA (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015, p. 2)

The standards were initially part of a combined effort by NPBEA members from 24 states. The national discussion amongst many educational scholars focused on the addition and omission of specific content. A much larger contingency of organizations and individuals influenced the changes, so the standards became more tightly governed (Murphy, 2017).

Many states now use administrative standards designed to analyze the effectiveness of school leaders. In this study, *leaders* are defined as site-based administrators. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (2013), the state legislative role is to define expectations for school administrators and detail how effective evaluation can improve their practice, ultimately affecting student outcomes. The report, however, mentions the inconsistency of these expectations:

> Many state and district evaluations are not aligned to performance standards, valid and reliable methods for evaluation are few and far between, and little emphasis is given to evaluator training. In addition, few rigorous principal performance assessments exist that are intended for use in hiring, advancement, and tenure decisions. Additional research is

clearly needed to fill knowledge gaps around the quality, use, and influence of principal

assessments. (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2013, p. 4)

Despite the inconsistencies reported in accurately defining the role of educational leaders, the

report goes on to state that forty-seven out of fifty states use some type of principal effectiveness

standards (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2013, p. 5).

In 2015, the NPBEA reported the need to revise the 2008 standards. A great deal had

changed in schools and for school leaders since the first standards were introduced. The report

details a few reasons including, but not limited to, the changes in demographics, characteristics

of students, family make-up, policy revision, and an increased focus on accountability coupled

with cuts in funding (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015, p. 1).

The second revision of the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC)

national standards for school leaders happened because of the need to refocus the standards of

educational leadership (Murphy, 2017). Each iteration of the national standards was the result of

a new consensus in the field, noting the need for a shift in thinking about the role leaders play in

schools, and the need to define the standards school leaders should exemplify. The NPBEA

(2015) reported the need for a "stronger, clearer emphasis on student learning," leading with a

positive approach that focuses on human potential and managing the transitions and shifts that

happen in a rapidly changing world (National Policy Board for Educational Administration,

2015, p. 2).

Creating North Carolina Leadership Standards

The Public Schools of North Carolina adopted their own standards in 2006 for public

school principals based primarily on two studies: McREL's 2005 balanced leadership research

and a 2003 study of principal practices entitled *Making Sense: A Study of the Principalship* (Gummerson et al., 2022, p. 467; Marzano et al., 2005; Portin et al., 2003;). Their *North Carolina School Executive: Principal and Assistant Principal Evaluation Process* document details seven standards to encapsulate what a school leader should include in their portfolio of operations. The following is a list of each standard, along with the first sentence describing the standard, as published by the Public Schools of North Carolina (2013):

- Standard 1: Strategic Leadership - School executives will create conditions that result in strategically re-imaging the school's vision, mission, and goals in the 21st century (p. 12).

- Standard 2: Instructional Leadership - School executives will set high standards for the professional practice of 21st-century instruction and assessment that result in a no-nonsense, accountable environment (p. 12).

- Standard 3: Cultural Leadership - School executives will understand and act on the understanding of the important role a school's culture contributes to the exemplary performance of the school (p. 13).

- Standard 4: Human Resource Leadership - School executives will ensure that the school is a professional learning community (p. 14).

- Standard 5: Managerial Leadership - School executives will ensure that the school has processes and systems in place for budgeting, staffing, problem-solving, communicating expectations, and scheduling that result in organizing the work routines in the building (p. 15).

- Standard 6: External Development Leadership - A school executive will design structures and processes that result in community engagement, support, and ownership (p. 15).

- Standard 7: Micropolitical Leadership - The school executive will build systems and relationships that utilize the staff's diversity, encourage constructive ideological conflict in order to leverage staff expertise, power and influence to realize the school's vision for success (p. 16).

In North Carolina, these are the seven standards used to assess assistant principals and principals as part of their annual summative evaluation and are not intended to operate independently of one another. The standards are intended to "prescribe specific actions, encouraging those involved in educational leadership and its development to adapt their application to be most effective in particular circumstances and contexts" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 4).

Public Standard of Leadership

In addition to school leaders being evaluated using the NSSE standards, the public generally relies upon the state's school report card to rate the performance of leaders and their schools. Muse and Abrams (2011) state that "there is little doubt the public eye is keenly focused on school principals to deliver results in the form of increased student achievement" (p. 49). The increase in testing and tight adherence to accountability measures is an example of what Hatch (2013) describes as "resource dependency theory," necessitating organizations analyzing power dynamics and determining where resources should be routed and where they are unnecessary (p. 85).

Kaplan, Owings, and Nunnery (2005) describe how much pressure is placed on school leaders to produce acceptable accountability performance numbers. They report a vast discrepancy between what superintendents see as valuable leadership focus versus what principals value. Kaplan et al. (2005) state, "Sixty-three percent of superintendents say the biggest part of how they evaluate principals is how successful they are at raising student

achievement" (p. 30). Moreover, 73% of superintendents suggest "it is a good idea to hold principals accountable for students' standardized test scores at the building level" (Kaplan et al., 2005, as cited in Farcas, et al., 2003, p. 30). Forty-eight percent of principals disagree and believe that holding principals accountable for student testing results is a poor reflection of who they are as school leaders (Kaplan et al., 2005).

Educational Leadership's COVID-19 Shift

In many ways, the leadership paradigm shifted instantly when COVID shutdowns happened, and determining *best practices* during the pandemic has been frustrating for school leaders. The pandemic required many school leaders to make a series of decisions that were extremely difficult and forced reactions to directives passed down from government agencies (Harris & Jones, 2020). As a result, these school leaders became what Harris and Jones (2020) call a *pinch point* (para. 8). They had to take in information, guidance, and directives from higher-ranking government officials and figure out how to efficiently enact the directives while operating in the best interest of their students and staff. It was a daunting task.

Many school districts closed for live instruction in the middle of March 2020. Within the next week, however, most had a plan to deliver digital instruction to the estimated 1.6 billion students who were out of school (Azorín, 2020; Harris, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020). School leaders had to quickly determine how to manage an intensely stressful situation with little to no guidance. In many instances, government entities at the federal and state levels made decisions about the educational community without their input (Kwatubana & Malaodi, 2021). Education had to be "re-crafted, re-designed, and re-booted as a home-based, technology-enabled, online activity" (Harris, 2020, p. 1). School leaders, under intense pressure, had to find new ways to provide a safe environment for students to learn (Harris, 2020). They had to determine what was

possible, what pieces of *normal* education needed to be continued or abandoned (Netolicky, 2020).

In March 2020, North Carolina schools had to close while adjusting to governmental requirements they could not have foreseen. On Saturday, March 14, 2020, Governor Roy Cooper issued North Carolina Executive Order 117 (2020), ordering all mass gatherings to cease and announced the closure of all schools effective on the following Monday, March 16. The executive order mandated that schools be closed until March 30. On March 23, North Carolina Executive Order 120 (2020) announced the closing of schools until May 15, 2020. Subsequently, North Carolina Executive Order 138 (2020) arrived on May 5, 2020, announcing the closure of schools for the remainder of the school year and the cancellation of all standardized testing for the 2019-2020 school year. Executive Order 138 (2020) also issued restrictions for graduation and end-of-year ceremonies as required by the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS). Schools and school leaders had little control over what was allowed in their schools, yet they had to find a way to deliver instruction to students in the best way possible.

Even after multiple years of working through COVID-19, disagreement exists about what is best for students. Some scholars support increasing teacher and school leaders' knowledge of technology for distance, blended, or hybrid learning (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020). Others support resistance to wholesale digital learning transformations and a return to more hands-on, active learning that utilizes less technology (Hargreaves, 2022). There are suggestions to utilize low-tech devices–like radios, television, and SMS messaging–that are more accessible to a larger population of students (Mundy & Hares, 2020). Others believe that, due to insufficient data developed during a shortened time frame, it is still too early to tell if

education needs to change significantly or if the traditional education model can come back into play (Harris, 2020).

Intersection of Traditional Leadership Standards and Pandemic Leadership

When the world essentially shut down due to a growing fear of the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of contemporary education leaders suddenly shifted. The pandemic brought about educational changes that were impossible to predict and almost as challenging to navigate. Educational leadership is not entirely different because of COVID-19. However, there has been a call to repurpose and redesign leadership standards to develop leaders who are able to lead public schools in increasingly turbulent times. The following section will discuss how some of the traditional leadership models–recognized in the *North Carolina Standards for School Executives*– were reimagined during the period of COVID education.

Instructional Leadership (NC Executive Leadership Standard 2)

Baker et al. (2020) studied the needs of school leaders in an environment that changed drastically due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They highlighted the vast uncertainty that the pandemic created and the shift in traditional, in-person instruction to a more digitized, virtual environment. They detailed the need to redefine the role of educational leadership. Though the study was intended to examine the school librarian's role in instructional leadership, its findings discussed the need for instructional leadership in schools. Principals were identified as the primary instructional leaders in schools and the researchers detailed the vital role these school leaders play in influencing instructional leadership throughout the organization (Baker et al., 2020).

Instructional leaders must attend to the specific instructional and academic needs within schools. Instructional leadership focuses on teaching and learning, curriculum development,

professional development (PD), testing preparation, collective decision-making, and other items centered around student accountability. Much scholarship is directed at defining the importance of school administrators being instructional leaders (Augustine, 2009; Schmoker, 2016; Whitaker, 2012). McEwan-Adkins (2003) believes that instructional leaders have a significant and lasting impact on their schools. She cites many research studies that define *instructional leadership* as a critical component of effective educational leadership.

Instructional leadership has been championed by those wanting to change student outcomes in education. Practices employed by instructional leaders are focused primarily on teaching and learning or anything that falls within that umbrella (King, 2002). Because schools operate in very diverse demographic areas, instructional leadership from one school to the next inevitably looks different due to the differing needs of students. For example, instructional leaders in one school may be focused on creating joint planning and team teaching to reach students that need specific interventions. Leaders in another school may look to create community partnerships with local businesses to provide students internship and apprenticeship opportunities. Simply put, instructional leaders look for ways to affect how students and teachers learn in different contexts. However, King (2002) does note that–at least in its first phases– instructional leadership is generally focused on the physical space, how it is managed, and how people operate within it.

Instructional leaders seek ways to give others within the organization an opportunity to take on responsibility (King, 2002). This goes beyond simple delegation and asks those within the organization to take on a variety of roles to help the organization progress as a whole. In addition, since societal climates are ever-changing, instructional leaders must create processes

that help keep themselves and the people within their organization abreast of current research and best practices to most effectively reach the students they teach.

Instructional school leaders are present in classrooms and meetings with teachers (Augustine, 2009). They work to find professional development opportunities for their staff and encourage education and training for all levels of personnel in the building–from students to administration. Augustine (2009) believes that an instructional leader's ability to create and manage curriculum and select and support teachers who are successful is meaningful pieces for instructional leaders. Many within education circles agree that an administrator's primary responsibility should be instructional leadership.

Due to spacing requirements on campus, masks, limited space in classrooms due to social-distancing protocols, and virtual learning for students isolated in their homes, the pandemic made instructional leadership much more difficult. The focus had to be maintained on providing quality instruction and supporting staff in maintaining that structure (Leithwood, 2021). In addition, educational leaders needed to encourage collaborative planning, co-teaching, and distributed leadership, as these are effective strategies that significantly impact student learning (Harris & Jones, 2020; Leithwood, 2021; Von Dohlen & Karvonen, 2018).

Cultural Leadership (NC Executive Leadership Standard 3)

Organizational culture is paramount in developing leadership. In its simplest form, culture is a standard operating procedure that serves as a framework for the people within an organization. However, the standards of operation have had to shift due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2000) state that "culture is the way in which a group of people solves problems and reconciles dilemmas" (p. 6). When viewed broadly, culture is a roadmap or plan for maneuvering amongst people with different personalities and intentions.

However, it is nearly impossible to define because of its constant fluidity and complex system of interactions. Therefore, leaders are charged with delineating an organization's culture, assessing its relation to the ideals and mission, and finding ways to continually allow the culture to reinvent itself with direction from those within.

Dimmock and Walker (2005) create a distinction between "culture and subculture" (p. 65), and both constructs affect one another. Many organizations focus on culture as a unified process and consistency of operational modes. However, organizations are diverse, and schools are no exception. They write:

> On the one hand, the concept of culture can help make sense of such related concepts as organizational consensus, shared values, and transformational leadership. On the other hand, the concept of sub-culture provides the basis for understanding organizational diversity, group identity, conflict, and micro-political processes. (Dimmock & Walker, 2005, p. 65)

Both cultures and subcultures must work in unison. Unfortunately, schools can often be places where teachers operate on islands, in silos, or behind closed doors. While there is a place in education for autonomy and personalization, post-pandemic leaders must be able to balance and support the sub-cultures while simultaneously creating a collective culture that continues to move forward.

It is important to remember that culture is not static, nor should it be. Organizational culture–particularly educational culture–constantly reimages the system of beliefs that individuals within an organization share. It is an educational leader's responsibility to create a focus for the changes and ensure that the processes within which changes take place align with the school community's mission and purpose. Dimmock and Walker (2005) describe the

importance of "reculturing" an organization (p. 69). This occurs through the communication of stakeholders–including students, teachers, other school personnel, and community members. This *reculturing* through dialog and collaborative decision-making creates a system of distributed leadership that can move an organization beyond where a typical bureaucratic leadership structure would allow it to go (Dimmock & Walker, 2005, p. 70). Beyond that–perhaps more importantly–it will allow an organization to continue to change, even in the absence of the principal or other administrators.

During COVID-19, personal and societal relationships were adversely affected and collaborative time became more important when stay-at-home orders were mandated and people were subsequently isolated (Harris, 2020). A specific focus on developing a collaborative culture is paramount during times of stress and crisis. Educational leaders had to learn to not only establish but also guard collaboration time as an essential part of post-pandemic leadership and education (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020). Communication with others and networking using multiple platforms–social media, email, virtual meetings, and in-person meetings became essential to running schools. It needs to be a significant area of focus moving forward (Harris, 2020).

Managerial Leadership (NC Executive Leadership Standard 5)

Until the COVID-19 pandemic hit, many school leaders focused primarily on academic standards and student growth measures. During the pandemic, much of their attention shifted to students' perceptions of their ability to remain calm in difficult circumstances, demonstrate transparency in decision-making, and ability to create comfort in schools that were suddenly more regimented with specific digital platforms and social distancing (Yokuş, 2022). School leaders faced a much more complex role with many additional layers. A plethora of ever-

changing governmental directives, requirements from health departments, and mandates from local school boards all added to the *normal* job requirements of school personnel. Educational leaders had to find ways to bring a sense of calm during incredibly turbulent times. School leaders oversaw systems ill-prepared for a pandemic and had to adjust to the management of an unpredictable future. This "new normal reflect[ed] unfamiliar changes not only in social life, economy, health but also in educational institutions" (Yokuş, 2022, p. 362).

Muse and Abrams (2011) highlighted the importance of managing in dynamic, complex environments. School leaders must be well-versed in instructional leadership. They must also be able to delegate responsibility and train others in taking on roles aimed at improving student outcomes through better instruction. In addition, school leaders must be good communicators: inclusive of different processes of thought; respectful of the needs of students, staff, parents, and community; up to date on policies and procedures and able to prioritize items of importance over those that are less pressing (Muse & Abrams, 2011, p. 51). Managing rapid and unfamilied change is a necessary leadership skill.

Education has changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and educational leaders have also had to change. Marshall et al. (2020) mention the difficulties that leaders faced when they had to find ways for their schools to transition into digital learning, even though they were unprepared to do so. "Equity, access, teacher training, and infusion of technology" were (Marshall et al., 2020, p. 31) challenges that leaders needed to address just to have their schools function from day to day. Focusing on schools in Barbados and Canada, they detailed the importance of strategic planning and distributed leadership. The researchers cited four critical behaviors that influential leaders projected during COVID-19:

1. Providing clear direction

2. Communicating effectively

3. Working collaboratively, and

4. Engaging in adaptive leadership. (Marshall et al., 2020, p. 33)

Leaders in the schools they analyzed were willing to embrace change, primarily when the change was managed collectively.

The inherent changes due to the pandemic have created a need to redefine what is operationally necessary for school leaders. Harris and Jones (2020) describe how being able to manage crises and change are now vital parts of an educational leader's toolkit; school leaders will likely be actively managing crises and change at some level for years to come. The authors believe that, upon the arrival of COVID-19, there were no leadership standards, preparation, development programs, Key Performance Indicators (KPI), or blueprints that could have prepared educators for the challenges that they faced (Harris & Jones, 2020, p. 246). Educational leaders cannot rely solely on past standards and practices that may have worked during stable times. Looking forward, educational leaders have to be prepared to act differently.

Recognizing the Need for Non-Standard Leadership

Parts of educational leadership during COVID learning had to be adapted *on the fly*. While the traditional standards for school executives were valuable, school leaders also discovered other leadership categories containing particular shared characteristics not included in the current standards that were of equal, if not greater, value. The following section will describe these categories as recognized in the scholarship.

Crisis Leadership

It is common thinking that in times of crisis, good leadership requires the ability to act quickly (Netloicky, 2020). However, part of the stress on school leaders during COVID-19 was

the constant change of pace when making decisions. "The pace of change and constantly shifting landscape mean that intuition and speed are required but also conscious, deliberate and well-considered planning" (Netolicky, 2020, p. 392). Government officials and state education agencies required answers and descriptions to some questions immediately, even though those decisions may not have been thoroughly vetted.

Klann (2003) discussed the need to assess and triage during a crisis. He also mentions the importance of leaders meeting with people within their charge to gauge emotions, answer questions, and ensure feelings of comfort that their needs are being addressed. Klann (2003) discussed what those looking for leadership in a crisis will think, warned, "If they are not told what is going on, their fears and anxieties about the crisis can turn into anger, distrust, and even revenge. And the organization will become the target of these emotions and possibly of destructive behavior" (p. 45). People look for leadership in times of crisis for guidance and direction. Leaders think differently in a crisis and tend to focus their attention to the future, while others tend to get hung up on the minutiae and small details (Whitaker, 2012).

Wheatley (2002) details how leaders who try to control circumstances are doomed to fail. During stress and chaos, people are looking for someone to lead them. Very often, though, people try to lead through control. Ineffective leaders believe that the people they supervise want to have someone save them or bring them through difficult times unscathed. According to Wheatley (2002), true leaders show people how to operate in times of uncertainty and how to stave off feelings of fear to regain control of their lives. There is a need for a spiritual connection with the world and being able to thrive in conditions that are never precisely ideal.

Academic, Social, and Emotional Leadership

Academic, social, and emotional leadership recognizes that academics and emotional responses are not mutually exclusive. Haynes et al. (2015) describe the importance of combining cognitive and academic exercises with social and emotional learning in order to reach students in a way that helps to develop such core competencies as "self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making" (p. 54). Unfortunately, the constructs of academics and social/emotional learning are often separated in schools. Characteristic of their profession, teachers tend to focus on academic learning, while counselors and school psychologists focus on social/emotional learning. School leaders who choose to integrate the two risk stepping away from the traditional education model that emphasizes proficiency and accountability. However, schools that integrate academic, social, and emotional models tend to improve their academics and test scores. Students in these schools "had better school attendance, less disorderly behavior, enjoyed school more, did better academically and had fewer suspensions from school" (Haynes et al., 2015, p. 57). Moving to this model entails a total re-envisioning of the traditional school environment, including taking time away from standards and core instruction in order to spend time plugging into social and emotional education and training.

Some school leaders are resistant to taking time away from academics. There is now a greater need than ever for developing trauma and healing-informed practice (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020). The pandemic provided challenges of all sorts for individuals and organizations all across the world. School personnel were asked to oversee the well-being of their students, but little was done for the well-being of teachers and staff. Kim and colleagues (2022), discussing the experiences of teachers in England during the pandemic, mention that there was a multitude

of factors that contributed to teacher stress during the pandemic including: increased workload, feelings of being inadequately prepared for digital teaching, increased demands on life away from school, lack of resources for teaching online, and general uncertainty of the future of the educational landscape. The stress placed on teachers led to higher attrition rates and feelings of inadequacy and job satisfaction.

During the pandemic, teachers had to, without hesitation, find ways to serve their students best. They had to redirect old ways of thinking and find new solutions to reaching students who were no longer meeting with them face to face without many of the necessary resources needed to manage online learning. In many places, teachers had to work in a more stressful environment for more hours than ever before. There was a great deal of uncertainty around what changes might come in the future. Many felt undervalued and unappreciated (Kim et al., 2022).

Since the COVID-19 pandemic is a phenomenon unlike any other experienced by this generation, the long-term effects on students, school staff, and schools are, in many ways, yet to be seen. Harris and Jones (2020) mention the lack of available research on the pandemic's long-term effect on education and underscore how important it will be to act as soon as that information is available. During the pandemic, many educational decisions needed to be made, and many were hotly contested and debated. Though there was a great deal of discussion about how to structure the return to learning during the pandemic, there was evidence pointing to the pandemic heightening the mental health needs of young people and adults. Harris and Jones (2020), describing pandemic reactions, write, "In this time of turmoil where quick solutions are required in a fast-changing world, the priority must be the well-being of leaders, teachers, learners, parents, and all stakeholders involved in reopening of school life" (p. 243).

Consequently, when schools reopened and remained open during the pandemic, leaders needed to pay attention to all stakeholders' mental health and well-being.

Kim et al. (2022) studied the mental health and well-being (MHWB) of 24 primary and secondary teachers in England across three-time points during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors found that the participants shared common frustrations in six key categories that contributed to stress on their MHWB: uncertainty, workload, negative perception of the profession, concern for others' well-being, health struggles, and multiple roles (Kim et al., 2022, p. 299). These areas created concern for the MHWB about the participants and are predictors of educator burnout and attrition, showing that the MHWB of teachers during the pandemic seemed to decline.

Social Justice Leadership

Social justice has been broadly defined in terms of its relationship to education and, as a construct, has been discussed in contemporary literature since the 1990s (Haynes et al., 2015). However, it has undergone many iterations, and its intentions can be widely characterized depending on the context. Dantley and Tillman (2006) mention that those in the field of educational leadership frame social justice around "several issues (e.g., race, diversity, marginalization, gender, spirituality). Although these areas are vitally important to any discussion of social justice, we add the challenging issues of age, ability, and sexual orientation to this discourse" (p. 17). Leadership focusing on social justice should analyze the framework that schools work within to reframe the overall intentions of the educational environment.

Social justice leadership creates the onus for challenging the status quo, attacking oppression, and pushing for equity. Dantley and Tillman (2006) reference Kumashiro's *anti-oppressive framework*, which includes a discussion of the term *other* regarding groups

traditionally marginalized in society. Kumashiro's framework suggests educating oneself about the *other* by creating a discussion allowing all students–privileged and non-privileged–to learn not only about each other but also how to combat oppression by discovering its roots in how people interact with one another.

Leaders need to be able to think beyond their immediate surroundings and be sensitive to a more broad, global perspective. Beachum (2011) uses the term "culturally relevant leadership" to describe a leadership style that is attentive to the needs of others and that is interested in equity and unity in the workplace (p. 27). Culturally relevant leadership does not simply acknowledge the existence of diversity in the workplace. Instead, it creates systems for accepting diversity and finds ways to help the organization and its people think more globally (Beachum, 2011). Leadership in this sense is transformative and shifting away from a traditional method of education.

Dantley and Tillman (2006) discuss the idea of transformative leadership in the educational setting. Transformative leadership involves leaving a traditionalist mindset in education and realizing how the creation of a power dynamic (or lack thereof for many) has fostered a system that has allowed a system of oppression to hold historically underrepresented groups back. Their idea of transformative leadership says that leaders within the school must dissect how leadership might "perpetuate inequities and the marginalization of members of the learning community who are outside of the dominant culture" (Dantley & Tillman, 2006, p. 19). They suggest that schools need to become agents of change by learning how to combat societal inequalities.

