



Confronting a Compound Crisis: The School Principal's Role During Initial Phase of the COVID-19 Pandemic

*Daniel Reyes-Guerra**, *Patricia Maslin-Ostrowski*, *Maysaa Y. Barakat* and *Melanie Ann Stefanovic*

Department of Educational Leadership and Research Methodology, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL, United States

OPEN ACCESS

Edited by:

Monica Byrne-Jimenez,
Michigan State University,
United States

Reviewed by:

Marsha E. Modeste,
Pennsylvania State University (PSU),
United States
Hans Klar,
Clemson University, United States

***Correspondence:**

Daniel Reyes-Guerra
dreyes@fau.edu

Specialty section:

This article was submitted to
Leadership in Education,
a section of the journal
Frontiers in Education

Received: 15 October 2020

Accepted: 05 March 2021

Published: 26 March 2021

Citation:

Reyes-Guerra D,
Maslin-Ostrowski P, Barakat MY and
Stefanovic MA (2021) Confronting
a Compound Crisis: The School
Principal's Role During Initial Phase
of the COVID-19 Pandemic.
Front. Educ. 6:617875.
doi: 10.3389/feduc.2021.617875

The COVID-19 pandemic, bringing to the forefront and catalyzing long-unconfronted racial and economic inequities, in addition to economic collapse and deep political divisions - which all impact students and schools - has resulted in a compound crisis requiring a novel conceptualization of school leadership during times of crisis. This qualitative study captures the leadership experience of principals during the apocalyptic crisis - the COVID-19 pandemic - beginning from the time schools were closing in March 2020 to the end of the school year in June. Crisis leadership, transformative leadership and social capital constitute the overarching framework for this study. The purpose of this case study was to discover how principals engaged in their thinking and practice to handle the compound crisis, in order to generate a rich description and gain an understanding of school leadership during the first phase of the COVID 19 pandemic. Our research questions were: What were the challenges and complications of leading during the initial phase of the compound crisis from the perspective of principals? How did principals respond? What were the emergent leadership practices? For this case study, we used a purposeful, maximum variation sample of nine principals in Florida. We sought balance in gender, race and ethnicity, and grade level. In-depth interviews were conducted using a structured protocol. Analysis treated each principal as an individual case, then cross-case thematic analysis was employed to uncover common patterns and themes. Three findings emerged. First, participants drew upon their individual reservoirs of shared leader qualities, including personalized and pragmatic communicator; leading with flexibility, creativity and care; bending rules and shifting priorities; and showing resilience under pressure. Second, they tapped into their schools' strengths, including school context and in-house expertise. Third, they made inter-school connections. The first phase of the compound crisis pushed principals to prioritize care, safety, and wellbeing of students, teachers, and communities above accountability measures and systemic institutional constraints. A call to action for equity is the next logical step for system consideration, and was echoed by participating principals, as well as a realization that going back to old ways is no longer an option.

Keywords: school principal, crisis leadership, transformative leadership, social capital, school leadership, equity

INTRODUCTION

You need to be agile as a leader. It used to be that a leader covered all bases, this is not the case anymore. Things are very fluid.

- FL District Director of Leadership Development (Spring, 2020).

A crisis is an unstable time in which a decisive change is impending, especially with the distinct possibility of highly undesirable outcomes. Given the exacerbated inequities in K-12 student access and learning which had already been observed and reported widely by news media, the COVID-19 pandemic certainly qualifies as a public education crisis. School leadership in times of crisis requires strategically and delicately balancing sensitive relational skills with effective and efficient leadership competencies (Smith and Riley, 2012). Yet the current crisis is not as straightforward as a single traumatic stimulus requiring a decisive leadership response (Whitla, 2003). The COVID-19 pandemic, bringing to the forefront and catalyzing long-unconfronted racial and economic inequities, in addition to economic collapse and deep political divisions - which all impact students and schools - has resulted in a compound crisis that requires a novel conceptualization of school leadership during times of crisis.