COVID's Spotlight on Inequity. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the need for social justice leadership more than ever to address the pandemic's disproportionate impact on

particular classes of students. Many of the problems created by the reaction to the virus may, in the long run, be worse than the virus itself. COVID will likely cause poverty rates to increase for the first time since the mid-1990s (Harris and Jones, 2020). Students living in poverty had a more difficult time keeping up with assignments during COVID due partly to a lack of access to devices and reliable internet (Hargreaves, 2022).

Many of the inequities noticed during COVID-19 have existed for a long time. COVID-19 not only exacerbated those inequities but brought a greater focus on them. The pandemic left an estimated 1.6 billion students out of school for extended amounts of time (Azorín, 2020; Harris, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020). Prior to the pandemic, the proximity to educational institutions was the main limiting factor for many students. During the pandemic, however, access to reliable internet, an electronic device, and a home set up for learning became a significant hurdle for many learners (Hargreaves, 2021). Mundy and Hares (2020) noted, "Students from households with greater levels of connectivity, higher levels of parental education, greater availability of books and materials have much better ability to access and benefit from distance learning" (para. 2).

Learning loss affects students that are away from school for extended periods. Summer learning loss traditionally (with an 8–10-week summer break) has an enormous impact on students, with students from low-income families disproportionately affected (Mundy & Hares, 2020). The COVID-19 closures in most of the world happened in March 2020 and then ran up against summer break in the United States. The following school year (2020-2021) saw many school systems start in an all-online format and then transition to some sort of hybrid learning during the year. As a result, many students were out of school for 8-10 months, with others

electing to stay out for the remainder of the 2020-2021 school year—which put those students out of school for 16 months or more.

Transformational Leadership

COVID educational leaders had to focus more heavily on transformational leadership strategies that would allow for being comfortable in a constantly changing environment (Marshall et al., 2020; Masry-Herzallah & Stavissky, 2021; Yokuş, 2022). Transformational leadership is a process that may look different in different organizations. West-Burnham (2009) says, "the mindscape has to change in order to change the landscape" (p. 9) to describe how creating change in an organization requires first creating intrinsic, personal change. This change is necessitated by the needs of the organization as a whole. Just as no two organizations look the same or contain the same groups of people, no two leaders should seek change within an organization without carefully analyzing their need for internal change. In other words, leaders cannot hope to initiate change in an organization without the ability to seek and accept personal change.

Leadership style directly impacts teachers' commitment to the school (Masry-Herzallah & Stavissky, 2021). Speaking specifically about the COVID-19 crisis and online learning, Masry-Herzallah and Stavissky (2021) listed "transformational leadership style and effective school communications as antecedents to [teachers'] perception of success in online teaching" (p. 893). Even though many students did not all want or enjoy online learning, the school leader's ability to make the adjustments necessary to make online learning accessible and applicable to all students was important.

Organizational change requires a shift in thinking. If members are open to transforming internally, an organization's mindset can shift without significant resistance. West-Burnham

(2009) notes that internal reflection requires an individual to assess how they operate alone and how their thoughts and actions might affect others within their environment. This practice can promote a culture of openness and acceptance of different ways of thinking by providing opportunities to learn from one another, which is critical to fostering unity within an organization.

Agile Leadership

Agile leadership is a form of interpersonal and organizational leadership that was vital during the pandemic. This is a type of leadership that–like its namesake–is founded on being able to move quickly and gracefully from one item to the next, particularly during times of stress. Leadership agility is "the ability to lead effectively when rapid change and uncertainty are the norm and when success requires consideration of multiple views and priorities" (Joiner, 2009, p. 29). Agile leaders are able to gain perspective from a variety of viewpoints, make decisions as the world turns around them, and predict what needs to come next based on their assessment of the situation.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused leaders in all types of organizations to have to think and operate differently. One of the many challenges of the pandemic was the ambiguity of direction. There were many different frames of thought regarding policy and best practices for leading through the pandemic on both a personal and professional level. There was also a great deal of discussion regarding how to continue progress despite the pandemic. Some believed society should operate based on known practices while others saw the COVID-19 pandemic as a problem that needed totally new solutions (Akkaya et al., 2021). Many organizations benefited from leaders who were agile in their reaction to the pandemic, and who were able to think

systematically about adapting and changing rather than trying to constantly react to shifting frames of thought.

Resilience. One trend that emerged in unison with agile leadership during the pandemic was *collective resilience*, which has to be developed from a systems perspective. Akkaya et al. (2021) note, "Both agility in organizational context and resilience are structured around a strong sense of clearly defined identity and purpose, as well as widely held organizational values and beliefs" (p. 2). Agility and resilience often go hand in hand, and organizational resilience is paramount to allowing adaptability and resistance to turbulence (McCann et al., 2009).

Resilience can be demonstrated through an organization's susceptibility to extremely stressful environments, like the COVID-19 pandemic. Organizations that survive times of extreme turbulence are those that restructure themselves around a core set of values (McCann et al., 2009). Being able to center around these values helps to promote relationship building and group thinking rather than having the fate of the organization rest on how a select few handle intense situations. It helps organizations to overcome damage from the outside world and rebuild differently in order to survive.

Agile Thinking. Leaders in times of disruption have to be able to think in ways that are outside of the norm, and sometimes against the grain. The world is not predictable and rational, so leaders should not expect to operate in a space that fits within those boundaries (Olivier et al., 2021). In fact, leaders should find ways to become comfortable and agile in unpredictable environments. Leaders create relationships with living, sentient beings who are all different from one another. This creates a complex system where a lot is determined with how individuals interact with one another.

Change and disruption are parts of any organization, and the way organizations change is rapidly increasing (Joiner & Josephs, 2007). Effective leaders are those who can be organized and quickly respond to changing environments, while motivating others around them to operate toward a common goal. Individuals under these circumstances should operate based on trust in their leadership, rather than trust in the environment or the circumstances (Joiner & Josephs, 2007). During the COVID -19 pandemic's aftermath, leaders with the ability to be agile were able to operate more effectively than those who tried to operate within predetermined parameters.

Self-awareness. Agile leaders are not only defined by interpersonal relationships but also by how they examine their own strengths and weaknesses to affect others. This is especially important during times of stress–both organizational and personal–because an agile leader knows what they need to focus on directly and what they might need to delegate (Yazici et al., 2022). Agile leaders focus constantly on learning and re-learning parts of who they are and how they affect the people around them.

Leading others, leading organizations, or both, can put those leading in positions of high stress. Stress and change are items that lower one's ability to lead with agility, can put a strain on relationships, and can influence burnout. Agile leaders, through being self-aware, are able to practice self-care and find ways to reduce stress (Joiner & Josephs, 2007). They are comfortable receiving feedback and are often proactive in seeking it out. They align their practice with their values and aspirations, which can help bring a sense of comfort when critical situations arise.

Systems Thinking. Organizations that tend to survive chaotic events are rarely reliant on individuals or a few individuals. Agile leadership involves creating a culture of leadership throughout the organization, with a mindset for examining the needs of the system as a whole.

Systems are interconnected. There really are no independent systems outside of controlled studies. All systems–and all items within the system–are reliant on other things to survive (Acaroglu, 2017). In the case of agile educational leadership, the items within the system–students, teachers, and staff–are reliant, in part, on the culture of leadership that is present in the school.

A systemic culture of agile leadership is important to organizational survival during times of serious stress, like the COVID-19 pandemic. A lot of attention has been paid to individuals who help their organizations through tough times, but agile leadership is about more than just the individual. Joiner (2009) mentions that "it is important to assess not only the agility levels of individual managers but also, at least informally, the agility level that predominates in the overall leadership culture" (p. 32). Agile leaders must examine the leadership structures that are in place within the organization, and then start to define how these structures might influence scalability, expansion, or sustainability.

Chapter 2 Summary

In this chapter, I began by defining early educational leadership–from the late-1800s to the present. I then defined the creation of national standards for educational leadership and North Carolina's adoption of their own leadership standards. Next, I listed the different types of educational leadership that align with the NCSSE and are outside of what is defined in the standards.

The North Carolina Standards for School Executives (NCSSE) are an integral piece of how educational leaders operate during normal times. They are a collection of leadership practices that have been adapted, based on research conducted by Portin et al. (2003), that described the practices that school leaders have that effectively move their schools forward.

However, these standards, especially during COVID-19 education, were not the only guiding principles that educational leaders looked toward. COVID-19 school leaders had to be well-versed in a variety of leadership strategies, many of which the average site-based administrator had never had to draw upon. In the next chapter, I will discuss the data collection methods, participant selection, research protocols, and paradigm description utilized in this study.

Chapter 3: Methods Used

The study described in this chapter uses a qualitative approach to tell the story of school leaders' decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic. Though some studies discuss the implications of crisis management, standard and non-standard decision-making, and moving forward during extreme stress, there is a need for a greater examination of the driving forces behind school leaders' decision-making during the COVID pandemic. This study observed how school leaders in Western North Carolina public schools operated during the pandemic crisis, their decision-making practices, their feelings of individual worth, how they interacted with and were changed by their decisions, and how both the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) and individual school leaders should refine their operational standards based on what they learned from the pandemic experience.

The scholarship around COVID-19 educational leadership provides suggestions–and sometimes research-based approaches–to adjusting educational leadership as a reaction to the pandemic. However, what is lacking is a description of how the lived experiences of school leaders in Western North Carolina public schools compare to one another, how these school leaders made decisions, and why they made them. Further inquiry is needed about leadership from within the school during the pandemic and leaders' reflections on those times.

Research Questions

1. How did the work of school leaders change during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. What barriers (if any) did school leaders encounter while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic?

3. Did the COVID-19 pandemic influence lasting changes in the school leader's role and should the current leadership standards be revised to reflect these changes?

Methodological Approach

Qualitative inquiry is a research technique that explores a subject or set of subjects. It is a search for deeper meaning, for the evolution of behavior, for meaning-making, or a host of other data that help to paint a picture of what is being researched. Qualitative research techniques differ from those focusing on more empirical, objective data collection. The use of qualitative design is intentional on the part of the researcher and is chosen because the paradigmatic thinking and methodology that supports qualitative research are necessary in the analysis of identified participants in a particular place.

Qualitative research explains a changing society, then interprets how society affects individuals and groups at a particular moment in time (Merriam, 2002). This type of research discovers how people might react differently to a given event or series of events. Qualitative researchers seek unique perspectives and meaning in areas that have not been examined before or answers to urgent questions that have not been found.

This study describes how the participants worked through the intricacies of being educational leaders before, during, and in the wake of the COVID pandemic. A qualitative approach is appropriate for this study because it allows the participants' stories to be told from their perspectives and using their words. Even though educational leaders in different schools or in different positions were reacting to similar influences manifested as a result of the COVID pandemic, the way they managed and continued to lead their schools was dependent on a combination of individual experiences, mindset, and planning associated with handling a traumatic event and preparing for recovery at its conclusion.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, I examine the qualitative data through a constructivist lens with a phenomenological framework. Nealon and Giroux (2012) describe constructivism as a cultural ideology:

> For there to be any knowledge at all, there has to be ideology in this sense; there has to be some preexisting agreement concerning what will *count* as knowledge, or what criteria will be used to judge new or developing knowledges. (Nealon & Giroux, 2012, p. 96)

Gaining knowledge deals greatly with a person's previous knowledge and how they construct meaning in the present tense based mainly on what has happened in the past. Walker (2002) defines constructivist thinking as "the theory of learners constructing meaning based upon their previous knowledge, beliefs, and experiences" (p. 1). The past guides the direction of the future.

A constructivist analysis of school leaders' experiences through the COVID-19 pandemic is appropriate because many of the struggles that school leaders faced were a reaction to what education *was supposed to be* rather than what it was. School leaders' prior knowledge shaped how they assembled and used new knowledge during the pandemic, and in many ways it limited their effectiveness as school leaders. Through inductive and deductive analysis of the data presented in this study, the constructivist concept of knowledge begetting further knowledge becomes more apparent as the school leaders describe their experience in unison with trying to maintain some semblance of the status quo in their schoolhouses.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is the study of "*phenomena*: appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience" (Smith, 2018, para. 4). The creation of phenomenology was an attempt redefine the

foundation of philosophy, and is largely credited to philosophers Edmund Husserl, Martin

Heidegger, Maurice Merlau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre in the early part of the 1900s (Smith,

2018; Titchen & Hobson, 2011). It was founded as a reaction to "epistemological concerns"

(Titchen and Hobson, 2011, p. 122) and helped lay the framework for other interpretive research

methodologies.

In a Husserlian context, phenomenology helps to create new meaning through lived

experiences and perceptions of events in the natural world. These perceptions, when gathered

together, create a "certain foundational sense of objectivity, which can serve as the starting point

for phenomenological investigations of meaning of the world" (Larsen & Adu, 2022, p. 7).

Heidegger's definition of phenomenology differed from Husserl's in that Heidegger saw a

person's contextual relation with things in the world as a defining characteristic of being (Smith,

2018). Other philosophers have debated the principles of phenomenology, but many of the

frames of thinking on the subject of phenomenology center around the idea that experience not

only has meaning, but the analysis of that experience can create new meaning.

Phenomenology is a specific qualitative methodology that looks to uncover how groups

of people might view a common construct, event, or phenomenon. It examines items that occur

to humans as conscious beings, but operates under the assumption that conscious beings will

have different lived experiences (Crotty, 2015). Crotty (2015), citing himself, writes,

"Phenomenology suggests that, if we lay aside...the prevailing understandings of those

phenomena and revisit our immediate experience of them, possibilities for new meaning emerge

for us or we witness at least an authentication and enhancement of former meaning" (Crotty,

1996/2015, p. 78). It is an exercise in not only subjectivity, but in creating non-judgmental views

of those that surround us.

It is important to have clear research questions in mind before beginning a research study using phenomenological methods (Titchen and Hobson, 2011). The methodology combines aspects of direct and indirect inquiry, as well as subjective and objective descriptions of phenomena. Data is often collected through interviewing participants, and researchers look for patterns of awareness in groups of people that can be synthesized to assess how a group of humans observe phenomena.

Phenomenology is an appropriate methodology for studying school leadership during COVID-19 education because it helps to paint a compositional picture of how lived experiences shape thinking during a particular time. Engelland (2020) defines phenomenology as an exercise in going beyond hypothesizing, observing, and describing, and letting experience provide the details of what should be known. He describes phenomenological study as a "direct way of bringing us face to face, up close and personal, with the fundamental layer of experience, a layer presupposed by science and everyday life" (Engelland, 2020, p. 76).

Educational leadership is a construct that is defined by continuous reactions to experiences which, on the surface, may seem similar in schools with similar populations, demographics, or community make-up. COVID-19 education forced a *new normal* and examining the lived experiences of school leaders through a phenomenological lens is an appropriate methodological framework for analyzing such experiences (Dablo et al., 2023, p. 97). Understanding how the participants in this study experienced a critical moment in a time like COVID-19 education may uncover relationships, theories, and new ways of thinking that apply meaning in different ways.

Allowing the participants to tell their stories allowed for different perspectives of the same event–pandemic education–to intertwine. The phenomenological lens helped to frame how

site-based educational leaders in Western North Carolina public schools reacted to a common crisis in both standard and non-standard ways. The interview analysis not only uncovered a divergence in thinking and creating ways to lead outside of the NCSSE, it also showed that the paths that these school leaders chose evolved in similar ways even though these professionals operated independently of one another, and many of them had never met. The collection of the participants' stories in relation to one another has created new knowledge that can be used to help define COVID-19 educational leadership in the future.

  Educational Leadership Research Using Phenomenology Methodology. Börü (2021) studied the effect school leadership had on students. Börü (2021) mentions that principals have many responsibilities within schools to increase opportunities for students to learn; however, most of a principal's time is taken up taking care of managerial duties like creating and policing rules and regulations in the school, working with parents, and ensuring safety for staff and students. Börü's (2021) research studied thirteen principals working in secondary schools containing student bodies from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The main research question aimed at discovering what commonalities the principals shared in their assessment of items that affect student academic success. Börü (2021) reported that the principals commonly found, "principals' leadership skills, school synergy, the effectiveness of discipline in schools, parent and student profiles, and national education policies can be considered to be among factors that affect academic success in schools" (p. 30). Börü's (2021) study, using a phenomenological methodology, drew conclusions based on the patterns in the data. Guillaume et al. (2020) studied how recent graduates from educational leadership programs were able to draw upon their academic experiences as students to put social justice into practice. The authors note that many school leaders–especially ones that are new to the profession–are not

equipped to handle social justice issues. Their study focused on ten participants who completed a semi-structured interview. The authors found that the graduates who participated in the study were able to create change in their organizations by drawing upon leadership coursework. The authors also found that the participants were able to take key components of their graduate coursework and, as new school leaders, turn that into usable knowledge and a mechanism for change in their organizations (Guillaume et al., 2020, p. 299).

Data Collection Methods

The research study described in this document used a combination of survey questions and focus group interviews to produce different data types. The survey provided an initial collection of information from a fairly large number of participants–52– designed to help inform the focus group interviews by uncovering general trends in COVID thinking from educational leaders in Western North Carolina public schools. The focus groups were a small sampling of the larger initial survey group, which provided a more intimate and in-depth discussion of some of the trends discovered via the survey. The data collected from the focus group interviews provided a deep discussion of the personal reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic. It also indicated how each school leader individually worked through the immense stress and uncertainty of pandemic decision-making.

The data collected helped answer the research questions because it created a deep, multi-layered picture of pandemic leadership as reported by different people experiencing a common event in many different ways. The research questions looked to uncover why school leaders made the decisions they did during the pandemic, what barriers stood in the way of effectively leading a school, and how the COVID-19 pandemic may caused a need to redefine school leadership outside of the North Carolina Standards for School Executives in the future. The

information gathered from the combination of the survey and the focus group interview methods allowed a view of not only how school leaders were changed because of the pandemic, but how school leadership as a standardized construct might need to be adapted.

The survey data was used to provide direction for the focus group questions. I looked at general trends in the data, consistency in thinking across the NCSSE, and discrepancies in the data. For example, I noticed that Instructional Leadership was ranked as being of high importance to school leaders prior to COVID-19, but ranked low in order of importance during the pandemic. These trends and discrepancies helped in the formation of questions for the focus group interviews. The survey data also helped me identify prospective participants in the focus group interviews.

Following the data collection from the focus group interviews, the data was analyzed and coded. This step helped to identify themes within the participants' answers. It allowed me to look for inconsistencies in the data or parts that need further exploration. After the initial focus group, I conducted a follow-up focus group with willing-participants in which I presented the major themes of the first focus group interview, asked if the findings resonated with them and for any follow-up thoughts from the participants. Member checks are important for the validity of research.

These methods helped to establish validity/trustworthiness because they were thorough, ethical, and authentic. Merriam (2002) describes an effective qualitative study as one that can be trusted, that has a need, and that has a clearly defined purpose. The methods included in this study are designed to address the research questions and fill in a gap in research on school leadership during COVID-19. The study took a deep dive into the experiences of school leaders

that will provide me as the researcher with unfettered access to the human experience of pandemic leadership.

Survey

An Educational Leaders Survey (Appendix C) was used in collecting data because it gave me the ability to collect information from a larger subset of school-based administrators before narrowing the field down to a smaller group of participants for the focus groups. It also helped to create focus for the interview questions that would be asked during the focus group interviews.

Survey Participant Selection

Superintendents from five Western North Carolina school districts were contacted for permission to send the Google Forms survey out to county administrators. Four of the five superintendents–or one of their associate superintendents–sent the survey to all administrators within the district. For the fifth district, after receiving permission from the superintendent, I sent personal emails to administrators using information gathered from school websites. The emails included the IRB approval (Appendix A) as well as a Survey Recruitment Letter (Appendix B) with a description of the research, the research questions, and a link to a Google Forms survey. There were administrators from other districts that participated in taking the survey, but it is unclear how they obtained knowledge of it. All survey participants were public school administrators at the time of survey completion.

The Educational Leaders Survey (Appendix C) was sent to principals and assistant principals in five Western North Carolina school districts with the permission of district superintendents via a Google Form. The survey included a list of questions that helped identify the general demographics of the schools participating administrators worked in. There was also a battery of questions aimed at delineating administrator's experience with navigating the North

Carolina Standards for School Executives, and their ratings on the importance of the standards "Pre," "During," and "Post-COVID" school shutdown. The final survey question asked if the participants would be willing to take part in two focus groups–one initial and one follow-up–with a group of other educational leaders.

Other than the demographic questions and the interest question, the survey consisted of questions participants answered on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The purpose of the initial survey was to gather information on COVID-19 decision-making by school-based leaders on a larger scale, which helped provide insight and ideas for discussion in the focus groups that followed. This data also provided information from a wide range of participants that helped guide the development of questions used in the focus group.

Informed Consent

I emailed the focus group participants an Informed Consent Form (Appendix D) before the first interview. The form included the research questions, a description of the research procedures, a section on benefits and risks, and a notification about confidentiality and data protection. Participants were aware there was no monetary compensation for participation. However, each expressed the desire to participate in the study to engage in constructive conversation about school leadership practices that might benefit other educators and students.

Focus Group

I used a semi-structured focus group interview method to both gain perspective on the experiences of educational leaders concerning the COVID pandemic and also to allow for a conversation between educators as they listened and reacted to the answers of other professionals in a similar position. Focus group interviews were an effective method for data collection in this

study because these types of interviews allow for data to be collected through an interactive discussion between participants, and interviews allow for a discussion of a past event that is unlikely to happen again in the same manner (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

There were eleven respondents who gave email addresses for interest in the focus group interviews. I contacted all eleven respondents via the email address they provided. Ten of the eleven respondents were able to participate in the focus group interviews. One administrator did not respond to the follow-up email. I provided participants with a description of the research's purpose and a list of the research questions. I set up times for two separate focus group interviews with five participants per session.

The first of two focus group interviews was scheduled based on the availability of the participants. The meetings took place virtually on the Zoom online platform so that the meeting would be available to as many participants as possible without having to consider traveling a great distance. I transcribed each interview using a digital transcription service. Participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms, which helped them be more likely to be honest in their responses without fear of retribution from supervisors or their school communities. School districts were also replaced with fictitious names. The transcription was stored on a personal device that was password protected.

A focus group interview method was used for data collection because it allowed participants to engage in a semi-structured interview with a moderator to provide initial questions and prompts. This method allowed participants to engage in meaningful conversation and respond to one another with follow-up comments or questions. The focus group interview allowed for a "flexible, unadulterated dialogue between the members of a group" and the

perspectives of multiple educational leaders to be represented at one time (Fusch et al., 2022, p. 171).

The focus group format allowed the participants to play off of one another's comments and engage in an organic, meaningful conversation. Since the COVID-19 pandemic took place over a couple of years–and since the focus groups were hosted approximately two years after the shutdown–this format also helped the participants remember items that may have immediately escaped their minds when prompted with a question. The focus group interviews were an appropriate choice for this type of research because they created a mode of engaging, natural conversation between educational leaders that allowed for their stories to be told in their own words.

Focus Group Participants

The focus group participants were diverse in gender, teaching specialty, administrative experience, and age. Participant tenure in education ranged from 7 - 26 years, and participant administrative tenure ranged from 1 - 9 years. Eight of the ten participants worked at mid-size schools with between 501 and 1200 students. This is indicative of the school sizes within the Western North Carolina region, as there are very few large cities, and population density within the region is not very concentrated.

Focus Group Pairings. Focus group pairings were based on participant availability. As mentioned above, all focus group interviews were hosted on Zoom. For the initial interviews, participants were sent two dates–one on a Thursday evening and one on a Saturday morning–and asked to respond with their availability for one of the two times. After the initial response, participants were sent corresponding invites for one of two interview sessions, and I asked them to fill out and return an Informed Consent Form via email (Appendix D). A description of the

focus group participants' ages, tenure, and educational backgrounds is provided in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1

Focus Group 1 Participant Demographics and Background

Focus Group 1 Participant	Barry Brown	Bart Black	Winnie Wagner	Yanel Yogi	Polly Panda
Age	Late 40s	Late 30s	Late 30s	Late 30s	Late 30s
Time as Administrator	9 years	8 years	1 year	8 years	5 years
Total Time in Education	26 years	13 years	12 years	13 years	15 years
First Role in Education	Elementary Teacher	EC Teacher Assistant	Elementary Teacher	High School Teacher	Elementary EC Teacher
Role During COVID	Principal	Principal	Elementary Teacher	Principal	Assistant Principal
Current Role	Principal	Principal	Principal	Principal	Principal
Size of School	Small (1-500 students)	Mid-size (501-1200 students)	Mid-size (501-1200 students)	Large (1200+ students)	Mid-size (501-1200 students)

Table 2

Focus Group 2 Participant Demographics and Background

Focus Group 2 Participant	Sam Sloth	Tracy Teri	Carson Conrad	Edna Ellinor	Robbie Rupert
Age	Late 30s	Early 30s	Early 30s	Early 30s	Early 30s
Time as Administrator	1 year	2 years	6 years	4 years	3 years
Total Time in Education	16 years	10 years	12 years	13 years	7 years
First Role in Education	High School Teacher	High School Teacher	Elementary Teacher	Elementary Teacher	High School Teacher
Role During COVID	High School Teacher	Counselor	Assistant Principal	Assistant Principal	High School Teacher
Current Role	Assistant Principal	Assistant Principal	Principal	Assistant Principal	Assistant Principal
Size of School	Mid-size (501-1200 students)	Mid-size (501-1200 students)	Mid-size (501-1200 students)	Mid-size (501-1200 students)	Mid-size (501-1200 students)

The first focus group interviews were conducted within three days of one another via a virtual meeting on the Zoom platform. Participants were divided evenly into two groups of five for the initial interviews based on participant availability. After the initial interviews, data was collected that guided the questions for the follow-up interviews. The follow-up interviews were conducted approximately two weeks after the original interviews. Participants for the follow-up interviews were selected one of two times based on their availability. The follow-up interviews hosted six participants and four participants, respectively.

Focus Group Questions

The questions for the semi-structured interviews (Appendix E) were designed to uncover the leadership experience during the pandemic. The questions were open-ended in order to allow the participants to answer in multiple ways. Focus groups are most effective when participants engage in a more natural conversation than simply responding to the interviewer (Krueger & Casey, 2002).

Initially, I asked the group to detail what *normal* leadership looked like before the pandemic–what a specific focus was for them, how their daily interactions played out, and what parts of standard leadership they integrated into their routines. This provided a baseline for each leader's standard before the pandemic. It also allowed for an indirect discussion on the pieces of educational leadership that changed because of the pandemic.

Next, I asked participants to detail their unique leadership experiences during the pandemic. Though the participants were free to discuss whatever portion of leadership they felt was essential, they were explicitly asked about what was different in their leadership strategies from pre-pandemic to during the pandemic. They were also asked to define which pieces of

normal educational leadership they purposefully or inadvertently left out of their daily/weekly/monthly routines.

Third, I asked the participants to discuss what they found to be most important during the pandemic. In other words, to define the non-negotiable aspects of their leadership role as they helped their school move through a difficult time. This helped determine how their roles as leaders may or may not have shifted focus during the different stages of the pandemic. It also allowed them to discuss special considerations made to address equity within their respective schools.

The focus group interview questions (Appendix E) helped delineate the participants' critical tenets before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The questions asked each leader to briefly define how they faced "similar challenges in their very different contexts" based on a wide variety of factors, including–but not limited to–overall leadership experience, personal values, district imperatives, and cultural ideologies. (Netolicky, 2020). The questions were open-ended to allow for further discussion. This helped to determine the specific leadership strategies that school leaders in different districts intentionally or accidentally employed.

The second focus group interview asked clarifying questions and allowed for follow-up questions from the group. The second round of questions were determined through the careful analysis of the answers from the first focus group. The procedures for data collection, recording, protection of anonymity, and transcription were the same as described for the first focus group.

Focus Group Procedures

In total, there were four focus group interviews–two groups of five for the first two interviews, and groups of six and four, respectively, for the follow-up interviews. All focus groups were hosted on the Zoom online platform and recorded using Zoom's recording software.

A digital transcription was completed using an online transcription tool. The recordings were saved to a USB drive until data collection was completed, and then the files were erased. All four interview sessions were semi-structured, with the researcher as the moderator asking open-ended questions–outside of the introductory and school demographic questions. Dialogue between the participants was encouraged, and each group's conversation was allowed to drive itself as long as it stayed centered around COVID-19 school leadership.

The purpose of the interviews was to gain a better understanding of how administrators in different schools navigated the COVID pandemic. It gave me, as the researcher, a better understanding of how these educators reacted to similar situations differently because of the needs of their schools and the effort to meet local, state, and federal guidelines. Since each location has unique needs due to building layout, spacing ability, staff make-up, and community support, among other factors, the conversations between these administrators allowed me to collect information on common themes that arose during the interviews.

Data Analysis

The data from the focus group interviews were analyzed and coded using both an inductive and deductive analysis. This presented the opportunity to use inductive analysis to uncover overarching themes from the interviews that became evident after reading and rereading the transcripts. The transcripts were also coded using a deductive analysis to search for alignment patterns with the North Carolina Standards for School Executives.

Inductive Analysis

Inductive coding was completed after reading and rereading the interview transcripts and looking for themes that were possible answers to the research questions. This type of coding allowed me to group the data into different categories, or themes, that emerged from the data

analysis. First, I read the transcripts in one sitting and underlined key points and themes that specifically addressed the research questions. After the initial coding session, I reread the transcripts and color-coded them with different colors assigned to each theme that developed, looking specifically for frequency, extensiveness, and intensity of answers (Krueger & Casey, 2002). I then stepped away from the data for several days and again re-read the transcripts to ensure that I had not missed any major pieces or themes.

In vivo coding was used for the inductive analysis. *In vivo* coding is especially useful for allowing the researcher to "prioritize and honor the participant's voice" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 91). Since every school leader worked through COVID education differently, it was essential to allow the participants' statements to tell the story of navigating that landscape from their perspective, and not that of the researcher. *In vivo* coding is appropriate for most qualitative studies (Saldaña, 2013).

Deductive Analysis

Deductive coding was completed after the initial inductive coding. The deductive coding aimed to examine the data in relation to existing theories and protocols. The data was coded using *provisional coding,* which began with "a list of researcher-generated codes based on what preparatory investigation suggested might appear in the data before they are analyzed" (Saldaña, 2013). In this case, the codes were the seven standards encompassing the North Carolina Standards for School Executives: Strategic Leadership, Instructional Leadership, Cultural Leadership, Human Resource Leadership, Managerial Leadership, External Development Leadership, and Micro-political Leadership.

Positionality as Researcher

My position within education, specifically when dealing with the fallout of the pandemic, is unique. I experienced the pandemic within an educational leadership framework in a manner that has given me insight into how the pandemic affects different educational institutions. I have also witnessed how higher-ranking leaders at the county and state levels reacted to the pandemic.

When the COVID-19 pandemic and the school closures occurred initially in March of 2020, I was an athletic director and assistant principal at a mid-sized high school of approximately 1000 students and 100 staff members. During the shutdown, my first order of business was to call our soccer coach and tell him that our girls' soccer team–who was over an hour away traveling to a game–must return home immediately. All high school athletic contests across the state had been postponed indefinitely. A few weeks later, I met with our coaches and athletes and told them their seasons had been canceled. Some of them did not realize that they had played or coached in their final game.

As an assistant principal at the high school, I helped teachers design online classrooms and develop online lessons–many had never done so before, but most created a new way of teaching in just a few days. I was also in charge of helping to track down students whom we had not heard from in several weeks or who did not have a computer at home to be able to pull up assignments. One of my final tasks at the high school was to organize a drive-through graduation where no two people were allowed within six feet of one another. My connection at the local radio station helped get the word out when certain groups would be able to arrive on campus to wait in their cars. Our priority was to provide our graduating students with as much normalcy as possible, even though nothing about that event was normal.

That summer–the summer leading into the 2020-2021 school year–I became the principal of the middle school that feeds the high school I was at previously. I spent the summer talking to teachers I had never met before over the phone since they were not allowed in the school building. My first significant order of business was to develop an all-online schedule and get buy-in from people I had never worked with before. I was vaguely familiar with middle school scheduling, at best. A few months later, I was tasked with developing a hybrid schedule of online and in-person teachers. I had to work through a plan for having students stand in designated spots in the hallway while their teachers sprayed desks and gave the solvent appropriate kill time, getting through lunch lines without being too close and entering and exiting the building following all governmental mandates.

In March of 2021, our county returned to in-person learning but still served those who stayed all online. It was wholly ineffective, but it was all we could do. When we returned to in-person learning, I realized that our school had students who had been in the same grade and classes with one another for nearly eight months and had never met before. Many of our students experienced their first day of school in the middle of March–after being at home for an entire year.

In my second year, we were in-person from the start, but with many restrictions, including mandatory mask-wearing. There were new regulations and challenges, but it was all to stay in person and not get shut down. I managed illnesses that I was not trained to manage. I had to send people who knew they were not sick home because they were in close contact. Students and staff missed so much school. In February 2022, almost two years after the COVID-19 shutdown, our county lifted the mask mandate. I had been the principal of a school for 20 months and had never seen the faces of many of my students before the mandate was lifted.

During this time, I also had the unique perspective of fulfilling 300 internship hours with our superintendent, associate superintendent, and assistant superintendent. From this experience, I gained a unique insight into how county leaders reacted to the pandemic and the mandates. I watched them struggle with what they believed was suitable and safe and how they could impartially present that to the principals.

The study of educational leadership pre- and post-COVID is particularly relevant to me. From my perspective, some things happened in education that were incredible. However, most of what I felt myself doing as a school leader was extraordinarily inefficient and produced a shallow impact on learning. My experiences, however, offer only one viewpoint, however. As a researcher, I believe there is great value to the field of education in comparing the stories of educational leaders who led through COVID in the hopes of becoming more efficient with our decision-making whenever the next crisis hits.

My personal experiences through COVID education created assumptions that affected my research. In many discussions with colleagues and peers before, during, and post-COVID, I discovered that I had different opinions and reactions to what was occurring, even in comparison with those I worked with closely during the entirety of the pandemic. This helped me to understand that, due to the individuality of lived experiences, infinite unique experiences manifested throughout the pandemic. Not only did this realization affect me as an educator, but it also influenced my assumptions as a researcher.

Ethical Considerations

It was essential to describe the ethical considerations to the participants before beginning the focus group interviews. I spoke with each participant via phone before setting up the interviews. I needed to convey my appreciation to the participants for being willing to participate

in the research, especially since they were not getting paid. I also needed to gauge preferences for setting up virtual meetings. Having these personal discussions allowed me to communicate the process for the research data collection and describe to the participants the intricacies of data collection that might seem aggravating to an outside participant–informed consent, description of procedures, collecting permissions for recording, and data protection protocols.

The raw data was collected and stored on a personal laptop computer and on a Google Drive with password protection. No participant information was stored other than pseudonyms that replaced participant names. All interview transcription information was coded and stored in the same locations, and all participant names were removed during storage. Only pseudonyms were used in the Chapters of the dissertation and any accompanying presentations.

Limitations

The group of participants was diverse in terms of gender. There were six male participants and four female participants. However, all participants were white. While there are administrators of color within the region, the administrator workforce in the Western North Carolina area is predominantly white. Though racial diversity within school administration was not a focus of this research, future studies may wish to gather information more purposefully on how administrators of color worked through the COVID pandemic.

Chapter 3 Summary

In this chapter, I described the research methods used for this study, the data collection methods, participant selections, data protection, research timeline, my positionality as an educator conducting research, ethical considerations, data collection procedures, and limitations. This study is intended to add to the growing body of work associated with COVID-19 education, precisely how site-based educational leaders in Western North Carolina navigated the ever-

changing landscape of academics, school management, and mental health support and the changes that were created during a relatively short amount of time.

The methods used in this study were selected specifically to present data collected from both a wide range of participants within Western North Carolina schools via the Educational Leaders Survey (Appendix C) and a more detailed, specific set of data gathered from the Focus Group Interviews (Appendix E). The thoughts of many different school leaders from Western North Carolina were able to be collected, analyzed, and presented in a manner that had not existed previous to this study. The following chapter will detail how these thoughts began to shift due to the extreme stress that the COVID-19 pandemic placed on the schools within Western North Carolina and the leaders of those schools.

Chapter 4: Presentation of the Data

The data presented in this chapter will break down the common themes that arose in the analysis of both the Educational Leaders Survey (Appendix C) and the Focus Group Interviews (Appendix E). It will show how the responses provided by the participants indicated a common reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, and it will detail how the participants adhered to the NCSSE or chose to deviate from them.

In this chapter, I will describe, in detail, the findings from the analysis of the data. I will discuss the findings from the initial survey, the selection of participants, and the survey distribution. I will then discuss the participant selection for the focus group and demographics. There will also be a detailed breakdown of both the inductive and deductive analysis of the focus group transcripts. This chapter will conclude with a listing of the difficulties in conducting this type of research and the possible benefits it may present to the educational community.

Initial Survey

After obtaining permission from the county superintendents or their proxy, the Educational Leaders Survey (Appendix C) was emailed to five school districts in Western North Carolina. These school districts have student populations ranging from approximately 3,200 students to 22,000 students (NCDPI, 2022).

The participants were sent an email containing a link to an online Google Form survey containing 31 opportunities for responses. The questions and statement responses were a combination of basic demographic information, an indication of ranking on the North Carolina Standards for School Executives, a section containing a Likert-type scale, and a final question indicating interest in being part of a follow-up focus group interview. All participant responses

were anonymous, and no information was collected from individuals unless they voluntarily provided an email address in the final response.

Survey Participants

In all, 52 survey participants completed the online survey. According to how the participants answered the demographic questions, respondents included 29 school principals and 23 assistant principals. At the time of the study, all participants were in site-based educational leadership positions in a North Carolina public school, and 44 of the 52 reported being in educational leadership positions at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. The demographic information and frequency distribution of the participants in the survey is demonstrated in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Survey Respondent Experience and School Demographic Information

Role	Frequency
Principal	29
Assistant Principal	23
Tenure	Frequency
0-3 Years	15
4-6 Years	10
7-10 Years	12
10+ Years	15

Community	Frequency
Rural	35
Suburban	16
Urban	1
School Size	Frequency
Small (1 - 500 Students)	19
Mid-size (501 - 1200 Students)	31
Large (1200+ Students)	2

Survey Findings

  All of the respondents reported having average or above average familiarity with the North Carolina Standards for School Executives. However, when asked to rank the importance of the standards from most important to least important, the responses varied. Cultural leadership was ranked the most important standard by 34 percent of the respondents. Instructional Leadership comprised only 11 percent of first-place rankings. However, it was ranked in either first or second place by 49 percent of the respondents–the highest ranking for the first and second positions, respectively. In order of most minor importance, Micro-political leadership was marked as the least important by 37 percent of the respondents and was the most frequent choice for the least essential standard. External Development Leadership was chosen in either the second-to-last or last position by 66 percent of the respondents. The summary of the findings are represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

North Carolina School Executive Standards Ranked by Order of Importance Prior to COVID-19

As a school leader, I would personally rank the standards in order of importance from 1-7 in the following way (please select only one ranking per column):
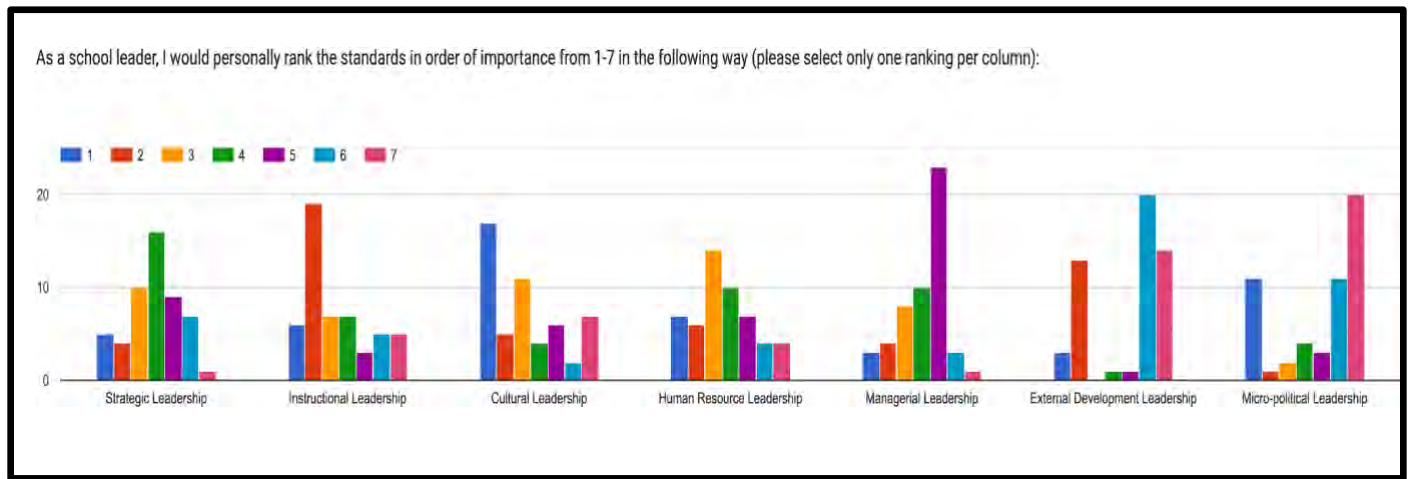
Note. This graphic illustrates the differences in how educational leaders ranked the NC Standards for School Executives. This data was collected in the Educational Leaders Survey (Appendix C).

The most common ranking for Managerial Leadership was as the fifth most important standard–43 percent of the respondents ranked it in this position. However, when asked what standard educational leaders focused on more during COVID-19 than pre-COVID, Managerial Leadership ranked the highest with 27 responses. It was followed by Cultural, Human Resource, and Strategic Leadership with 26, 26, and 23 responses each, respectively. These results are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2

North Carolina School Executive Standards Showing Increased Focus During-COVID-19

During the COVID pandemic, I found myself focusing on the following standards more than I did pre-COVID:

Note. This graphic illustrates the NC Standards for School Executives that school leaders focused on more during the pandemic than previous to it. This data was collected in the Educational Leaders Survey (Appendix C).

The most common selection for the standard school leaders used less frequently during COVID-19 education than pre-COVID-19 was External Development Leadership, with 23 responses. Instructional Leadership and Micro-political Leadership received the second and third most selections in this section, with 21 and 20 responses, respectively. It is worth noting, as mentioned in a previous section, that Instructional Leadership ranked first or second in educational leaders' ranking of the most essential standards with 49 percent of the respondents. However, it was selected by 39 percent of the respondents as a standard they used far less during COVID-19 education than pre-COVID-19. This will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter, as this finding aligned with data uncovered from the Focus Group Interview transcript analysis. The above results are presented in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3

North Carolina School Executive Standards Showing Decreased Focus During COVID-19

During the COVID pandemic, I found myself focusing far less on the following standards than I did pre-COVID:
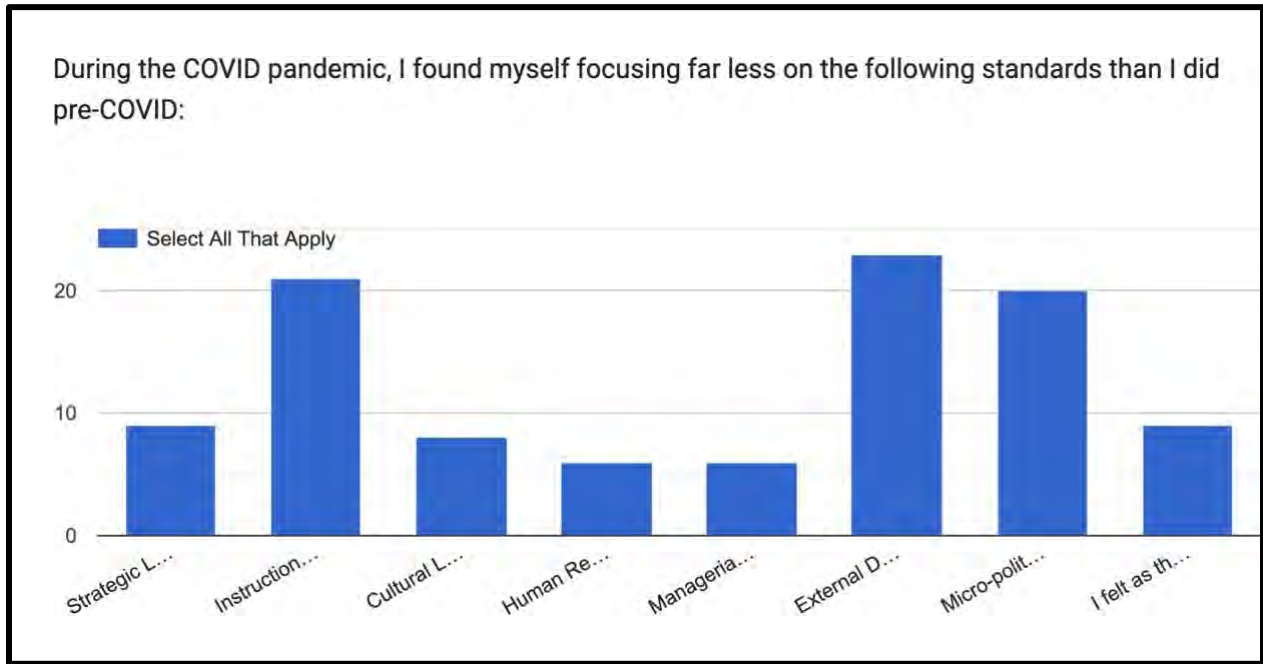
Note. This graphic illustrates the NC Standards for School Executives that school leaders focused on far less during the pandemic than previous to it. This data was collected in the Educational Leaders Survey (Appendix C).

Many survey responses indicated consistency in thinking prior to and during-COVID-19. Cultural Leadership was ranked high in terms of importance during COVID-19. However, some answers indicated that school leaders' ranking of importance shifted. For example, the ranking of Instructional Leadership, which was low during COVID-19, had been very high prior to the pandemic. Not only did the survey questions provide a base of information for the development of the focus group questions, they also helped to uncover where there may have been shifts in thinking as COVID-19 emerged. The final survey question allowed respondents to signify their interest in participating in a focus group interview.

Focus Group Interviews

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the focus group interviews were conducted over two weeks. In all, ten participants agreed to be part of the focus group interviews. An additional participant stated interest in the Educational Leaders Survey but did not respond to follow-up emails. Participants were representative of six different school districts within Western North Carolina. The group consisted of six males and four females, all with varying ages, tenure in education, and school administration experience.

Inductive Analysis

Major themes became apparent through an inductive analysis of the focus group interviews. Even though the participants were all from different schools, and were spread out across six different school districts, many of the challenges that COVID-19 education created were consistent throughout the group. These challenges also existed regardless of the experience level of the participant. The following sections describe some of the common themes noticed in the interviews and include examples of different participant statements that speak to the various themes.

Preparing for the Unknown and Uncertainty

During the initial phases of the COVID pandemic, there was a great deal of uncertainty surrounding education and how schools would operate. The participants shared many concerns they encountered at the onset of the pandemic as they tried to get a hold on what might be coming next. Collectively, they experienced a great deal of variability in their thoughts, the expectations of their school systems, and the rapidly shifting social and political landscape that dictated the parameters of operation in public schools.

One of the major frustrations among the participants was the need for greater direction from the various governing bodies that oversee public education as a whole. In most cases, schools were governed by a local school board, the local government, the state health department, the state governor, and the federal government. From the federal government down, each level of government passed specific mandates, which were often either conflicting or contradictory. This created a great deal of confusion about how public schools should operate from day to day. Most of those in education believed that if a shutdown happened, it would only last a couple of weeks. No one expected it to continue for months.

Many of the feelings of uncertainty stemmed from polarization caused by the pandemic. Group and individual feelings were fueled by social media, news outlets, politicians, and group speculation about what might happen next. This caused a great deal of unrest and distrust, resulting in stress throughout public education. Site-based school leaders were forced to create a plan for their schools using guidance that had not permitted school leader input when being developed. Some of the participant responses are highlighted in Table 4.

Table 4

Preparing for the Unknown and Uncertainty

Participant	Preparing for the Unknown and Uncertainty
Barry Brown District A	• "I feel like we were caught a little unprepared. It was off in the distance, and I don't think, at least in my district, it was on the radar what was going to happen." • "I didn't feel prepared because I think once whatever came out that those first three weeks stuck in people's heads for a long time and it was hard to move people beyond that and be practical." • "I think there was a very quick boom reaction and steam roll."
Bart Black District B	• "I didn't hear a word from the centralized administration until Saturday. Saturday evening, we got a text message from our superintendent with the link to watch the governor's press conference. If he shuts us down, we'll meet first thing Monday morning. So all the damage was done. I mean, we couldn't really meet with our staff on Saturday, so I don't feel like I had any inkling before it actually happened." • "I personally felt like we were reactive. We were trying so hard to follow the protocols that we didn't really know."

Participant	Preparing for the Unknown and Uncertainty
Yanel Yogi District D	• "We had a principal's meeting and we were told to meet with our schools that afternoon, to call a faculty meeting and to make sure that we send home devices because there was talk that we would probably be closed. And so I met with my faculty on a Thursday afternoon and told them tomorrow, Friday, please make sure you send home devices. If we're home, they're saying we'll be home for two weeks and then we'll be right back. Well, Saturday came and we weren't right back. So that was the beginning."
Carson Conrad District B	• "I mean, that was not like you got to plan and prepare. It was just an instant reaction."
Bart Black District B	• "I was emphasizing what's the most important thing to worry about as teachers, as the people I'm in charge of, what do I want them to worry about the most."
Barry Brown District A	• "If the science initially said something needs to sit in open space for five days or whatever came out there that first week, I mean, there were some people who still kept that up even though we started to realize it wasn't that way."

Participant	Preparing for the Unknown and Uncertainty
Bart Black District B	● " The outside influence was everything…1,000,000% outside influenced everything."
Winnie Queen District B	● "I think it was a very reactive response. Part of that had to do with how information was being rolled out from the governor and the superintendents I think. But at a school level, teachers and site-based administration were trying to formulate a plan but we didn't even have time to execute that with the sudden closure." ● "One of the biggest obstacles was that I lived in the community where I was then a teacher and I didn't even have internet access. And so as the teacher of 27 students and trying my best, we didn't know if we were going to come back for EOGs…"
Yanel Yogi District D	● "Everyone was in different camps, from this is not real to death is imminent. And so you'd have teachers feeling this way, students feeling this way, and that created an awkward and tense social dynamic in a classroom."

Participant	Preparing for the Unknown and Uncertainty
Tracy Teri District E	• "Even in the meetings in which we would try to decide how to proceed with helping students, what are the expectations for Zoom? What are the expectations for attendance? All of those decisions that are usually fairly straightforward became very political, very complicated. And it almost felt like suddenly everything was a case by case basis, which was incredibly time-consuming."

Note. This table contains focus group participant responses relating to preparing for the unknown and uncertainty. This data was collected in the Focus Group Interviews (Appendix E).

Increased Workload and Taking on New Responsibilities

Pandemic education brought many hurdles and difficulties. For many school leaders, the workload increased despite not having any students and only a few staff members in the building. Several participants mentioned feeling the need to work every day, despite–in some cases–being encouraged to work from home. During the conversations, the general sentiment was that many items needed to be attended to and since administrators were considered *essential personnel*, frequently the only staff members in the buildings who could attend to student needs, they felt the need to be on site every day.

During the pandemic, job responsibilities inside schools changed rapidly. The primary role of schools initially went from educational institutions to student-care units. The first few weeks after schools closed were spent finding ways to get food to students. After that, school leaders took on new roles within the system. Each respective position had to operate very

differently than their usual, pre-COVID, day-to-day job requirements simply because students and teachers were not in the school together.

Beginning in the 2020-2021 school year, schools in North Carolina started with distance education–all students at home, and throughout the year, most districts slowly transitioned from all students being taught virtually to various combinations of students being back in school while others were at home–aptly called *hybrid education*. School leaders worked with teachers to become knowledgeable about online platforms that many had never used before, contacted families to check on the well-being of students, helped students gain access to the materials necessary to continue education, ensured that food deliveries were ready for bus drivers to deliver to students, managed close contacts and contact tracing, as well as many other tasks. The addition of new responsibilities continued over the next two years as schools and administrators adjusted to ever-changing federal, state, and local regulations that governed schooling. Table 5 lists some of the participant responses regarding increased workload and taking on new roles.

Table 5

Increased Workload and Taking on New Roles

Participant	Increased Workload and Taking on New Roles
Barry Brown District A	● "I worked every single day of the shutdown. I never took a day off at all during the pandemic."
Yanel Yogi District D	● "I was a middle school principal at that point and I always came in as the principal."

Participant	Increased Workload and Taking on New Roles
Polly Panda District C	● "We were advised to work from home if possible. But every day in my building, it was me, my bookkeeper, and my head custodian. We worked every day through it."
Winnie Queen District B	● "I drove to the parking lot of a school and sat in my car and taught classes from my car on my laptop in my car because I wasn't allowed in the building."
Robby Rupert District D	● "You were assigned days, but our team chose to work every day together because we wanted to see other people. But [District D] switched so you could have a rotating schedule. One office member and one admin had to be in the building at all times. But again…we all chose to come to work."
Edna Ellinor District F	● "We also were allowed to rotate. I lived in a tiny apartment, so I was trying to get out of there. I was at work every day and I was kind of the go-between for the other administrators. We have four admin at my high school, and so everybody else kind of rotated and I went every day."

Participant	Increased Workload and Taking on New Roles
Bart Black District B	• "Every couple of weeks we would do a supply pickup." • "I think I've never trouble-shot so many thermometers in my life and I've never directed a car line…I had mornings where we had six rows of traffic in our parking lot, people going car to car window-shooting. I've got to quit saying this, but shooting people in the head with a thermometer." • "We had to have a COVID room that we would stick people in if they showed symptoms."
Polly Panda District C	• "I think it is just the importance of delegation and pulling on my strong team members and knowing to use my resources pulling in my school nurse...knowing I can't know it all. I can't do it all."
Yanel Yogi District D	• "I had two yardsticks taped together so I'd get that proper distance. It felt like theater that I had to do for the sake of the regulations." • "I remember as a principal getting calls fairly frequently, not all the time, but hey, this teacher's getting too close to my kid in terms of distance, actual physical distance. Or this teacher pulled down their mask to blow their nose, stuff like that."

Participant	Increased Workload and Taking on New Roles
Tracy Teri District E	● "So I think that we're inevitably going to be in all these other roles for a really long time because of what education had to mean to people during this period."
Carson Conrad District B	● "I remember loading onto yellow buses with coolers full of food and driving to houses all over the county delivering meals.
Robby Rupert District D	● "I know other people at other places didn't come back in, but I think June 1st, you could allow them to come back in for graduation purposes." ● "We had an overwhelming amount of students who weren't getting fed in our district adequately. So we were tasked with getting to our lower socioeconomic neighborhoods in our district, and getting a schedule out [for] when breakfast and lunch would be served."
Carson Conrad District B	● "For graduation, we brought our teachers in and luckily our campus is kind of…the roads make a good circle. We built a deck for graduation. We built a deck."
Bart Black District B	● "Our fifth graders that were promoted to graduating, whatever you want to call it, we made them little yard signs and put them up on our hill and made a little honorarium for them."

Participant	Increased Workload and Taking on New Roles
Yanel Yogi District D	• "At the end, we had a day, one day for seventh grade, one day for eighth grade where all the students could come in a drive-through line."

Note. This table contains focus group participant responses relating to increased workload and taking on new roles. This data was collected in the Focus Group Interviews (Appendix E).

Lack of Resources

The participants noted a lack of resources being a significant obstacle to COVID-19 education. Not only were schools not initially prepared to manage the intricacies of COVID-19, but in many locations across Western North Carolina, there were limitations with online learning. Many students and teachers alike struggled with being able to log on consistently to check assignments, participate in live or pre-recorded virtual classes, complete research using online searches, and even save materials they might have needed. In Western North Carolina communities, many families living in poverty were not able to afford internet at their homes, and in other cases the topography of the region did not allow for homes to have reliable internet or cellular service.

A lack of resources is nothing new to public education, as there are constant battles in all levels of government to provide more funding for schools. During the interviews, however, there was a sense of frustration in the idea that school leaders were being forced to ask teachers and students to complete a task that was impossible. There was a feeling of exacerbation with all parts of a system that created a demand on those in education but could not provide ample support to it. Some examples are illustrated in Table 6.

Table 6

Lack of Resources

Participant	Lack of Resources
Winnie Queen District B	● "I lived in the community where I was then a teacher and I didn't even have internet." ● "I drove to the parking lot of a school and sat in my car and taught classes from my car on my laptop in my car because I wasn't allowed in the building."
Barry Brown District A	● "I know in some of the schools in my district, the principals controlled everything, literally put seals on the doors to make sure teachers didn't go into the classrooms."
Yanel Yogi District D	● "I would have people, students come into the building in the lobby if they had to get, I don't know, their computer updated to even pick up the hotspot."
Edna Ellinor District F	● "We were only allowed to have teachers in the building for two weeks and then they were not allowed in the building. The county set up Wi-Fi on some of our activity buses and parked them in the parking lots so people could sit near them and get Wi-Fi."

Participant	Lack of Resources
Winnie Queen District B	● "It honestly brought to light that we had infrastructure issues within our state, but then you saw that across the entire nation there were teachers in cars or that just couldn't do anything." ● "There's still infrastructure issues like our kids, my students, if I was back in the exact same school, nothing has changed. I would still have to go to a parking lot. If the situation was exactly the same, my son would still have to go to some kind of community center because where we live, we have no internet service provider and a lot of the people in our community are that way."

Note. This table contains focus group participant responses relating to lack of resources. This data was collected in the Focus Group Interviews (Appendix E).

Instruction on the Back Burner

Throughout a few weeks, the focus of schools shifted. To understand those changes, it is crucial to know the deeply-ingrained expectations inherent in the structure and day-to-day operations of schools. The focus on testing and grades were initially reduced at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. This indicated the state association seeing equity issues that could not be rectified, as well as the realization that instruction–what was once of extreme importance–was suddenly low on the list.

NCDPI released grading guidance stating that all high school students would receive either a *PC19*–pass–or a *WC19*–withdrawal for the classes they were attending when the March 13 school closures became official. If a student had a passing grade as of March 13, they would

pass the course. If they had a failing grade, they could take a withdrawal or bring their grade up to passing. Part of the order also stated that no student could get a grade any lower than they had on March 13, when the school closures began. While grades still counted, the emphasis on passing was minimized. The cancellation of testing and the adjusting of grades diminished two of the most significant elements of educational accountability and pedagogy.

The educators had a common message that school during COVID-19 differed from school before COVID. They found that everything that seemed so important just a few months prior—tests, homework, grades, attendance, was suddenly not a priority. Education during the COVID-19 pandemic was all about providing essential needs to students wherever possible. Instruction was no longer a priority for public schools. Table 7 includes participant discussion on instruction being placed on the back burner.

Table 7

Instruction on the Back Burner

Participant	Instruction on the Back Burner
Tracy Teri District E	"Everyone was so focused on survival, meeting those basic needs that it was almost like the role of education really did slip." "Schools, during that time, became the hub for all things. We were talking about food, resources, access to COVID tests or medical supplies, all these things that we kind of stepped in and became the source for that so [instruction] had to be on the back burner. And I think that we're still kind of coming away from that."

Participant	Instruction on the Back Burner
Edna Ellinor District F	● "We had kids begging, begging, please let me come to school every day. This every other day stuff is not working for me. I can't keep up."
Sam Sloth District D	● "Looking at the effectiveness [of instruction during COVID], I'd actually put it as not very…I feel like we did what we had to do, but it wasn't necessarily in terms of the actual educational value. I didn't feel like it was something that really helped our students, but obviously there weren't many other options."
Winnie Queen District B	● "And so that was another thing that I think disrupted that effectiveness was just the procedures and policies that were in place that led to harm. Ultimately, I think the intent was this essence of safety, but to the devastation of learning." ● "I had a third grader and so I watched it from his perspective. And it was just that you just couldn't mimic instruction." ● "There were places where no instruction was delivered."

Participant	Instruction on the Back Burner
Polly Panda District C	● "We didn't even go to extremes to make sure that they were getting the education. But that's what happened. One of the things when you talk about that [barriers created by COVID restrictions] is that all of a sudden education went on the back burner in school in a lot of places."
Winnie Queen District B	● "It was before the school year even ended that DPI announced that everyone was going to pass. And my participation, I was a fifth grade teacher at that time, my participation dropped to greater than half of my kids. My kids quit showing up."
Yanel Yogi District D	● "What was the grade thing? It was P, it was PC 19 or WC 19. PC 19, yeah. And if you were passing on March 13th…this was about, I guess late April, you could choose to take a PC 19 and it wouldn't negatively affect your GPA or a WC 19 and retake the class in the fall. So academics couldn't happen."

Note. This table contains focus group participant responses relating to putting instruction on the back burner. This data was collected in the Focus Group Interviews (Appendix E).

Different Approaches to Schooling

In North Carolina, on March 14, 2020, Governor Roy Cooper announced that schools would shut down for two weeks. He followed up every few weeks with a similar announcement

that prolonged the shutdown. This pattern continued until May 2020, when he announced that schools would remain closed until the end of the school year. Students and school personnel went into the summer break without knowing what would happen in the following school year or even if schools would operate moving forward.

Eventually, updated guidance was released from the governor's office in late July of 2020 detailing how schools were allowed to operate during the 2020-2021 school year. To start the school year in August, schools could bring students back but had to do so in a limited capacity. Districts could determine individually if they would have their teachers and students return to a hybrid model or if all teachers and students would participate remotely.

During the 2020-2021 school year, schools had to follow many regulations. School, as it was before COVID, was entirely different. Local school districts were allowed to choose from a sampling of models provided by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, working in conjunction with Governor Roy Cooper in the form of the StrongSchools Public Health Toolkit. This document was "sunset" by the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services in June 2022–and is no longer available for review. At the time, it was a comprehensive document that defined how schools could operate, including spacing requirements, operational expectations, quarantine procedures, reopening procedures, and many other regulations.

Local school districts decided what plan they would utilize and how to implement it in their district. Most employed some form of a hybrid schedule because they could not fit all of their students into their schools and still maintain six feet of distance between everyone. These hybrid models consisted of A and B groups, respectively. The participants interviewed represented six different school districts. Not only did all operate using a different model, most

of the districts had a different model for their elementary and secondary schools. Table 8 details how the participants' school districts operated outside of the norm during COVID education.

Table 8

Different Approaches to Schooling

Participant	Different Approaches to Schooling
Yanel Yogi District D	● "In [District D] you could choose whether you wanted to do at-home instruction for the entire year or you could ask for in-person and hybrid instruction. Those are the only two options all year. Virtual or hybrid."
Barry Brown District A	● "We were A day/ B day, and Fridays were all virtual for K-12 at some point regulations relaxed I think."
Polly Panda District C	● "So when we came back, in elementary, we were Monday through Friday, but they moved all of our fifth graders to the middle schools to allow for space."
Bart Black District B	● "We came back five days a week because the guidance changed."

Participant	Different Approaches to Schooling
Barry Brown District A	● "That decision by the board and by the district office really created a resentment between the elementary schools and the middle and high schools because some elementary schools were still doing their virtual thing on Friday and they were working with a full group spread out, squished into a room and the middle schools and high schools didn't have any of that on the Fridays. They were basically a free for all for the teachers, a free day completely."
Yanel Yogi District D	● "I still did announcements virtually every day."
Polly Panda District C	● "We did paper packets. My teachers would come in and have drop off/pickup days and teachers would spread out.
Edna Ellinor District F	● "I did a Monday morning virtual meeting and then a Friday virtual meeting with my teachers during the week just for us all to check in on each other." ● "Everything was upside down."

Note. This table contains focus group participant responses relating different approaches to schooling. This data was collected in the Focus Group Interviews (Appendix E).

Increased Exposure to Technology

When the COVID-19 shutdown hit in March 2020, schools were heavily encouraged to allow all students to take a device home. Many school districts in North Carolina, including all six represented in this study, provided a Chromebook, iPad, Pixel, or another personal device for students to have at home. The participants mentioned that, initially, this seemed like a good thing to be able to troubleshoot a disconnection from the school and implement full-scale. However, it soon became apparent that introducing a full-time device for all students may have had unintended consequences.

School leaders had no idea that this change would create so many problems over the years that followed. Not only was there an increased reliance on computer generated work by teachers, but students also had unfettered access to the internet and in many cases–particularly on home Wi-Fi, access to everything the internet had to offer. Students were exposed to such temptations as pornographic websites, chat rooms and forums, and a host of other items that were neither age-appropriate nor part of the intended pedagogy. Table 9 lists participant responses in relation to an increased exposure to technology.

Table 9

Increased Exposure to Technology

Participant	Increased Exposure to Technology
Yanel Yogi District D	● "When we look at the sixth grade through the twelfth grade students we do run into lots of issues…with all sorts of inappropriateness and really just inappropriate use of school technology."

Participant	Increased Exposure to Technology
Barry Brown District A	● "I see a lot more teachers [using] too much screen time and throwing work on their computer in the corner for 30 minutes."
Carson Conrad District B	● "[The increased use of technology] is a double-edged sword. It's great to have but it's also a difficult thing to have as well."
Tracy Teri District E	● "We have had an unbelievable amount of issues with inappropriate conversations via school, email, inappropriate pictures, sending pornography." ● "That was really hard for [teachers] to then have to put everything they've ever taught online. And so I think utilizing the technology that we have, even if you don't use it every day in your classroom, being prepared to do that I think has, is always kind of in the back of my mind and trying to check in with teachers to see how they're using technology even now."

Note. This table contains focus group participant responses relating to increased exposure to technology. This data was collected in the Focus Group Interviews (Appendix E).

Inequity

No two schools experienced the pandemic the same. Local governments interpreted the guidelines and passed them down to local school boards, who provided their guidance to the individual schools. School leaders had to make on-site school decisions while still following

what were often very stringent guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and local governments. From there, every school operated with varying levels of autonomy and micromanagement from county administrators and local health organizations. Some were better equipped than others to meet the needs of their students.

In the communities surrounding the schools, inequities that existed well before COVID-19 were compounded once COVID education came to the forefront. Schools have slowly introduced more and more technology over the decades. Technology, which is accessible for some students while they are at school, is not for some in their homes. The COVID-19 pandemic created a much larger gap between those with and without access to remote learning needs than previously existed (Azorín, 2020).

Once COVID-19 pushed schooling into the home, the challenges for parents, students, and educators became much greater. The focus group participants mentioned that students from lower socioeconomic status (SES) families were among those mostly greatly affected, not only because many of these families lacked the resources to provide students what they needed, but also because many parents from these homes were having to work long hours away from home and were unable to oversee student education at home. The addition of technology resources was intended to allow education to continue without interruption. What it actually caused was the continued and disproportionate lack of access for students living in poverty (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023).

Another group that the participants mentioned that was negatively affected–possibly more than others–was students with disabilities. In many cases, these students went from having a great deal of mental, physical, therapeutic, and academic support to nearly nothing during the throes of the pandemic. Students with disabilities often need immediate intervention and

treatment, but during COVID these services were either cut off completely or changed to a virtual implementation (Hoofman & Secord, 2021). Table 10 lists the participant responses relating to inequity during COVID-19 education.

Table 10

Inequity

Participant	Inequity
Winnie Queen District B	• "We didn't have the internet. [My son] was sitting in the car beside me trying to get online to count for attendance, and I'm trying to teach in the front seat." • "Our lower SES students. They struggled in my district. We got some hotspots but only so many. And we assigned them out based on need. If the families would put in a request or we would tell our kids if an adult would come with them, they could sit in the parking lot and try to get online for class. But definitely our lower [economic] kids suffered."
Yanel Yogi District D	• "The students whose parents had to work and could not monitor their student's academic progress via Zoom or their attendance even for that matter…I think the group, again, that has the most barriers are those single parent, single family households and particularly those groups whose parents were not present due to outside obligations with their job."

Participant	Inequity
Tracy Teri District E	● "I think it really did highlight the disparity between the students who had resources and the students who did not." ● "Just being in rural areas in Western North most, the logistics of internet access, not all areas have great wifi access, even if you do have the resources. And so trying to navigate that, even something as simple as who's taking the hotspot to the student, because then it becomes an issue of your own personal safety of being in a situation where you might be in contact with someone."
Bart Black District B	● "I think our disabled students were hindered more than anybody regardless of socioeconomic status. I think the SES might have played into that, but we have an intensive intervention population and they weren't getting therapy. They weren't getting any kind of occupational or physical therapy. Our mental health students, the mental health world, shut down during this."

Note. This table contains focus group participant responses relating inequity. This data was collected in the Focus Group Interviews (Appendix E).

Ineffective Home Education

Almost immediately, when organizations worldwide began to react to the COVID pandemic and subsequent shutdowns, the role of schools and education began to shift. When students were sent home after schools shut down, there was no teacher or student peers to help

one another. Schools had to rely heavily on parents to monitor the virtual learning environment at home. In many cases, students at homes where parents worked every day or staying with relatives or friends did not complete assignments and subsequently fell way behind.

Overall, the group expressed a great deal of frustration with the inability of supporting their students fully and, to a large degree, their parents and guardians. Though educators did ask for support from home and consistent expectations, during COVID education, school leaders had to put a great deal of faith in the adults at home to help keep students engaged with their schoolwork. In many cases, this seemed like a frivolous ask. Table 11 includes participant responses regarding how ineffective at-home education was.

Table 11

Ineffective Home Education

Participant	Ineffective Home Education
Carson Conrad District B	● "Having some sort of education for parents to explain to them the capabilities…this is not just their kid getting on and doing math homework. There's a whole lot more they can get into at night."
Polly Panda District C	● "I have noticed when we went remote and during COVID parents don't seem to care as much about their kids coming to school and they don't mind pulling them. I have noticed that parents don't seem to have as much respect for the kids being in school."

Participant	Ineffective Home Education
Bart Black District A	• "There's been no reset to those parents. They've just really just written off that coming to school when they can, that time period where we were A Day/B day or only four days a week and they just never have switched back. And yeah, we've done a lot more truancy. We've had to crack down…There's this much more apathy towards coming to school."
Tracy Teri District E	• "I think it was very evident when students were home alone all the time because their parents had to work in order to provide for their family. And then the issues that arose from that, even mental health wise, trying to figure out how to assess students via Zoom, confidentiality…what do we do if a student does need services, who's going to actually go to the house?"
Robby Rupert District D	• "[The students] didn't get the culmination of those four years coming together, counting down the last days."
Winnie Queen District B	• "To me it would make sense post-COVID to help draw attention to what's your core instruction and is your core meeting the needs of us, of your kids? How do we help bolster that?"

Participant	Ineffective Home Education
Yanel Yogi District D	● "I mean, these are freshmen that I'm working with and they're very unfazed when we call them in. And some of the conversations are unbelievable and some of the things that are going on. And so again, back to mental health, I think that piece that is very, very concerning to me in the ways in which we're still seeing that it's shaped education." ● "If I start with the good parts of it, [we] are able to be in different parts of Western North Carolina, engage and interact. I mean, you can do whole doctorate programs, graduate programs online now without ever stepping onto the actual campus. So in that regard, I think for, I would say college age students, plus it's really good."
Edna Ellinor District F	● "So I think that if there was another decision, I don't think people's brains would go back to April of 2020 when they think, what was COVID-19 education? I think they would look at that 2021 school year and go, we're never doing that again."
Carson Conrad District B	● "Maybe the impacts of kids not being in school were much greater than the impacts of the safety created by saying everybody has to stay home."

Participant	Ineffective Home Education
Yanel Yogi District D	• "I was always opposed to us closing schools because I think it was a great disservice to our students. But it's made up of adults as teachers and faculty. And I had a lot of teachers who were scared." • "The COVID-19 pandemic made me a better principal. It made me a better educator but it was a horrible thing to go through."

Note. This table contains focus group participant responses relating to school in a different format. This data was collected in the Focus Group Interviews (Appendix E).

Inductive Trends

One trend evident from the participants' description of pandemic education was a drastic increase in certain aspects of school leaders' roles that caused stress in conjunction with a direct decrease in items of support. School leaders noticed increased uncertainty, frustration, and responsibility during the pandemic. The feelings were brought on, in part, by a decrease in focus on instruction, resources, and confidence in leadership at all levels (Burnette, 2022). One survey response reported by Fotheringham et al., (2022) described part of school leaders' frustration existing because of, "poor leadership from central government with little consideration for the time it takes to plan operational changes effectively. Now exacerbated by a total lack of trust of anything they say" (para. 49). This dynamic caused great stress on school leaders during this time. This trend is represented in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4

Inductive Trends
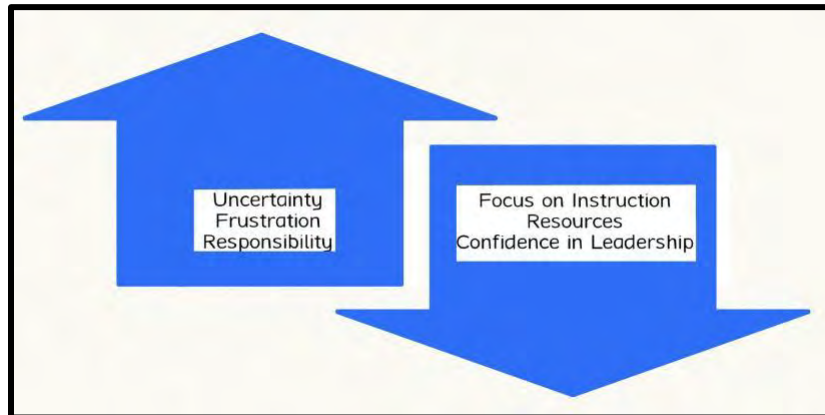
Note. This graphic shows the inductive trend of uncertainty, frustration, and responsibility for school leaders rising during the pandemic while focus on instruction, resources, and confidence in leadership went down. This graphic was created by the researcher.

Deductive Analysis

Deductive analysis was completed by coding the interviews and looking for themes associated with participant responses aligned with existing theories or concepts. In this case, participant responses were coded as to their relationship with the North Carolina Standards for School Executives (NCSSE). While some of the responses had cross-over between standards, a description of the responses as they most closely apply to each standard will follow in subsequent sections.

A description of the NCSSE currently exists on the NCDPI's Google Sites page. There are various descriptions of the School Executive standards and a collection of rubric materials. I completed the deductive coding by referencing the Rubric for Evaluating Principals/Self-Assessment Form provided by the Public Schools of North Carolina (2018). This form is required to be completed by each school administrator every year and closely aligns with the

rubric that their immediate supervisor fills out. A representation of the analysis and frequency of participant responses relating to each standard is represented in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Deductive Analysis of the Frequency of Participant Responses Per Standard
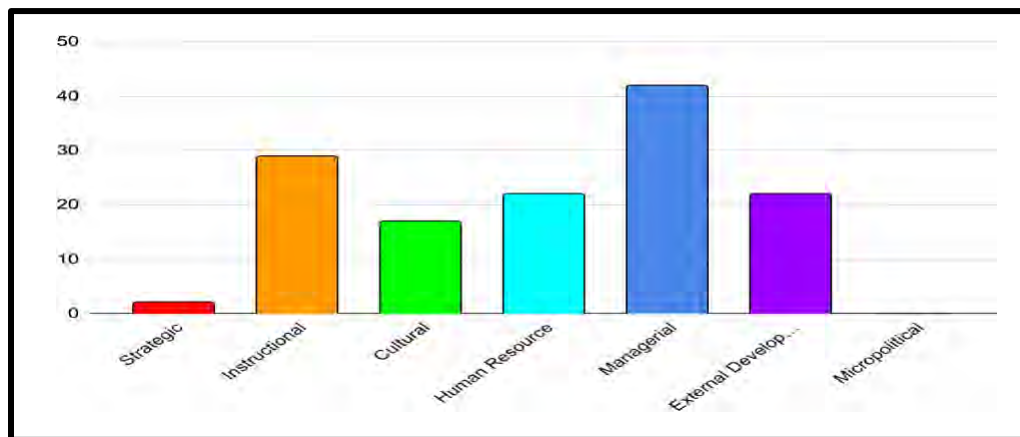
Note. This graphic details how the responses from educational leaders in the Educational Leaders Survey (Appendix C) were coded in relation to the NC Standards for School Executives.

Standard 1: Strategic Leadership

Strategic Leadership is broken into four sub-standards: School Vision, Mission, and Strategic Goals; Leading Change, School Improvement Plan, and Distributive Leadership (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2008). The standard focuses on creating a vision and goals for the school, getting others involved, and planning for ways to help reach the goals. During the COVID pandemic, however, school leaders' focus was spread to many different areas that had never been encountered before, and Strategic Leadership was not a priority.

Even though Strategic Leadership was a standard that school leaders listed mentioned focusing on more during the pandemic by 44% of the survey participants (Figure 1), focus group participant responses relating to Strategic Leadership were limited, with only two responses coded that align with this standard. Of the two focus group responses relating to this standard,

both were aligned with focusing on what was important during that period. Bart mentioned the importance of being transparent in his expectations with his staff and helping his staff stay focused during a time when there were lots of different distractions. Sam felt like a great deal of what schools did was create the facade of safety and normalcy, which was largely ineffective and time-consuming. These comments aligned with the substandard of *Leading Change* under Strategic Leadership.

Standard 2: Instructional Leadership

Instructional Leadership has two sub-standards: Focus on Learning and Teaching, Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment; and Focus on Instructional Time (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2008). This standard highlights the importance of creating processes for academic efficiency and efficacy. School leaders are charged with finding ways to protect planning and instructional time and provide processes to improve instruction. In the Educational Leaders Survey, respondents ranked Instructional Leadership as one of the most critical standards (Figure 1). However, 40% of the survey participants chose it as a standard they focused on less frequently during the pandemic (Figure 3).

Many of the participant responses regarding instructional leadership focused on the difficulties educators experienced in trying to have classes and work on academics during COVID-19. These difficulties ranged from connecting to the internet and logging onto virtual classroom sessions to trying to convince students to stay engaged because participation and performance were still necessary until NCDPI announced that students could not receive a failing grade due to a lack of participation during COVID-19 education. The educators interviewed seem to have a common frustration with holding high expectations while still getting students to participate.

There was also a theme of feeling helpless, particularly with students that were participating in virtual learning. Several school leaders mentioned having to weigh focusing on instruction with the media message that having people close to one another would cause harm. This departure from a strictly academic direction was something new for many of the educators. They voiced a collective remembrance of the notion of helplessness during this time. Table 12 below highlights some statements relating to instructional leadership during COVID-19.

Table 12

Instructional Leadership Deductive Coding

Participant	Instructional Leadership Statement
Bart Black District B	● "It's hard to teach a kindergartener letter sounds over Zoom…if we're honest with ourselves, I didn't know what to tell people to do. I didn't know how to tell them to instruct remotely. I mean, I took what I heard and what I thought might be good, but in the grand scheme of things, we're talking about the media and the health professionals telling us we're all going to die. Who cares if they're learning?"
Barry Brown District A	● "We were getting mixed signals, in general, about how to teach and how to instruct while we were dealing with whether people were living or dying."

Participant	Instructional Leadership Statement
Yanel Yogi District D	• "It was a smorgasbord of a mess in terms of instruction."
Polly Panda District C	• "Not many students Zoomed in. They just wanted to post the assignments and get grades for them."
Edna Ellinor District F	• "So a kid would come to school on Monday, be virtual on Tuesday and Wednesday, and then they could come to school on Thursday and that was their only live instruction for the week. It was wild."
Winnie Queen District B	• "There was a certain amount of anxiety in not knowing, does this count? No one had the big picture yet, and you were working towards trying to arrive at the same end goal and then something would change."
Carson Conrad District B	• "I'm not going to stress about instructional leadership because if I pressure that person into leaving, it doesn't matter how much I focus on instructional leadership, I don't have the best person in front of my kids."

Participant	Instructional Leadership Statement
Traci Terry District E	● "We really did try to advocate for, regardless how you feel about COVID or how you identify politically, our students aren't getting instruction because we also can't require students or the teachers to do a Zoom."

Note. This table contains focus group participant responses coded using deductive analysis that related to instructional leadership. This data was collected in the Focus Group Interviews (Appendix E).

Standard 3: Cultural Leadership

Cultural Leadership has three sub-standards: Focus on Collaborative Work Environment; School Culture and Identity; Acknowledges Failures, Celebrates Accomplishments and Rewards, and Efficacy and Empowerment (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2008). This standard highlights the importance of creating a robust and positive culture in the school, and it is centered around collaborative decision-making, recognition of accomplishments, empowerment of staff and students, and a general sense of well-being (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2008). The survey participants listed Cultural Leadership as one of the three standards they focused on more during COVID-19 than pre-COVID (Table 5).

The focus group responses aligned with Cultural Leadership focused on creating a unified mode of operation during COVID-19 and maintaining consistency in an ever-changing world. The school leaders interviewed struggled with the notion that, despite the administration's best efforts, staff and students were generally unhappy during COVID-19. The group experienced incredible frustration because, while the discontent was not directly focused on the school or the

administration, school leaders were ultimately responsible for promoting a healthy learning environment.

The difficulty during COVID instruction was that administration, staff, and students were often in different places. Creating a culture of support was extremely difficult when there needed to be consistency and regularity. Much of the focus group discussion on Cultural Leadership centered on trying to create a stable environment amid significant instability. It meant finding ways to support staff navigating online systems they had never used; going to students' homes to take meals, work packets, or internet hotspots; or simply providing resources to keep teachers happy. Inevitably, the feeling from the group was that they were trying to keep people happy and safe temporarily. However, they had no idea how long the temporary situation would last, and they were being asked to maintain systems that were not sustainable in the long term. Table 13 below contains participant statements regarding Cultural Leadership.

Table 13

Cultural Leadership Deductive Coding

Participant	Cultural Leadership Statement
Barry Brown District A	● "So I felt like as a school cultural leader, I kind of lump together as having to take care of the adults in addition to the students and having to do a lot of taking care of the adults in the school."
Yanel Yogi District D	● "We did a lot of home visits. If they weren't coming on the Zoom or coming in there two days in person, if they opted for that, there were a lot of home visits."

Participant	Cultural Leadership Statement
Edna Ellinor District F	• "There were definitely things that came down that I was like, whoever made this rule has never been in a high school of a thousand kids."
Tracy Terri District E	• "And I have seen that this year just at our schools, the responsibility that people place on the administrative team to suddenly change the culture of the school overnight. And I know the cultural piece is a big part of that executive role in doing things to help and for the betterment of the culture as a whole."
Carson Conrad District B	• "So our shift went from let's get our best people even better to let's keep our best people in front of our kids and keep them happy, and let's make sure that I can keep the teachers that have done this for 25 years in my building." • "For us, it was always a recovery mindset. Whatever we do right now has to be better than everyone else. So when we come back a hundred percent, when our kids get back to normal, we're in better shape to recover."

Note. This table contains focus group participant responses coded using deductive analysis that related to cultural leadership. This data was collected in the Focus Group Interviews (Appendix E).

Standard 4: Human Resource Leadership

Human Resource Leadership is broken into three sub-standards: Professional Development/Learning Communities; Recruiting, Hiring, Placing and Mentoring of Staff; and Teachers and Staff Evaluation (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2008). Human Resources Leadership focuses on finding and training staff to present the strongest core of teachers and auxiliary staff to support students. It is a standard that comprehensively details fostering healthy professional relationships within the school. Survey participants listed Human Resource Leadership as one of the standards they focused on more during COVID-19 (Table 5).

The conversations around Human Resource Leadership mainly revolved around the difficulties emanating from managing personnel during the COVID-19 crisis. In addition to federal and state mandates regarding treating individuals who contracted COVID-19 or were in close contact with a COVID-19 positive patient, each school district could have added restrictions imposed by their local Department of Health and Human Services.

Before COVID-19, schools in different systems had operated with a relatively similar set of guidelines regarding illness. In most cases, students or staff with illness needed to be off of school property until at least 24 hours after symptoms of the illness had disappeared. During COVID-19, anyone in a school building who was COVID-19 positive was forced to quarantine for a time period between ten and twenty-one days, depending on the school district. For those deemed close contacts, another set of rules dictated their return, and close contact quarantines often lasted longer than quarantines for individuals who contracted the virus.

The participants voiced a general disdain for the human resource management part of the COVID-19 pandemic. There was a shared sentiment that finding substitutes during regular school operations is difficult, but finding people to cover classes during COVID education was

exhausting. The participants noted that they covered classes, drove buses, did custodial work, and regularly filled in for cafeteria staff during this time. All of this was added to the regular human resources tasks of managing personnel, evaluating employees, and creating professional development opportunities. Table 14 includes participant statements regarding Human Resource Leadership.

Table 14

Human Resource Leadership Coding

Participant	Human Resource Leadership Statement
Bart Black District B	● "When I look back at it, there were so many rights and laws and people had certain healthcare rights that we had abide by and with certain recommendations."
Edna Ellinor District F	● "Between HR and COVID leave and contact tracing and putting stickers up and all. There was a lot of minutia."
Carson Conrad District B	● "We had a teacher who was out for 28 days for a legitimate COVID quarantine mandated by our school nurse. Try finding a sub for that!"
Bart Black District B	● "Finding substitutes in the pandemic was like trying to find workers after the pandemic. There were none to be found."

Participant	Human Resource Leadership Statement
Barry Brown District A	● "So I spent a lot of time in mental health propping people up trying to keep them going on with so much uncertainty. So many people were frustrated by the regulations, whether they believed in them or not, and all the different crap that was going on."
Carson Conrad District B	● "Our county continued to say through the part where we started remote we won't make teachers do both. We won't make teachers do both. We won't make teachers do both. And we had kind of promised our teachers that. I think our county promised something that they soon realized was not obtainable and kind of put it back on the schools."
Edna Ellinor District F	● "We had to just go back and forth and we had to have teachers do [virtual and in-person instruction] even though they didn't want to. And we just said this is what the county is making us do. We didn't feel like we really had a choice.

Participant	Human Resource Leadership Statement
Bart Black District B	• "When people don't have to work, they're not going to work and there are no employees out there to choose from. It's hard to put the hammer down on people that need to improve. So at least at times during the process, I found myself putting up with a little more than I normally would have from people because I knew it was either them or nobody."
Winnie Queen District B	• "And so at the elementary level, we actually ended up losing two teachers because personnel could also opt to take that year and COVID-related leave without harm. So on the personnel side, we had a hiring freeze. We're in the middle of coming back and we were short two teachers starting with COVID, needing to run hybrid models in an elementary school and you have them all day."

Note. This table contains focus group participant responses coded using deductive analysis that related to human resource leadership. This data was collected in the Focus Group Interviews (Appendix E).

Standard 5: Managerial Leadership

Managerial Leadership is split into four sub-standards: School Resources and Budget, Conflict Management and Resolution, Systematic Communication, and School Expectations for Students and Staff (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2008). This standard focuses on managing

the processes that exist in order to keep the school running efficiently and garnering support from within. In the Educational Leaders Survey (Appendix C), 52 participants rated Managerial Leadership as one of the least important standards (Figure 1). However, when asked about the standards used more often during COVID-19, it received the highest number of responses (Figure 2).

During COVID-19 education, school leaders focused heavily on Managerial Leadership requirements. When asked what duties were added to the management of their schools, the school leaders in the focus groups began quickly listing some of the parts they remembered:

- Handing out masks at the door to students who did not bring one
- Communicating quarantine protocols
- Cleaning desks after each class
- Allowing a range of two to five minutes between sanitizing after one class and letting the next group of students come in
- Sanitizing common areas multiple times a day
- Creating protocols for handing in assignments and having to wait between two to five days to grade them
- Managing a schedule for covering classes

Often, when a participant would name one of the management protocols they operated under, others would have a verbal reaction of disdain or dislike. Some follow-up responses to fellow participants would use words like "terrible," "ridiculous," or "overwhelming."

These responsibilities were added to the daily requirements of administrators, but participants seemed frustrated that all the everyday, routine management responsibilities still existed. School administrators still managed and evaluated personnel, oversaw the school budget,

found ways to retain staff, created professional development opportunities, orchestrated the

school's master schedule, attended to student discipline, and found ways to communicate

effectively with groups that were not together all the time. Nothing had been removed from the

general responsibilities of school leaders, but a great deal had been added. Table 15 represents

some of the comments relating to Managerial Leadership.

Table 15

Managerial Leadership Coding

Participant	Managerial Leadership Statement
Yanel Yogi District D	• "This law was coming that was going to be like, your school principal, you can't say nope, sorry. They're coming. And you still have to maintain the spacing requirements."
Polly Panda District C	• "I think managing it showed the importance of delegation and pulling on my strong team members and knowing to use my resources, pulling in my school nurse...knowing I can't know it all. I can't do it all."
Tracy Teri District E	• "There was a lot of delivering the hotspots to the students, getting those to individual students. And I guess they would work. And here I do remember they might have put some activity buses, they might have done some things like that."

Participant	Managerial Leadership Statement
Carson Conrad District B	• "And the expectation being that you put these down every six feet and kids needed to walk six feet apart and you needed a travel plan for your school so that students didn't pass face-to-face, but that they were walking all in a single file line basically throughout your entire campus. And I remember trying to plan, how are we going to do this?"
Winnie Queen District B	• "That year I had 29 students and you were supposed to space them six feet apart. They were able to be there every day. They could also choose to be hybrid." • "I think that was one of the complexities with that managerial piece, because people, I keep going back to the no internet, but I was not the only teacher at my school that first year. Those two years, the first two years of COVID, and the hotspots that the school system would supply weren't even adequate."
Edna Ellinor District F	• "We were just very much rule followers. We got the thousand stickers and we put them exactly where they said, and we had to. And when a kid would refuse to put a mask on, we sent them home and said, now you're virtual."

Participant	Managerial Leadership Statement
Edna Ellinor District F	• "There were so many managerial tasks that had to be done that had never been done before that. Yeah, the managerial side of it took so much."

Note. This table contains focus group participant responses coded using deductive analysis that related to managerial leadership. This data was collected in the Focus Group Interviews (Appendix E).

Standard 6: External Development Leadership

External Development Leadership is broken into two sub-standards: Parent and Community Involvement and Outreach; and Federal, State and District Mandates (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2008). This standard addresses the importance of fostering relationships outside of the school with parents and other community stakeholders. It also speaks to taking federal, state, and local mandates and finding ways to present them as an opportunity for improvement. The survey participants listed a focus on this standard as low overall (Figure 1) and as one of the standards they focused on less during the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 3).

The group discussion about external development leadership revolved around navigating how to take outside requirements and recommendations from federal, state, and local governments and create an atmosphere of adherence and support within the school, regardless of personal opinions. Several participants expressed difficulties navigating this landscape while also feeling that many local elected officials were very vocal about their personal opinions and had some control over how the schools would operate. Some participants felt as if they were caught

in a political battle between the school board and the outside world. Table 16 includes participant statements regarding External Development Leadership.

Table 16

External Development Leadership Coding

Participant	External Development Leadership Statement
Yanel Yogi District D	• "I mean, my school board member would call me and say [one thing] but then you'd hear something from the central office that was somewhat different than what the school board member was asking you to do…So it kind of makes it awkward."
Tracy Teri District E	• "And I guess it's probably just the county perspective of the role of navigating relationships with community members to get resources and support from the board. Here, [COVID] was so politicized that it created such division that even navigating conversations felt really challenging. And especially talking to those people and asking the board for permission, can we do this? I mean, it was tricky." • "We didn't even have a mask mandate last year, whenever everyone else was starting school with masks, and that was purely political reasons for taking a very strong approach to that. And it was really challenging..."

Note. This table contains focus group participant responses coded using deductive analysis that related to external development leadership. This data was collected in the Focus Group Interviews (Appendix E).

Standard 7: Micropolitical Leadership

Micropolitical Leadership has one substandard: School Executive Micro-political Leadership (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2008). This standard's description reflects the importance of using the "staff's diversity, ideological differences and expertise to realize the school's goals" (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2008, p. 26). This standard was ranked the lowest in the Educational Leaders Survey (Appendix C), in terms of importance (Figure 1), and it also had the lowest number of responses for the standards that school leaders focused on more during COVID (Figure 2). There were no focus group responses coded that directly applied to Micropolitical Leadership.

Crossover Data

The analysis of the focus group transcripts also uncovered some themes in phrasing that created some crossover between inductive and deductive themes that is worth noting. Many of these words or phrases were noticed in the data analysis but could not be relegated strictly to one theme or another. However, they are pieces of the analysis that are important. These words and their respective meanings are represented in Table 17 below.

Table 17

Additional Themes

Term	Frequency
Work (Student Instructional)	7
Work (Job Responsibilities)	54
Work (Efficiency)	22
Contact (Personal Contact)	7
Contact (Close Contact or Contact Tracing)	15
Distance/Space	16
Parents/Guardians	31

Note. This table contains focus group participant responses coded using deductive analysis that contained common phrasing and occurred multiple times in the interviews. This data was collected in the Focus Group Interviews (Appendix E).

Work

The mention of *work* came up 83 times in various capacities. Throughout the discussion, participants consistently brought up the idea of extra work required due to increased regulations governing how schools could operate. This mention of *work* was differentiated into three main categories: work as a definition of being at a job or having job responsibilities, work as a qualifier for the efficiency, and student academic work.

Work as Job Responsibilities

The theme of work as a responsibility came up 54 times during the interviews. Participants mentioned feeling the need to be *at work* more during the pandemic because they might be the only ones available. Bart, Yanel, Polly, Edna, and Robbie all mentioned being at work every day during the pandemic with phrases like, "never took a day off," "always came in," "*worked* every day through it," "I went every day," and "we all chose to come to *work*," respectively. School leaders felt the need to be at work and on campus even though there was often no one else in the buildings. Some of the discussion involved the frustration of getting employees to work from home. Bart, while discussing keeping teachers engaged away from the school building, said, "When people don't have to *work*, they're not going to *work*, and there are no employees out there to choose from."

The discussion of *work* was not relegated to school administrators and staff. A general consensus from the focus groups was that the parents' work responsibilities were a determining factor of student participation during COVID-19. These descriptions included the following:

Robby: "Parents had to *work* in order to provide for their families."

Yanel: "Parents *working* two shifts," "*working* night shifts."

Carson Conrad: "The *working* parents had no idea what was going on."

Many parents continued to work away from home even when their children were at home participating in virtual learning. This seemed to be a fairly ineffective way of educating students.

Work as a Qualifier for Efficiency. Some of the mentions of work from the participants were with regard to describing the determination of if something should be continued or not. For instance, Yanel mentioned having to "go online to make this *work*." Winnie Queen, who was a teacher during the COVID shutdown, mentioned "the topography of where we lived still didn't

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work" when describing the difficulty of navigating online teaching as she was not allowed to come into her school building. Edna, recalling a conversation with a student, said "This every other day stuff is *not working* for me." The general theme of work as a qualifier for efficiency had a negative undertone throughout the interviews.

Contact/Distance/Space

One key theme in the interviews was the increased focus on *contact/distance/space*. During COVID-19, especially when schools first came back into session with modifications, administrators were asked to monitor spacing and distance requirements. In most cases, students and staff were supposed to maintain at least six feet of distance between them at all times. This included seating in classrooms, at lunch, in the hallways, in the restroom, and all other places on campus.

Many participants mentioned the frustration of trying to manage this in a school setting. Yanel mentioned, "I felt like that year all I did was walk around with two yard sticks taped together to make sure people were staying the correct distance." Not only was this strict adherence to distance/space a relative impossibility to maintain within the confines of a school building, but it was also one of a long line of extra responsibilities placed on school leaders. The consequences of not maintaining the correct space could result in a staff member or student being forced to quarantine or in extreme cases, an entire classroom of students and staff being quarantined for up to 21 days.

The word *contact* was used 22 times. In some instances, it was used to define a person coming in contact with an infected person or surface. In other instances, it was used to describe someone in *close contact* with an infected person inside or outside the schoolhouse's confines.

There was a definite, consistent theme of adherence to guidelines that essentially banished person-to-person contact and asked for separation in all aspects.

Parents

Though the term *parents* was used by many participants in many different contexts, it is likely this term was a descriptor of the adults charged with caring for students at home. This phrasing was noticed 31 times during the focus group interviews. It depicts the significance of the guardian's role during COVID-19 education, especially during the school shutdown, when students were participating virtually at home. There was much discussion on how difficult it was to educate a student when there was a lack of support from home. According to the school leaders interviewed, this was possibly due to the inability to help a student effectively, the lack of time available to support a student at home due to work or familial obligations, a fundamental belief that school was important during that period, or a combination of the above.

The Difference in Inductive and Deductive Analysis

The data analyses from this study highlight similar ways that educational leaders worked through the pandemic in their schools. One significant pattern that emerged in the data was that during this extreme crisis, the NCSSE were, in many cases, a shallow reference tool used to keep educational leaders on track. The focus group participants did not seem cognizant of conforming to the standards because they were part of their job responsibilities. Instead, in looking back on pandemic education, the participants could recall portions of their experience that unintentionally conformed to various standards.

This unintended conformity to some standards over others was likely a combination of the internalization of the standards to an extent where these school leaders naturally adhered to them under certain circumstances combined with the need to quickly make decisions regardless

of how these decisions fit into a set of standards. These school leaders were operating under extreme crisis circumstances where they had to make decisions based on the physical and mental safety of their students and staff. The participant answers to the Educational Leaders Survey (Appendix C) and the Focus Group Interviews (Appendix E) indicate that the NCSSE were not inherently important to their decision-making during COVID-19 education.

Another pattern that emerged was the extreme sense of vulnerability that the school leaders operated under. All of the interviewed participants expressed frustration, helplessness, and varying degrees of guilt from being unable to help the staff and students in their schools as they saw fit. In describing their actions, whether specifically addressing the NCSSE or not, there was a palpable sense of openness and vulnerability in not knowing how to lead their schools during the pandemic. The participants did not specifically express feelings of failure, and failure was not an identified theme of the analyses; however, the openness to discussing insecurities in their actions and being vulnerable in discussion with other educators was evident.

Chapter 4 Summary

In this chapter, I described both the inductive and deductive coding of the data compiled from the focus group interview transcripts. During the analysis of the data, there were many different themes that emerged from the participant responses. The themes were broken into different categories and presented in tables that contained similar participant responses.

The inductive data analysis revealed themes from the data that were noticed without a preconceived category or mode of analysis. In other words, the themes were uncovered via a thorough analysis of the data that resulted in a compilation of different themes that were consistent and noticeable in participant responses. This method of data collection allowed me to uncover and demonstrate the many consistencies that existed in how educational leaders in

Western North Carolina managed their schools, and the unique circumstances that arose due to COVID-19 education, in very similar ways.

The deductive analysis was completed by analyzing the participant responses in relation to the seven standards identified in the North Carolina Standards for School Executives. These standards are what school administrators are evaluated on annually, and they are designed to be the guiding standards that school administrators operate under during professional operations. Several of the standards–instructional leadership, cultural leadership, human resource management leadership, and managerial leadership had many responses that matched those standards. However, three standards–strategic leadership, external development leadership, and micro-political leadership–had a very limited number of responses that matched up with them.

While there were many consistencies with how site-based school leaders led during the COVID-19 pandemic, and many of the strategies did fall into recognizable, standards-based approaches, all of the school leaders interviewed in the Focus Group Interviews (Appendix E) admitted to not considering where their actions fell in relation to the standards when they were navigating COVID-19 education. The data demonstrates that even though adherence to the North Carolina Standards for School Executives might be inherent in some leadership capacities, the NCSSE may not have been entirely relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic, and they may have also become less relevant in post-COVID education. The enrichment of other forms of leadership may be necessary for the future management of schools, particularly during a crisis.

Chapter 5: Analysis and Conclusions

There were many themes that emerged from the disaggregation, analysis, and synthesis of both pre-existing data on educational and crisis leadership, and the data collected as a result of this study. The analysis shows that while there is a place for the use of standards for educational leadership, there is also a need to support leadership strategies that exist outside of the standards, including developing educational leadership training that focuses on being able to quickly gather information, triage the needs of the organization, and shift leadership styles based on the greatest immediate needs of the school.

This research study employed two different methods to provide a wide range of different data sets and information about school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. While there is no set tactic for reimagining leadership standards or creating a set of standards that are universally applicable to all situations, there are likely ways to promote standards for leadership that can bolster the unique talents of the leaders in schools, as well as address the unique circumstances that each individual school may need at any given moment in time. This chapter will provide a summary of findings and recommendations for future research on the subject of COVID-19 educational leadership.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to analyze how site-based school leaders navigated education during the pandemic. It looked closely at what school leaders found essential during the pandemic, how their focus may have shifted, and how the North Carolina Standards for School Executives guided their decision-making from the onset of the pandemic in March of 2020 through the immediate years that followed. The research questions guiding the study were:

1. How did the work of school leaders change during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. What barriers (if any) did school leaders encounter while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic?

3. Did the COVID-19 pandemic influence lasting changes in the school leader's role and should the current leadership standards be revised to reflect these changes?

The COVID pandemic brought unforeseeable challenges that made school leadership extremely difficult. After March 2020, the role of the school leader shifted dramatically. The role rapidly changed from being an instructional leader and teaching mentor to triaging physical and mental health concerns of which very few school leaders are trained. Undoubtedly, the pandemic brought about changes in school leadership and how school leaders will operate, likely well into the future.

Educators working through the pandemic were placed in stressful situations that many were untrained to handle. Educator stress, anxiety, and instances of depression were heightened during the pandemic, and administrators now need to be hyper-aware of the needs of those they supervise regarding pandemic-induced stress (Ma et al., 2022). More focus needs to be placed on supporting the well-being of all those in education, including students, teachers, clerical staff, administrators, and all those within the school building.

Summary of Findings

There were two methods of data collection used in this research study. The first was a survey containing questions on educators' opinions about the importance of the North Carolina Standards for School Executives, both before COVID-19 and after the onset. It also asked how the job responsibilities of educators changed during the pandemic, what barriers existed not there previously, and demonstrated how a group of school leaders ranked the importance of the

standards that guide the profession. The survey was sent to all school administrators in five Western North Carolina school districts. There were a total of 52 respondents.

The second method of data collection was focus group interviews. There were two sets of interviews with ten participants who indicated on the Educational Leaders Survey (Appendix C) an interest in being a part of the interviews. The focus group interviews were guided, in part, by questions that arose through a careful analysis of the Educational Leaders Survey data. As the researcher, I moderated the semi-structured interviews, allowing me to provide focus where it was needed, but also allowing for participants to engage in conversation organically influenced by other participants' comments.

Uncertainty and Certainty in Instruction

One of the key takeaways from the data was the apparent shift in focus from instruction and academics being a top priority before COVID to being of less importance to educational leaders during the pandemic. When the pandemic hit, school leaders were trying to find ways to mitigate the fallout from many different problems that were compounded by the pandemic like chronic absenteeism, lack of food in the home, lack of parental supervision, engagement in a sedentary lifestyle, inability to access the internet or have reliable device access, as well as a host of other problems. One of the main problems, however, may have been the educational leaders' lack of confidence in serving the students and parents during a time fraught with uncertainty and drastic shifts in guidance (Brion & Kiral, 2021).

During the focus group interviews, the participants admitted to a feeling of uncertainty limiting their ability to focus on instruction. A group concern was that much of what was detailed in the media described how dire the pandemic health risk was and the potential dangers in getting groups of people together might be. Many of the school leaders interviewed discussed

how their focus went away from instruction and to survival–helping to provide basic needs and obeying health protocols passed down from many different agencies. There was collective uncertainty in what to do coupled with the certainty that instruction–which was once at the forefront–was limited and very difficult to implement with regularity.

Stress Management

During regular school operation, educational leaders are under constant pressure to reach performance goals, deal with discipline problems or angry parents, complete evaluations, provide professional development, manage schedules, and complete many other tasks that accompany the position. However, the stress added on during COVID was immense, and educational leaders tried to create a sense of normalcy by attempting to help keep the operation of schools as close to the same as possible, which they did not have the resources to do (Brion & Kiral, 2021). The stresses of the pandemic were extreme, and educators may have experienced more acute stress than other professions, even other front-line workers (Kush et al., 2022).

Many participants discussed feeling the need to be at work more during the pandemic, despite long periods when very few people were in the buildings. Several of the participants mentioned not taking any days off. They were also trying to navigate a complicated political landscape and translate federal, state, and local government mandates into something workable at the school level that could be communicated to parents, teachers, and students. This created a waterfall effect on the decision-making process.

The federal government released mandates, and then the state released their mandates that included the federal mandates plus what the state wanted to add, and the local governments did the same. The school leaders interviewed discussed having to react to and translate information distributed by three levels of government and then communicate the school plans to

its stakeholders. The mandates passed down from different levels of government were often confusing and contradictory. This dynamic is represented in Figure 6 below.

Figure 6

Flowchart of Mandate Collection and School Planning
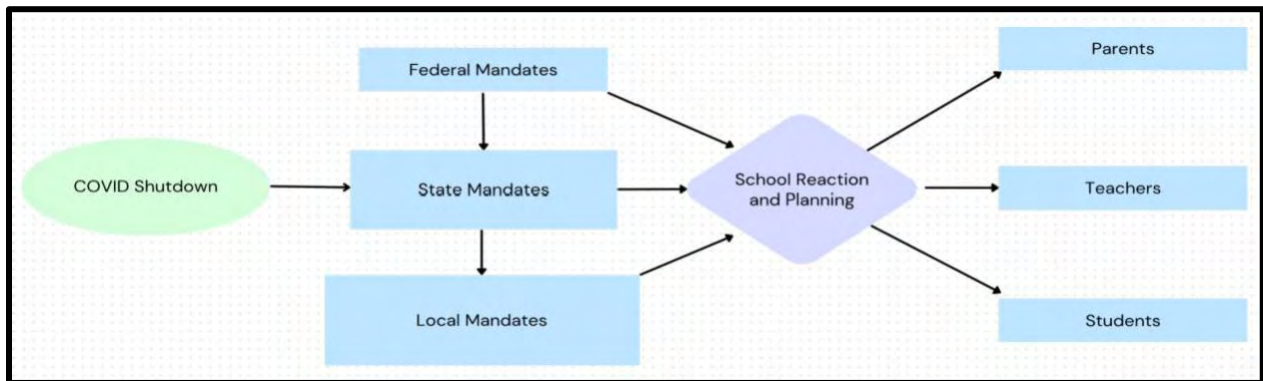
Note. This graphic is an illustration of how COVID-19 mandates were filtered down from the federal government, to the state governments, to the local governments. Schools assembled the information and mandates from all levels and planned for safe handling of parents, students, and staff. This graphic was developed by the researcher as an illustration of how information was collected and disseminated during COVID-19 education.

Addition Without Subtraction

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the responsibilities placed on school leaders had been increasing as local, state, and federal government officials pushed for higher performance on accountability models. School leaders are pressured to meet a wide variety of requirements passed down not only by different levels of government, but also the parents and communities that are part of their school district. These requirements and reforms, when added together, make it extremely difficult for school leaders to implement any of them with fidelity (Gummerson, 2015). Gummerson (2015), discussing the added responsibilities that teachers have had placed on them with nothing being removed, labeled the constant addition of reforms as a "pack mule

effect" (p. 1814). This also accurately describes the role of the educational leader, even before COVID-19. Since the pandemic, however, the requirements of the school leader role have continued to increase exponentially.

The pandemic dramatically changed the teaching and learning process, and as such, it has changed the role of the educational leader (Constantia et al., 2021; Zhao, 2020). The simple addition of the bureaucratic requirements–quarantining, turning in social distancing protocols, managing close contacts, checking temperatures, enforcing masks, planning virtual instruction– placed on school leaders caused them to focus on managing rather than leading their schools (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023). As education moves forward and relief funds dry up, it is important to reconsider what is necessary in education. Since the COVID-19 shutdowns the system has been run beyond full capacity because public educators are called to support their students. However, this is not sustainable.

The data uncovered from the focus group interviews showed that participants did what they felt was necessary during the school closures and years after. However, none of them felt like they did it very well. There was a common sense that all of the added responsibilities were largely reactionary management strategies, and these had nothing to do with leading through the crisis. All of the extra duties added on top of what already existed, coupled with the notion that schools have not been effective in teaching students during this stretch of time, was evident in the demeanor of the participants.

Increased Focus on School Culture

The data suggests that Cultural Leadership was an essential focus for school leaders before and during the pandemic. Culture often separates one school from another, and because it is a "predominant force, the culture of a school influences teacher and student retention,

performance, and well-being" (Brion, 2022, p. 12). Culture also affects the collective efficacy of the staff, which speaks to the belief that all employees are capable of helping students, and all students believe they are capable of being helped.

The focus group interviews detailed the attempts of school leaders to provide a culture of support during the pandemic. The participants mentioned trying everything they could think of to help foster a caring and safe environment. However, many of them sometimes felt like they were fighting a losing battle. They shifted from having support protocols within the school buildings to trying to build systems to take support into the community with home visits, food drives, and creating internet hotspots in strategic locations. The school leaders interviewed exhausted themselves trying to reinvent school amid difficult circumstances in order to create a culture of support, even when people were not in the school buildings, all while having very little extra financial support.

A Forced Re-entry into Education

During the pandemic, public schools became much more than places where academics are administered. They became shelters, food pantries, and mental health agencies. In some places they became community hubs for internet access, with people setting up in parking lots and near other campus internet access points to attend virtual meetings, complete assignments, or simply connect with friends. Decades of research and action steps supporting standardization, proficiency testing, and accountability data were put on hold in May of 2020 when the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) announced that standardized testing would not take place, and school letter grades would not be given for the 2019-2020 school year. With that, teacher and administrator evaluations were also cancelled for the 2019-2020 school year.

For the first time in history, all public education turned virtual, and the educational responsibilities were shared between the schools and the homes of the students.

Schools had to become increasingly reliant on parents and guardians to help administer academic lessons, despite the parents and guardians not being trained to do so (Hoofman & Secord, 2021). This created drastic learning deficits for many students. Kuhfeld and Tarasawa (2020) reported that, due to extended time out of school after the lengthy COVID-19 shutdowns between March 2020 and August 2020, students could be up to a year behind what is normal and expected after returning from a summer break. Parents were being asked to be involved in and supervise the education of their students at a level that they were not prepared for, and to facilitate learning that they were not trained to assist in (Lee et al., 2021).

The focus group participants talked at length about the challenges involved in virtual education with students at home. They mentioned trying to educate students in homes with spotty internet service, and all manner of distractions happening in the background. These school leaders were fighting internal battles between asking their teachers to maintain academic integrity, even though this was a mere shell of what it was pre-COVID, and simply survive virtual education knowing it was not optimal.

Despite a great deal of evidence that the needs of students, staff, and parents had greatly changed during the COVID-19 shutdown and distance education, North Carolina public schools returned to a hybrid model of education for the 2020-2021 school year. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction reinstituted End of Grade (EOG) and End of Course (EOC) testing for the 2020-2021 school year. NCDPI also reinstated the use of school letter grades, which provide a score for each school–A through F–based largely on proficiency and growth scores. In less than a year and a half after an unprecedented disruption in public education, North

Carolina public schools were essentially back to business as usual. The needs of the students and the community that surrounded them, however, had drastically changed.

The reinstatement of accountability measures brought back all of the pressure for schools to pick up where they left off. This was despite the fact that schools were operating with a drastic increase in mental health needs, shortages in staffing due to quarantine restrictions, and learning gaps exacerbated by many months of students not being in school. All of these items, which require more time and attention, came with no extra support for school leaders. Winnie Queen, a teacher during COVID-19 education who did not have internet access at her home, talked about how she sat in her car to deliver instruction to her elementary students because she had to teach them what they needed to know. Whether the expectations of the governing bodies were to maintain the same level of production as pre-COVID or not, school leaders felt as if this was the expectation.

This Study's Application to Crisis Leadership

The findings from this study detail the lived experiences of site-based K-12 public educational leaders In Western North Carolina public schools during the COVID-19 crisis. Crises are not new to education; however, the unique experiences encountered during COVID-19 are unique. Never before had education been so abruptly shut down and then reimagined and reopened within only a few days. The lessons learned from this crisis, in particular, can be applied to future crisis leadership analysis.

It is worth noting that, at the inception of distance learning, the educational leaders who were participants in this study, felt the need to help maintain a focus on academics. For this reason, they made drastic efforts to create processes designed to hold together the academic integrity of their schools. Not only was this a huge stress on them professionally, many of them

were disheartened by their efforts. They were frustrated by the idea that, despite a great deal of effort from themselves and others, education as they knew it was just not possible.

There are definite lessons to be learned from the research described in this dissertation. During a crisis, normal operation is typically not possible, nor is it always a priority. The focus group participants listed many frustrations with trying to recreate a focus on academics, when what was important at the onset of the pandemic was the safety and well-being of their staff and students. Effective crisis leadership strategies should include the products that are part of *normal* operation that can be sacrificed in the short-term in order to attend to the human needs that have arisen.

This study has also shown that, during a crisis, the systems of operation are running well-above normal capacity. So many mandates and regulations were forced upon schools and school leaders during COVID-19. Extra responsibilities are part of typical crisis management. However, many crises relating to education, like weather-related closures or political unrest, last weeks or months. COVID-19 education lasted years, and its lingering effects are likely to be part of educational crisis management until the students who were in pre-kindergarten during the pandemic finally graduate from high school–around the year 2032. Due to the extended nature of the COVID-19 crisis and the educational needs that have been presented because of it, there are important lessons to be learned in crisis leadership that relate to centralizing early efforts to mitigate crisis and disaster, but then creating a plan for long-term sustainability–something that did not exist for educational leaders during the COVID-19 crisis.

A Shift in Standards

A careful data analysis indicated that educational leadership shifted drastically during the pandemic. Many school leaders tried desperately to maintain the status quo by attempting to

operate within a set of standards that they were used to. However, these standards were built to support an educational system that had evolved over more than a century, and in many ways, both the national and North Carolina standards also evolved with it. The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a violent shift in how educational leaders operated. Educational leaders redefined their interpretation of the standards and worked outside of them in many areas.

The data uncovered during this research study showed that, during COVID-19 education, school leaders worked outside of the standards in order to attend to the physical and mental safety of their staff and students. This was not a conscious effort to act against the norm, but rather the only way they knew how to lead through a crisis. Their system was put under extreme stress and the only logical solution was to tap every financial, emotional, and physical reserve they could think of in order to create a new normal in the midst of drastic instability. Many of them worked every day of the pandemic–while most people were working from home–to maintain the systems that those in education had built over centuries.

The survey data supported the idea that school leaders had to change how they led. Only 21% of the survey respondents reported that the NC Standards for School Executives were essential to their decision-making during the pandemic. The focus group interview analysis supported this data. During the interviews, the participants only mentioned the NCSSE if they were directly asked about it. The participants also mentioned that the standards were something they only sometimes thought about during the pandemic. This data is represented in Figure 7.

Figure 7

Educational Leaders' Determination of the Importance of NCSSE
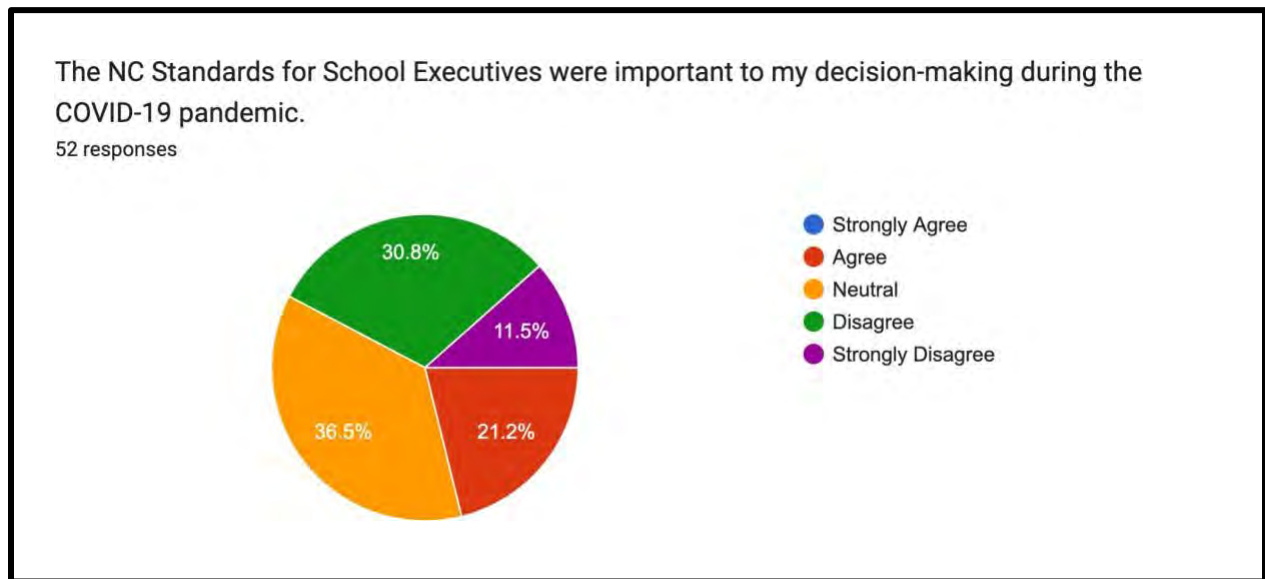
The NC Standards for School Executives were important to my decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic.

52 responses

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

30.8%
11.5%
36.5%
21.2%

Note. This chart contains participant responses from the Educational Leaders Survey (Appendix C). It demonstrates how participants–using a Likert-type scale–felt about the importance of the NC Standards for School Executives during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the Educational Leaders Survey (Appendix C), nearly 83% of respondents reported that COVID-19 impacted their leadership style, and 82.7% agreed that the pandemic fostered a new pattern of educational leadership. The survey participant data also showed that these educational leaders had to find new ways to lead their organizations during COVID-19 education. Many focus group participants mentioned having to react to the needs of their organization and find ways to lead despite not knowing exactly what to do or how to do it. They found themselves having to triage immediate needs with those less important–despite the level of importance that might have existed before COVID-19. For example, many leaders detailed the need to focus on managerial and human resource leadership over instructional leadership, which was a change from how they operated pre-COVID. This data is represented in Figure 8 below.

133

Figure 8

COVID-19 Impact on Leadership Style

Note. This chart contains participant responses from the Educational Leaders Survey (Appendix C). It demonstrates if participants–using a Likert-type scale–believed that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their leadership style.

There also seems to be a new pattern of educational leadership that has emerged since COVID-19 began. School leaders have created new ways of managing schools with students and staff that have different needs than what they did prior to COVID-19. Today's leaders have to be more versed in mental health support, connection with parents, stress management for themselves and others, and addressing learning gaps that are far larger than what they had previously been accustomed. This data is shown in Figure 9 below and was supported by the participants in the focus group interviews.

Figure 9

Indication of New Pattern of Leadership

A new pattern of educational leadership has emerged due to the changes that COVID-19 education brought.

52 responses

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
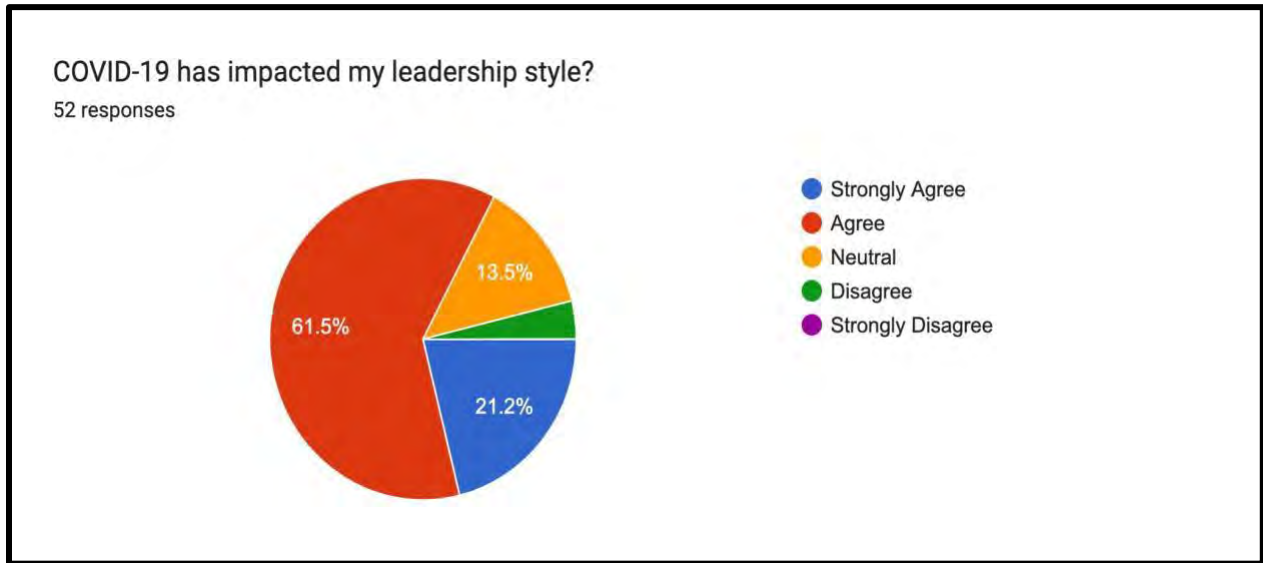- Neutral
- Disagree
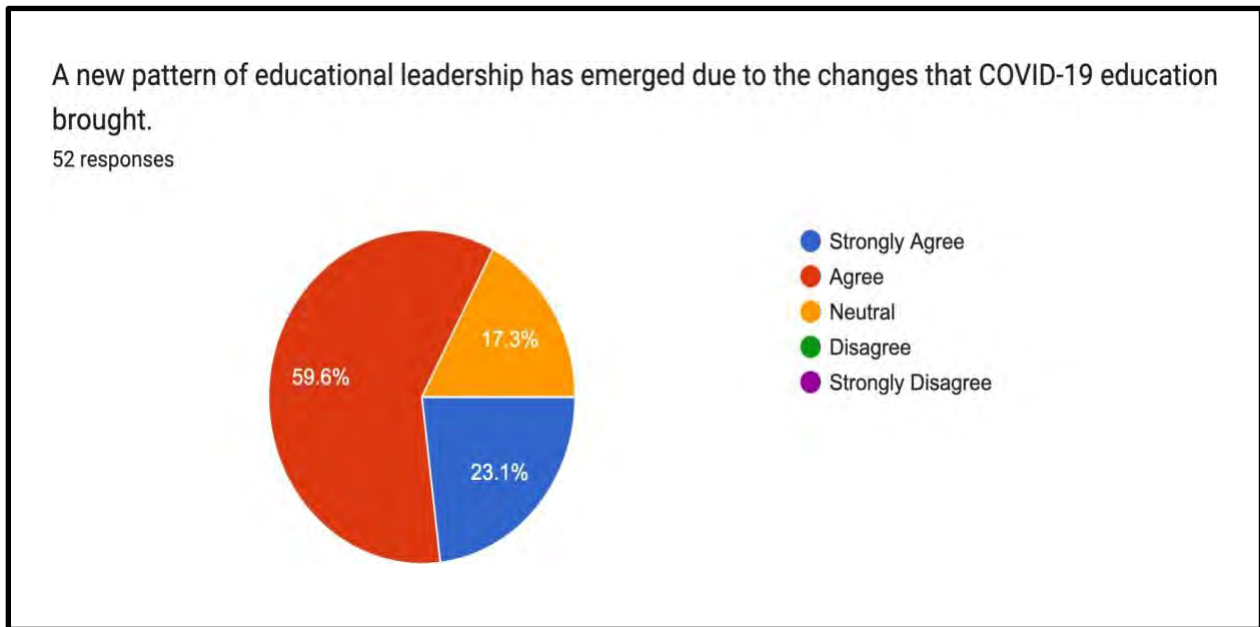- Strongly Disagree

59.6%

17.3%

23.1%

Note. This chart contains participant responses from the Educational Leaders Survey (Appendix C). It demonstrates if participants–using a Likert-type scale–believed that the COVID-19 pandemic introduced a new pattern of leadership.

During COVID-19, school leaders prioritized their focus to take care of the physiological and safety needs of their staff and students. The discussion by the focus group participants is reminiscent of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs which states that, as humans, we pay attention to our most urgent needs and attend to them if possible (*Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*, 2016; Aanstoos, 2023). During the pandemic, school leaders attended to the most urgent, unmet needs of their staff and students. In many cases, this meant ignoring the standards that they were guided by, and even ignoring the basic instructional needs of their students. Since the pandemic had effects on health and well-being, the economy, education, professional operation, and a host of other parts of human life, people immediately and unapologetically looked after their most basic needs first. For the educational leader, what was most important, especially in the initial phases

of COVID-19 education, was helping to meet their staff and students' physiological needs–food, shelter, supplies–and then attending to their physical and mental safety. Instruction and assessment were not priorities.

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework Revisit

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the research data was analyzed through a constructivist lens with a phenomenological framework. The participants in both the Educational Leaders Survey (Appendix C) and the Focus Group Interviews (Appendix E) all experienced the COVID-19 pandemic as educators. They all had to operate under the same federal and state governmental directives, and they all experienced the extreme stresses associated with having to make decisions based on a rapid influx of expectations and requirements that had never been experienced before in education.

Their lived experiences during this time, however, were a result of many different factors, including Local Education Agency directives based off of federal and state mandates, personal ideologies regarding the governmental mandates, and the specific needs of the schools they were a part of. None of them had ever experienced an educational crisis that in any way resembled COVID-19 education, but all of them were expected to lead their organizations through it. They also all entered pandemic education with differing backgrounds, life experiences inside and outside of education, leadership expertise, and varying thoughts on the efficacy of the COVID-19 shutdown.

What they had in common to begin working through pandemic education was the North Carolina Standards for School Executives (NCSSE). The NCSSE were designed to be a universal set of standards and practices that school leaders should include in their regular operations. Though the educational leaders in this study were cognizant of these standards–the NCSSE are

part of the evaluation system for school administrators–the school leaders had to determine how to operate outside of these standards where necessary in order to support the needs of their schools.

An analysis through a constructivist lens was appropriate for this study because pandemic education required the construction of new knowledge that allowed school leaders to effectively lead their schools. Gaining new knowledge deals greatly with building on prior knowledge and constructing meaning from past experiences (Nealon & Giroux, 2012; Walker, 2002). In the case of COVID-19 education, constructing new knowledge was necessary because what was being experienced was uncharted. In many cases, though, the individual's prior experiences and comparison with what education was *supposed* to look like caused frustration and feelings of discontent with what happened during this time.

Using a phenomenological framework was appropriate because it allowed me, as the researcher, to show how site-based Western North Carolina public school educational leaders, who were initially guided by a common set of standards, and who experienced the COVID-19 pandemic as a brand-new experience, lived through and reacted to the same event. Research conducted with a phenomenological framework allows the participants' experience to be the source of the data (Larsen & Adu, 2022). There were many similarities in action between these educators despite being in different schools and school systems. There were also patterns that emerged in both the inductive and deductive analysis of the data that helped create a new story about COVID-19 educational leadership.

Recommendations and Implications

Conducting this study and analyzing the data has uncovered several needs for how we prepare school leaders, as well as initial and on-job professional development. Even though the

pandemic was unpredictable, unlike anything the North Carolina education system has ever experienced, there were many lessons to be learned. Data from both the Educational Leaders Survey (Appendix C) and the focus group interviews pointed toward the idea that educational leaders were unable to navigate the difficulties of education during the pandemic because they were underprepared from the onset. They were not given training during the pandemic, and they were so used to focusing on specific aspects of education that they were unable to address immediate needs in the midst of the pandemic.

Crisis Management Training

Both the survey data and the focus group interviews uncovered the need for increased training for school administrators in crisis management strategies. Many leaders were unsure how to plan for their schools because they needed to be adequately prepared and trained to work through an intense crisis. In the Educational Leaders Survey (Appendix C), 46.1% of respondents expressed that they had not received adequate training for leading their school through a pandemic, and 55.8% reported that they had received no additional training since the onset.

A principal area of need is developing a strategic plan for crisis intervention. A great deal of discussion during the focus group interviews centered around trying to run a school based on the standards and ideals that existed before COVID. In many ways, it was an exercise in futility. How much the public education system has changed has yet to be seen, but there is no doubt that the two years after the March 2020 shutdown forced immediate shifts in educational thinking. The only measuring stick of effectiveness at the time was a comparison of how things operated before COVID. This created unrealistic and unsustainable standards of operation and performance for the principals and their schools.

Educational leaders need specific training in strategic planning related to surviving a crisis and setting up their organization for recovery after the crisis. As many focus group participants mentioned, much of what was done during COVID-19 was a reaction–to government mandates, mental health needs, providing basic nutritional and living needs, and doing wellness checks on students and staff that had been lost to contact. Educational leaders were trying to stay current on details they had no frame of reference for understanding. The pandemic was unprecedented, and in many cases, educational leaders did the best job they were trained to do. However, there is an opportunity to learn from the challenges endured during that time.

Leadership Crisis Training. Training in how to develop plans for providing triage followed by how to create a sustainable system for operating schools is vital. Part of this training should involve empowering leaders to make decisions outside of the normal operating procedures and understanding how to best use personnel to meet the organization's needs. It should also include common training in systems thinking, and predicting how shifts or movement in one area can affect multiple parts of an organization.

Crisis training should involve developing an increased emphasis on central communication strategy, especially during times of stress. During COVID-19 education, there were many mixed messages from the mass media about the dangers associated with COVID-19, fatality risk, and health protocol procedures (Dumulescu & Muţiu, 2021; Kaul et al., 2020). Reliance on outside media causes uncertainty, and "Uncertainty produces anxiety throughout the workforce and the leader's silence will be interpreted as bad 'local' news" (Kaul et al., 2020, p. 809). Training in this area should focus on addressing what is happening to cause stress on the organization, how this stress might affect the organization, and the steps the organization will

take to mitigate the effects of the outside stress inside the organization. There should be specific attention paid to the uses of different types of media–mass communication apps, telephone-based communication, newspaper communication, and social media.

Many educational leaders became paralyzed when trying to determine how to best employ their personnel, particularly when staff had to operate outside of the box and take on additional responsibilities. This was exacerbated by being limited to traditional modes of operation in hiring procedures, adherence to standard work hours, and a comprehensive lack of training in virtual teaching and learning. This limited the effectiveness of principals and their schools because these leaders were operating with short-term resources and little to know knowledge of what the long-term effects of the pandemic might be.

Crisis training should include the creation of strategic crisis planning, which involves not only funneling resources into meeting the immediate needs of the organization, but also being "guided by a view of the sacrifices required to preserve strategic direction" (Kaul et al., 2020, p. 810). COVID-19 was drastically different than other crises, especially in terms of education. However, it is now possible to reflect on the strategic process and how it was hampered because of a lack of vision and direction. Future educational leadership training should focus on creating structured organizational crisis plans as well as methods for adjustment where needed.

Addition of a Mental Health Standard

One of the most glaring deficits in the training of educational leaders during the pandemic was that of supporting mental health, both for the staff and the students. Supporting mental health, in itself, is a difficult task. However, the barriers that educational leaders faced during the pandemic were monumental. Not only were they being asked to support others through unprecedented times, but they were being asked to support people who were not even on

their campuses and those who, in many cases, did not want to be reached. Educational leaders were ill-prepared to handle these scenarios.

The mental health needs of those in education were substantial. Seemingly, all involved with schools during the pandemic required mental health support. In a study involving 662 school system employees in Wisconsin during the pandemic, "Anxiety and depressive symptoms were respectively 1 and .5 SD above the population average," and most of these employees reported clinically significant symptoms. New teachers reportedly had high levels of anxiety and dissatisfaction during the pandemic (Martínez-Líbano & Yeomans, 2023), and nearly 80% of schools reported seeing a need for increased social-emotional support for students (Camera, 2022). The need for school leaders to focus on mental health, including their own, has never been higher.

All students were impacted by the pandemic in different ways. Even though many may never show long-term effects from the COVID-19 shutdowns, the pandemic's effects on a large number of school-aged children are significant. Adolescents showed a much higher propensity for depression and PTSD after COVID-19; a higher risk of suicide; a significant decrease in overall life satisfaction; feelings of isolation; increases in screen time, attachment to social media, stressful altercations within the home, and anxiety; and a decrease in physical activity (Hoofman & Secord, 2021; Lee et al., 2021).

The focus group participants echoed that a mental health standard is necessary to the North Carolina Standards for School Executives. Not only did the group voice dissatisfaction with their current training, but they also reported being overwhelmed with the needs that presented themselves immediately when the shutdown happened, as well as and in the months and years since. There was a hope that mental health needs would be addressed when students

and staff returned to school, but perhaps the opposite has been true. The participants echoed that students returned to school with a much larger set of needs, and the school personnel that are meant to support them have fewer resources and training with which to provide that support. Some of the comments from the groups are represented in Table 18 below.

Table 18

Need for Mental Health Standard Comments

Participant	Mental Health Standard Statements
Winnie Queen District B	• "What we're seeing in the wake of it all is the huge influx towards needing mental health support." • "When we had the sphere of control of a typical school day prior to COVID, we had so many systems already in place to address the human whole person needs. With COVID, we lost all of that. They lost their food supply, they lost heat…they lost that part of what school provided that we kind of just took for granted." • "But I think when you look at EC students in particular, there is definitely this high need for mental health support and behavioral support that has not been a part of the status quo. I don't know that that's been reevaluated since when it became everyone's job to kind of triage social emotional well-being. But now everyone's back in the building and we're supposed to be teaching and you've got this SEL component that…people just aren't trained still."

Participant	Mental Health Standard Statements
Barry Brown District A	• "There's only so many people to go around and if I push [mental health] off and hope someone else will take it, no one is stepping up." • "I spent a lot of time in mental health propping people up trying to keep them going on with so much uncertainty."
Polly Panda District C	• "[Mental health] is one of the least funded things in the state. But in the school system, we also have to fight the parents and the political aspect of them getting upset. I know here it's talk about SEL, don't teach tolerance. Our parents just get up in arms when you start throwing that out there. But mental health training is needed for school leadership."
Tracy Teri District E	• "Now I do feel like it would be helpful to add in a standard that ensures that administrators have some [mental health] training. "

Note. This table contains focus group participant responses coded using inductive analysis that related to an increased need for mental health standards. This data was collected in the Focus Group Interviews (Appendix E).

Mental Health Standard Elements. In fitting with the NCSSE's ordering of the standards into elements and sub-elements, the addition of a mental health standard could consist of three elements: Student Mental Health Support, Staff Mental Health Support, and Personal

Mental Health Support. These three elements would be used to create guidelines for educational leaders to be able to assess both the mental health and well-being of all those in the school buildings, and also to ensure systems are in place to diagnose and support mental health needs.

The element addressing student mental health should include sub-elements that detail the education practices the school provides to its students to recognize mental health needs in of both the student and their peers. It should also include reporting practices that address multiple different layers of how students could report a mental health concern in themselves, their peers, or staff. This could include follow-up that would be provided once a mental health concern is found.

The element addressing staff mental health should have similar sub-elements addressing the recognition and reporting of mental health support for staff members. This might include the creation of a monitored plan for staff members who demonstrate the need for mental health support, as well as the specific places where mental health support will be provided by school leaders. There should be a sub-element that stresses the importance of creating processes to relieve pressure on staff members, where possible. Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the myriad tasks that have been added to the role of educational leader. This is not exclusive to school leaders, but exists at all levels of employment in the school system. It is important for school leaders to recognize the places they can lighten the load on those that they supervise.

There should also be an element that defines how educational leaders should be taking care of their own mental health and well-being. Evidence from both the research in this study and findings from the scholarly literature described in this dissertation show that more is being asked of educational leaders, possibly than ever before. During COVID-19 education, school leaders reported feeling the need to work more and also taking on more job responsibilities than

they had pre-COVID. An element addressing how these educational leaders can recognize their own mental health needs is a necessary addition to the standards.

Recommendations for School Leaders

The need for school leaders who can adjust their leadership practices is perhaps greater now than ever before. School leaders need to be adept, not only in the way they demonstrate their knowledge of the NCSSE, but also in how they use leadership practices that are not addressed in the standards. As described in Chapter 2, there were areas of leadership that were particularly useful during the pandemic; however, pinpointing leadership strategies that were part of the NCSSE and those that were not is difficult. For this reason, the post-COVID educational leader should recognize both the importance of strategies that are a part of an administrator's responsibility to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, and also strategies that are not explicitly mentioned in the standards.

A post-COVID school leader needs to understand the importance of the various components addressed in the NCSSE, especially when extreme stress is put on the system. Specific attention needs to paid to supporting teachers as continue to recover from the COVID-19 shutdowns and hybrid instruction. In the 2021-2022 school year, the attrition rate–defined as "no longer teaching in a North Carolina public school in the 2021-22 school year"–for all teachers was 7.78 percent, and the attrition rate for beginning teachers–those in the first three years of their teaching careers–was nearly twice that of experienced teachers at 13.06 percent and 6.9 percent, respectively (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2023, p. 7). While the support of teachers is addressed in differing degrees in many of the NCSSE, attention should be paid to Cultural Leadership, Instructional Leadership, and Human Resource Leadership as they relate to

hiring and training teachers, creating instructional practices that are efficient and meaningful, and creating a school environment grounded in a culture of growth and support.

Moving forward, school leaders need to understand the importance of planning for a crisis, and in times of stress to rethink and reimagine the priorities of their individual school. The NCSSE were intended to define what effective school leaders do regularly. Adhering to a finite set of standards not only limits school leaders' ability to lead, but it also does not allow for creatively addressing the needs of schools as they arise. While the overall idea of leadership might be similar to what has always been, COVID-19 has changes the The post-COVID educational leader has to think differently.

As shown in both Chapters 2 and 4, school leaders should continue to become well-versed in Agile Leadership practices that allow them to bring in lots of leadership styles that are tailored to both the short- and long-term needs of their schools. Agile leaders are resilient, they are creative thinkers, they are self-aware, and they are able to think from a systems standpoint. Agile leadership requires becoming hyperaware, having informed decision-making, and being able to quickly execute initiatives based on recently-gathered information (Puckett & Neubauer, 2020). Agile leaders are able to analyze the immediate needs of their organization and exhibit multiple forms of leadership depending on what is necessary in the moment (Olivier et al., 2021). They are able to provide focused, community-oriented assistance to the people within their schools despite the sheer volume of change going on around them (Fernandes et al., 2022). Studying these qualities and being vulnerable in the individual's ability to demonstrate them will help school leaders in negotiating a future in education that may not be as predictable as it was pre-COVID.

Recommendations for Universities and Educational Leadership Training Programs

Educational leadership practices and operations have changed since the COVID-19 shutdown, and with this change comes the necessity of the leadership training programs to change. The pandemic was a test on the education system that was unprecedented, and the actions taken by school leaders were adjustments to fit the demands of a crisis. Leadership training programs should provide a focus in helping school leaders triage the immediate needs of their organization, search for remedies to immediate problems, and notice common pitfalls in managing during a crisis. This could involve developing research strategies for effective practice–especially during a crisis, extending the role of the instructional leader, and training future school leaders to self-assess their abilities in relation to the immediate needs of their organization.

Crisis management and mitigation was of dire importance during COVID-19 education. As is evidenced by the research contained in this document, the role of the school leader was drastically different during COVID-19. Even though there is difficulty in creating crisis training due to the unexpected nature of crises, their inherent unpredictability in timing, and the ways that they present themselves, leadership training programs could provide training in how to pinpoint the immediate needs of their organization and develop a plan to address those needs succinctly until the immediate threat has been mitigated. This could involve helping leadership candidates think creatively–outside of standard practices, looking for ways to mobilize available resources, and developing strategies for creating a professional network that can provide knowledge and assistance in the time of need.

University leadership programs should also provide training in the new role of instructional leadership. Traditional training programs provide some field work and study in

pedagogy and instruction. However, COVID-19 created the need for an increase in the usage and knowledge of digital instruction (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023). Providing teacher support in digital pedagogy and ensuring that digital instruction is using high-yield, research-based strategies is critical to ensuring that modern education, with an increased usage of digital interfaces, is meeting the needs of the students and the teachers involved in the implementation of it.

There is a need for helping prospective school leaders be able to assess their own set of needs, including individual strengths and weaknesses in relation to the immediate needs of their organization, especially during a crisis. As mentioned in Chapter 4, every school administrator completes a self-evaluation yearly as part of their Professional Development Plan (PDP) and overall evaluation by their immediate supervisor. This evaluation, however, is based on the NCSSE, which have been shown by the data contained in this document to have been of variable importance during the COVID-19 crisis. In normal school operation, the NCSSE may guide school leaders in a general set of practices that have been shown to demonstrate effectiveness in school leadership. However, a strict adherence to a set of standards may actually weaken the abilities of those involved rather than strengthening them.

Recommendations for State Educational Agencies

The data presented in this document detail the importance in adjusting the North Carolina Standards for School Executives. Between 1986 and 2013 there was a focus on both the creation of effective leadership strategies and the adjustment to those strategies in order to reflect current trends and needs for educational leaders. There is a current discussion occurring that is centered around adjusting the NCSSE to be more representative of the practices needed to lead in a North Carolina public school. During these discussions, it will be important to detail strategies for

school leaders to be effective crisis and mental health leaders. It is also recommended that the discussions include elements addressing agile leadership. In particular, the post-COVID school leader needs to be adept at investigating strategies, even those that may not be traditional or even well-defined, that will help to meet the short-term needs of their organization while also planning for long-term sustainability.

Impact of the Data on the Researcher

As mentioned in Chapter 3, I am not only the researcher but also an administrator at a public school in Western North Carolina. In conducting this research, it is the hope that the data gathering and analysis will offer some insight into educational leadership during a crisis, particularly a crisis that was unlike any other that has been experienced in recent years. As a site-based educational leader in a Western North Carolina public school during COVID-19, I am able to question why we did what we did, and I was able to moderate the focus group interviews with vulnerability and show empathy toward the participants. Not only has this research opened my eyes to strategies used in other schools, but it has also helped me as an educational leader in my school and district.

Many parts of the data analysis matched my preconceived notions as someone who attempted to lead schools on many different levels during the pandemic. There was an increased focus on individual and group well-being, frustrations experienced from not being able to plan efficiently, the added stress of managing a multitude of new operations, and the overwhelming sense that our instructional efforts were wholly ineffective during the shutdown and a hybrid re-entry process.

A belief that I operated on for some time, even before beginning this research, was that additional job responsibilities created by the pandemic fell under *managerial leadership*, NCSSE

Standard 5. However, during the interviews, participants sometimes operated under different assumptions. For some, Human Resource Leadership was a primary focus during pandemic education, especially once staff and students were allowed to return to school under strict health guidelines. Upon reflecting more deeply, this type of leadership was something that I did have to focus on more heavily. I might have missed this piece of pandemic leadership had I not been involved in this research.

Educational leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic thrust school leaders into a form of leadership that required fast thinking, often without a chance to process information. School leaders had to be reactionary, and the standards discussed by Portin et al. (2003) were largely not what guided them in their decisions. The focus group interviews asked participants to look back and think about how the standards guided them. These reflections, though, were less about thinking how the standards caused their actions, and more about how their actions might have fit into one of the NCSSE if it had to be placed there. Many of the participants acknowledged that a lot of the leadership actions taken during COVID-19 education were not part a result of an adherence to the NCSSE.

I was also saddened by the idea that the overwhelming tone of the focus group conversations was that we, as educators, could not find solace in making a great effort during the pandemic. There was a great deal of frustration and a general sense that educational leaders did all that we were able to do, but that was still not enough. Carson, one of the focus group participants, even redirected the conversation once by mentioning that, as educational leaders, we are often hard on ourselves. The focus group interviews mirrored a characteristic often exhibited by educators who deeply desire to educate and protect children—being critical of themselves. However, as an outsider and moderator in this research, I was encouraged by the

extreme efforts these educational leaders made to provide the best educational experience possible.

During the focus group interviews, I was struck by how many times a participant mentioned something about education during the pandemic that I had forgotten. For me, this highlighted the importance of engaging in conversations about COVID-19 education despite wanting not to have to think about it ever again. Until examining a list of COVID-related tasks and topics created from the focus group participants' discussions, I had brushed aside the introduction of new ways of leading that we had to implement in our schools–in some cases, within only a few days. This not only underscored the depth of the obstacles that faced educational leaders, but it also drove home that what public education did accomplish, with limited knowledge of the circumstances and very few added resources, was nothing short of miraculous.

As the 2023-2024 school year begins, it is impossible not to notice how public education so quickly tried to return to *normal* following the COVID-19 shutdowns. In the three and a half years since the COVID-19 shutdowns, drastic measures have been taken to maintain even a sliver of normalcy. Now, even as COVID-19 cases begin to rise again across the nation, there is little mention of the preparations public education might need to be making should we experience a disruption to education similar to that of March of 2020.

Phenomenological Revelations. Using a phenomenological lens in analyzing the data in this research study has helped me, as a public educator, realize how individual reactions to phenomena are worth investigating. The COVID-19 crisis precipitated changes in the ways that site-based educational leaders operated. When observed in isolation, these changes appeared as necessary adjustments to federal, state, and local directives that caused a change in the way that

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an individual school administrator led through a crisis. When observed as a collection of experiences detailing how multiple school leaders, representing six different school districts in Western North Carolina public schools, navigated the complexities of pandemic education, these changes appeared as objective data delineating how the pandemic educational leader demonstrated leadership through a forced evolution of leadership strategies.

Phenomenological analysis involves diving into the "meanings things have in our experience" (Smith, 2018, para. 4). As an educational leader that experienced the COVID-19 pandemic as a site-based school administrator, I viewed my experience of pandemic leadership as unique. This study provided evidence that, despite how I originally experienced the pandemic, I was part of a collection of individuals that created leadership nuances that were initially my own, but that belonged to a larger assemblage of the re-creation of educational leadership that exists now in a post-COVID educational system.

My own experience also created a feeling of failure in relation to adhering to the North Carolina Standards for School Executives that I had agreed to follow when moving into a role as a site-based school administrator. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Engelland (2020) describes phenomenological study as a "direct way of bringing us face to face, up close and personal, with the fundamental layer of experience, a layer presupposed by science and everyday life" (p. 76). Conducting this research and using inductive and deductive analysis to uncover the themes contained within it has helped me to understand that educational leadership does not exist in isolation, nor does it rely on a strict adherence to standards. It is, however, a constant evolution of adjustments by educational leaders designed to meet the needs of the students and staff that are a part of North Carolina public schools.

Difficulties, Pitfalls, and Limitations

Part of the anticipated difficulties in this type of research lie in analyzing the human element and being fair to the research process. The COVID-19 pandemic was an intensely stressful period for educators. It was a time that may never have a definite end point because educational leaders may have to address the after-effects for decades to come. Asking these leaders to relive these moments did trigger emotions that had been left behind. However, to provide an accurate, valid sample of data, the participants needed to speak honestly about their experiences and be forthright with their frustrations. The participants' identities were kept anonymous in case they revealed disparaging remarks about their supervisor or government officials.

A possible pitfall with this type of research is the selection of the participants. There was no prior indication of actual leadership ability or effectiveness, nor was there a long-term analysis of how the tactics the participants chose to use or not to use affected their schools. The participants were chosen based on an indication that they would voluntarily be a part of this research.

Using surveys and identifying the participants helped to seek a wide range of participants for the study. However, at the very least, the participant field was limited to those who responded to the Educational Leaders Survey (Appendix C). Even though care was taken to select participants representative of the general population, there was no guarantee that a variety of participants would be willing to participate.

The sampling of educational leaders in the focus groups was not racially diverse. The survey was sent to all principals and assistant principals within five different school districts in Western North Carolina. The focus group interviews were chosen from the respondent pool. All

those who indicated interest and were asked to participate in the focus groups were either white males or females. Since no ethnicity information was collected in the survey, there was no way of knowing anything about the identity of the focus group participants before meeting with them.

The knowledge and experience of the participants selected was another limitation. Even though the group may be representative of the general population, their opinions and experiences may not be. Participants with varying degrees of experience were solicited; however, there was no certainty as to the overall ability of the participants or how those that work with them would view them. In other words, the participants self-identified as educational leaders even though others might not identify them that way.

There is a limitation in the data gathered from human subjects trying to remember a past event. Even though the event being described may seem lucid and clear to them, any removal from the experience through the course of time and subsequent life events that exist in-between the event and present time can cloud their memories. All memories are essentially a reconstruction of past events that have been filtered through a current lens. On top of that, COVID-19 education was such a stressful, traumatic event for so many educators, many of the participants' memories may have been clouded or even repressed. Therefore, these memories may not be as accurate as the participants believe them to be.

Benefits

Due to the relative newness of the pandemic, pandemic research, and, more specifically, educational leadership during the pandemic, little research has been done. In addition, most of the research detailing individual experiences during the pandemic seems to be focused on or around the medical profession, as people in that field experienced many of the harshest parts of the pandemic in a way no one outside the medical profession is likely to understand.

Educational leaders–particularly in the K-12 public school setting–arguably had an experience that was just as challenging as any other profession. They had to manage personal emotions and ideologies while attempting to serve students and staff both educationally and safely, albeit with no prior training in managing a large number of people during a pandemic. These leaders were constantly challenged and asked to decipher mandates passed down from one government agency to another.

The research conducted during this study helped uncover why educational leaders made choices during the different stages of the pandemic. It also sheds light on how different stressors played a role in decision-making, how educational leaders used traditional leadership strategies and standards versus finding new ways to lead, and what decisions educational leaders were forced to make and which ones they were asked to manage. Finally, this study gave insight into how educational leaders worked through enormous stress and how they might do that differently now that they have experienced it.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research involved participants in Western North Carolina. In order to gather more data regarding how educational leaders led through COVID-19 education in North Carolina public schools, particularly concerning adherence to the NCSSE, future researchers may wish to include participants from across the state. The Western North Carolina region is not only geographically different from the rest of the state–with many small communities spread out in various parts of the Appalachian Mountains–it also does not contain much ethnic diversity. There is an opportunity for further inquiry into how school leaders from across the state navigated pandemic education.

Conclusion

The data gathered in this study detailed several inductive and deductive themes that emerged in the analysis of the focus group transcripts. The themes showed that leaders in individual schools in Western North Carolina did have some commonality in managing the COVID-19 education crisis. Even though educational leaders were guided by a set of evaluative standards provided by the NCDPI, their adherence to these standards was shallow. An analysis of the data demonstrated a need to find solutions that did not fit into the NCSSE standards and elements that school leaders had been trained to use in their university programs, that guided their principal evaluations, and which they had relied upon in the past. There was evidence that educational leaders began looking for ways to lead their schools in new and creative ways to fit the needs of the moment.

Further inquiry needs to be conducted on how educational leaders led their organizations during COVID-19 education. There is an opportunity for a more detailed analysis of whether or not educational leaders in different geographical regions used the NCSSE to guide them in their leadership approaches during COVID-19 education. There will likely be a much greater need to discover the long-term effects of the pandemic on public education and the individuals involved. Comparisons with the data contained within this study can be one part of that discovery.

In many ways, the shifts in educational leadership were necessary adaptations to incredible stress placed on K-12 public schools in North Carolina. Not only did educational leaders have to reimagine how they navigated the North Carolina Standards for School Executives, they also had to operate outside of the standards in order to do what they felt was appropriate for their organizations. The research examined in this paper indicates that when the K-12 public education system in North Carolina was placed under extreme stress due to COVID-

19, its educational leaders worked to solve the problems that they faced in their schools. Through many different layers of federal, state, and local mandates, as well as enormous pressure from the community to protect its students, the site-based leaders in these schools created a new standard of operation.

What the data described in this document have shown is that there is a place for standards like the NCSSE–to provide a set of guiding principles that help to ensure consistent practices across the state. However, what this data have also shown is that during times of stress like the COVID-19 pandemic, adherence to a standard practice may not help school leaders guide their organizations to a place of safety and regulation, and in some cases this adherence limits the creative process. *Standard* is no longer actual. What is necessary during a time of crisis–a period of time, especially in education, that may exist temporarily or permanently after the COVID-19 shutdowns–is to be able to differentiate leadership strategies in order to fit the rapidly-changing needs of the organization and the people contained within it based on both internal and external pressures. The post-COVID educational leader needs to be able to think outside of the standards in order to lead through change and disruption.

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Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Approval

Casey Kruk <krukcc@appstate.edu>

HS-23-103 - Modification: Notice of Exempt Research Determination
1 message

do-not-reply@cayuse.com <do-not-reply@cayuse.com>   Mon, Nov 21, 2022 at 8:54 AM
To: hassonjd@appstate.edu, krukcc@appstate.edu

To: Casey Kruk, Casey Kruk
Department: Leadership & Edu Studies, Graduate Students

Re: HS-23-103 - Modification: Notice of Exempt Research Determination

STUDY #: HS-23-103
STUDY TITLE: Traditional and Non-traditional Leadership Styles Implemented During COVID Education: Becoming Agile in Educational Leadership
EXEMPTION DATE: November 21, 2022
EXEMPTION CATEGORY: Category 2.(ii). 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).
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.

Research Protections staff have determined that your project constitutes research with human subjects, but that in accordance with federal regulations and University policy and procedures, the research activities described in the study materials fall into the category (or categories) stated above and are exempt from IRB review per 45 CFR 46.104.

The following changes require further review by our office, please submit a modification if you intend to change any of the following about your study:

- the addition of a funding source;
- the addition of a potential for a conflict of interest;
- a change in location of the research (i.e., country, school system, off site location);
- change in contact information for the Principal Investigator or Faculty Advisor;
- the addition of research team members (please note that additional permissions are required for non-Appalachian State University faculty, staff, or students to assist with human subjects research), or
- **Changes to study procedures.** If you plan to change your study procedures, you must submit a modification for further review prior to changing the study procedures.

Investigator Responsibilities: All individuals engaged in research with human participants are responsible for compliance with University policies and procedures, and IRB determinations. The Principal Investigator (PI), or Faculty Advisor if the PI is a student, is ultimately responsible for ensuring the protection of research participants; for conducting sound ethical research that complies with federal regulations, University policy and procedures; and for maintaining study records. The PI should review the IRB's list of PI responsibilities.

To Close the Study: When research procedures with human participants are completed and all subject identifiers have been destroyed, please submit a request for closure in Cayuse.

If you have any questions, please email irb@appstate.edu.

Best wishes with your research.

Important Links for Exempt Research:

1. ASU's Human Research Protections Program (IRB Office) website: https://researchprotections appstate.edu/human-subjects;
2. SOP #9 Exempt Human Subjects Research: https://researchprotections.appstate.edu/sites/default/files/sop_9_revision_2_signed.pdf

Appendix B

Survey Recruitment Letter

Hello,

My name is Casey Kruk, and I am a doctoral candidate in Appalachian State's Educational

Leadership program and a principal at Canton Middle School. I am completing a study entitled

Traditional and Non-traditional Leadership Styles Implemented During COVID Education:

Becoming Agile in Educational Leadership. This study focuses on the decisions educational

leaders made during COVID education, as well as why those decisions were made.

The study will offer a reflection from those who were in schools as educational leaders from the

shutdown in March of 2020 through present day. I am particularly interested in seeing how

educational leaders in different districts throughout Western North Carolina navigated the

intricacies of the pandemic and, specifically, COVID education.

Initially, I am seeking participants who are willing to complete a brief survey (it will take most

folks around 5 minutes to complete). There may be an opportunity to participate in a focus group

interview for those who are interested, but you will not be contacted unless you purposefully

enter your email address at the end of the survey. Participation is completely voluntary.

Highlighting the experiences of school-based leaders–administrators, lead teachers, group

leaders, etc.–may help to redefine crisis leadership for our schools in the future.

Research Questions:

1. How did the work of school leaders change during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. What barriers (if any) did school leaders encounter while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic?

3. Did the COVID-19 pandemic influence lasting changes in the school leader's role and should the current leadership standards be revised to reflect these changes?

If you are willing to participate in the initial survey (it will take most folks around 5 minutes to complete) please click on the link below that will take you to a Google Form. No identifying information will be collected unless you choose to input your email address at the very end. If you have any questions feel free to contact me (krukcc@appstate.edu) or my dissertation chair Julie Hasson (hassonjd@appstate.edu).

COVID Leadership Styles Survey

Also, thank you for the time spent with students and staff during the last couple of years. We've come a long way since March of 2020.

Best Regards,

Casey Kruk

Doctoral Candidate Appalachian State University

Appendix C

Educational Leaders Survey

Educational Leaders Survey Questions:

Part 1: Introduction

1. Are you currently in what would be considered an educational leadership role?

2. Please specify:

    1. Principal

    2. Assistant Principal

    3. Lead Teacher

    4. Team Leader

    5. Other

3. Please specify how long you have served in a leadership role:

    1. 0-3 Years

    2. 4-6 Years

    3. 7-10 Years

    4. 10+ years

4. Were you in an educational leadership role during the height of the COVID-19 crisis

   (March of 2019 - June 2022)?

    1. Yes

    2. No

5. The largest part of my decision-making pre- COVID-19 pandemic would be considered:

    1. Strategic Leadership

2. Instructional Leadership

3. Cultural Leadership

4. Human Resource Leadership

5. Managerial Leadership

6. External Development Leadership

7. Micro-political Leadership

6. The largest part of my decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic would be considered:

   1. Strategic Leadership

   2. Instructional Leadership

   3. Cultural Leadership

   4. Human Resource Leadership

   5. Managerial Leadership

   6. External Development Leadership

   7. Micro-political Leadership

7. The largest part of my decision-making post COVID-19 pandemic would be considered:

   1. Strategic Leadership

   2. Instructional Leadership

   3. Cultural Leadership

   4. Human Resource Leadership

   5. Managerial Leadership

   6. External Development Leadership

   7. Micro-political Leadership

8. I would define my school district as:

    1. Urban

    2. Rural

9. The size of my school is:

    1. Small (0-500 students)

    2. Mid-size (501-1200 students)

    3. Large (1200+ students)

Part 2: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree, N/A

10. I am familiar with the NC School Executive Evaluation Rubric (Principal and assistant principal observation instrument)?

    1. Strongly Agree

    2. Agree

    3. Neutral

    4. Disagree

    5. Strongly Disagree

11. The NC School Executive Evaluation Rubric was important to my decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic.

    1. Strongly Agree

    2. Agree

    3. Neutral

    4. Disagree

    5. Strongly Disagree

12. COVID-19 has impacted my leadership style?

1. Strongly Agree

2. Agree

3. Neutral

4. Disagree

5. Strongly Disagree

13.   During the COVID-19 pandemic, I sought alternate leadership strategies.

1. Strongly Agree

2. Agree

3. Neutral

4. Disagree

5. Strongly Disagree

14.   A new pattern of educational leadership has emerged due to the changes that COVID-19

education brought.

1. Strongly Agree

2. Agree

3. Neutral

4. Disagree

5. Strongly Disagree

15.   I believe my educational leadership experiences and strategies used during the pandemic

are mostly unique to me and my school.

1. Strongly Agree

2. Agree

3. Neutral

4. Disagree

5. Strongly Disagree

16. As an educational leader, I was prepared for the needs of my school when the pandemic hit.

   1. Strongly Agree

   2. Agree

   3. Neutral

   4. Disagree

   5. Strongly Disagree

17. I received adequate training for leading my school through a pandemic.

   1. Strongly Agree

   2. Agree

   3. Neutral

   4. Disagree

   5. Strongly Disagree

18. Since the onset of the pandemic, I have received training specific to leading through a crisis.

   1. Strongly Agree

   2. Agree

   3. Neutral

   4. Disagree

   5. Strongly Disagree

19. During COVID, I had autonomy in making decisions at my school.

1. Strongly Agree

2. Agree

3. Neutral

4. Disagree

5. Strongly Disagree

20.   After leading through the pandemic, my view of the role of educational leaders has

changed.

1. Strongly Agree

2. Agree

3. Neutral

4. Disagree

5. Strongly Disagree

21.   If there was another pandemic in the near future, I would be likely to implement

strategies that I didn't know existed prior to March of 2019.

1. Strongly Agree

2. Agree

3. Neutral

4. Disagree

5. Strongly Disagree

22.   The pandemic has made me a better educational leader.

1. Strongly Agree

2. Agree

3. Neutral

4. Disagree

5. Strongly Disagree

23.   Site-based personnel were the most qualified to make decisions about COVID-19 education at their individual sites?

1. Strongly Agree

2. Agree

3. Neutral

4. Disagree

5. Strongly Disagree

24.   During COVID-19 education (particularly when schools were on virtual learning), students from lower income families did not have the same access to educational needs as compared to their peers from higher income homes.

1. Strongly Agree

2. Agree

3. Neutral

4. Disagree

5. Strongly Disagree

25.   After returning from virtual education, school leaders had adequate time to spend counseling students and staff with mental health needs.

1. Strongly Agree

2. Agree

3. Neutral

4. Disagree

5. Strongly Disagree

26. During COVID-19 virtual education, school leaders had more time to focus on the needs of students.

    1. Strongly Agree

    2. Agree

    3. Neutral

    4. Disagree

    5. Strongly Disagree

27. All students–regardless of socio-economic status, race, or ability–were affected by COVID-19 education in fairly similar ways.

    1. Strongly Agree

    2. Agree

    3. Neutral

    4. Disagree

    5. Strongly Disagree

28. I would be interested in participating in a virtual focus group that would last approximately one hour to further discuss how educational leaders helped their schools survive COVID education.

    1. Yes

    2. No.

Informed Consent Form

Traditional and Non-traditional Leadership Styles Implemented During COVID Education: Becoming Agile in Educational Leadership

You are invited to participate in two, semi-structured focus group interviews asking educational leaders to reflect on times of crisis management specific to COVID-19 education, standard and non-standard decision making, and moving forward during extreme stress. It will be an observation on the driving forces behind school leaders' decision-making during the pandemic. The study will observe how individuals operated during the pandemic crisis, their decision-making practices, their feelings of individual worth, how they interacted with and were changed by their decisions, and how they might refine their operational standards now that they have experienced education through a pandemic.

Research Questions:

1. How did the work of school leaders change during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. What barriers (if any) did school leaders encounter while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic?

3. Did the COVID-19 pandemic influence lasting changes in the school leader's role and should the current leadership standards be revised to reflect these changes?

Procedure:

If you agree to be part of the research study, you will be asked to participate in a focus group interview with 6-8 participants that will be hosted using Zoom and moderated. The discussion questions will center around the choices educational leaders made during the COVID-19 crisis, why they made them, and what they might do differently if faced with the same problem in the future.

There will be a second focus group interview with the same participants in order to ask clarifying questions and allow for follow-up questions from the group.

The interviews–which will each last approximately one hour–will be conducted virtually on Zoom. Both Zoom sessions will be recorded virtually using Zoom's recording system and the moderator will be taking notes. Identities will be kept confidential, and no names will be included in the final report.

Benefits and Risks:

Benefits of the research may include providing the educational leadership community with a heightened understanding of leadership during a crisis. No risks are anticipated outside of those that exist in normal conversation.

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You may choose not to participate or continue participation for any reason.

Confidentiality:

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to respect the confidentiality and privacy of other participants by not disclosing any content discussed during the study. Researchers within

the Educational Leadership department will analyze the data, but–as stated above–your responses will remain confidential, and no names will be included in any reports.

The Appalachian State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has determined that this study is exempt from IRB oversight.

If you have questions about this research study, you may contact myself, Casey Kruk (krukcc@appstate.edu) or Julie Hasson (hassonjd@appstate.edu).

I understand fully and agree to participate fully under the conditions stated above.

Sign Name: _____

*Date:*_____

*Print Name:*_____

- *I would like to be provided a copy of the dissertation when completed.*

*Email Address:*_____

- *I do not prefer to be provided a copy of the dissertation when completed.*

Appendix E

Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. Please briefly describe your position, current grade level span (K-12, etc.), and years of experience in an educational leadership role (administrator, lead teacher, department chair, etc.). You do not need to identify any specifics about your employment (name, school, etc.).

2. Think back to March of 2020, specifically the week before Governor Cooper announced that schools would be closing. What, if anything, was going on in your school system to prepare for the possibility of dealing with COVID-19.

a. Was there discussion of protocol moving forward?

b. Was there a general sense of concern in your district and/or the need for further preparation?

3. Did you feel that the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated a change in the daily operations of North Carolina K-12 school leaders?

a. Why might this change have been necessary?

4. What parts of the *standard* job responsibilities did you adhere to in your daily/weekly/monthly routines, and what parts did you deem unnecessary during the pandemic?

a. What part of your moral/professional code drove your decision-making?

5. What priorities existed for you once you found out the state and district guidelines for continuing instruction off campus in March of 2020?

a. What about when new regulations came out again in the summer of 2020?

6. Was there any part of your professional experience prior to COVID-19 helped you to navigate pandemic education?

7. Did governmental regulations have an impact on school leaders' decision-making ability?

8. Can you describe if, due to governmental regulations, you were asked to follow orders that challenged your own set of beliefs?

9. How much autonomy did you have in the management of the school you were in?

10. What considerations, if any, did you give to students with special needs–Exceptional Children, children from poverty, minority students, etc.?

11. How much thought did you give to the adherence to the *NC Standards for School Executives* during COVID?

a.   My initial survey was sent out to administrators of schools from 5 school districts (Asheville City, Buncombe, Haywood, Henderson, and Transylvania). One of the questions asked participants to rank the *NC Standards for School Executives* in order from 1-7 with which standards they focused on more during the pandemic. Cultural Leadership was identified as the most common first choice (17 responses) and Instructional Leadership was second with 25 and 21 selections, respectively. Did your experience match these results?

b.   Is there anything that surprised you?

12. Did COVID education uncover a need for specific changes in the leadership standards?

13. If another pandemic hit us tomorrow, what suggestions would you make to legislators and/or school boards?

14. What would be your non-negotiables as far as placing limitations on what decisions school-based leaders were allowed to make in the event of another pandemic?

15. Describe why you believe that you are a more effective leader or less effective leader because of COVID?

Follow-up

1. Many of you mentioned the difficulties with staffing during COVID education. What specific strategies did you employ to support your staff?

1. Imagine another pandemic is imminent. You have a week to prepare. At your school, what type of preparations would you make?

2. What type of student (racial, socioeconomic, etc.) was most greatly affected by COVID education?

3. What barriers did school leaders face during the COVID pandemic?

a. Is it harder to find qualified staff.

4. Did the COVID pandemic influence lasting changes in the leader's role in schools?

a. Should the standards be revised to reflect these changes?

5. What has the reliance on technology done to our students both inside and outside of school? How has it affected administrators?

Vita

Casey Kruk was born in Asheville, North Carolina. He graduated from Enka High School in 1997. The following fall, he enrolled in Mars Hill College to study Communications. He later changed majors to pursue a degree in English Literature. In 2001, he was awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature. In the fall of 2010, he enrolled in Western Carolina University's Masters in School Administration program, and in 2012 he was awarded an M.S.A. from the university. Casey continued his education through Appalachian State University's Educational Doctorate in 2019. In October of 2023, he successfully defended his dissertation.