This study captures the leadership experience of principals during the apocalyptic crisis - the COVID-19 pandemic - beginning from the time schools were closing in March 2020 to the end of the school year in June. It is the first phase of a longitudinal study that will investigate and describe how Florida school leaders' work occurs in phases over the course of a compound crisis. The principals are situated in four districts, including two of the 10 largest districts (coded in the methods section as district 1 and 2) in the country with racially and culturally diverse student populations in an urban/suburban context. All four districts have significant numbers of economically distressed households. For this first phase, a team of researchers analyzed individual interviews of public school principals from southeastern Florida, which were a part of the data collected for a national study (Supovitz, 2020). Subsequent phases will include the re-opening of public schools in these districts through a hybrid delivery model (taking place during Fall 2020 and Spring 2021) and the anticipated eventual evolution to a "new normal" of brick and mortar delivery of learning.

The purpose of this case study was to discover how principals engaged in their thinking and practice to handle the compound crisis, in order to generate a rich description and gain an understanding of school leadership during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. We explored how a compound crisis may become an opportunity for curing entrenched societal ills. We define compound crisis as a confluence of individual crises that erupt, disrupt, and challenge leaders and society. A compound crisis is complex in that it has multiple causes and unknown solutions but also needs system-wide responses to address current inadequacies. It provides an opportunity

to move to a new normal that allows for new beliefs and systems to emerge.

The research questions guiding our study were:

- (1) What were the challenges and complications of leading during the initial phase of the compound crisis from the perspective of principals?
- (2) How did principals respond?
- (3) What were the emergent leadership practices?

These questions were developed to gain a greater understanding of how school leaders navigated through this compound crisis, which marks a possible turning point in the direction and leadership of public schools in the United States, if not the world. While not the catalyst of the crisis, public education has found itself at the center. This study is significant because it shows how the crisis offered an opportunity for leaders to awaken and meet student educational learning needs through new leadership emphases, begin to examine or re-examine existing systemic inequities, and cultivate new and different mechanisms and mindsets needed to confront a compound crisis.

Crisis leadership and transformative leadership constitute the overarching framework for this study.

Crisis Leadership in Education

Crises are intrusive and painful experiences for educational leaders and all school stakeholders (Smith and Riley, 2012), and a mishandled crisis poses the significant threat of negatively impacting an organization (Coombs, 2007). According to Boin (2005), within all crises exists three components - threat, uncertainty, and urgency. Baron et al. (2005) add to this list the impact on many stakeholders and little to no warning, which together comprise the five features common to all crises regardless of the organization.

Smith and Riley (2012) provide a widely used typology for school-based crises. Their five categories of school-based crises include short-term crises, cathartic crises, long-term crises, one-off crises, and infectious crises. To handle these types of crises Mayer et al. (2008) argue most organizations utilize a linear crisis management strategy: prevent, respond, and recover. Gainey (2009), however, recommends a cyclical strategy for crisis management, through an open two-way communication for decision making, which minimizes misinformation.

While the literature around a theory of educational leadership during times of crisis is sparse, Smith and Riley (2012) conducted an extensive literature review and applied crisis management models from other fields to educational leadership theory, and they identified nine key attributes of crisis leadership in education: communication skills, procedural intelligence, synthesizing skills, optimism/tenacity, flexibility, intuition, empathy/respect, creativity/lateral thinking, and decisive decision making. It can also be argued the school context and surrounding community provide the backdrop for how principals determine what leadership strategies are effective and ignore those ill-suited for addressing a crisis (Hallinger, 2003).

Transformative Leadership

In the transformative leadership process, education aims at affecting deep change and transformation within the wider community (Shields, 2010), and leadership activities are “expanded to address a wider and perhaps more complex array of issues” (Shields, 2014, p. 325). Weiner (2003) describes transformative leadership as an exercise of power and authority that begins with questions of justice, democracy, and the dialectic between individual accountability and social responsibility. Some researchers use the terms transformational-leadership and transformative-leadership interchangeably, however, Shields (2010) draws a distinction where she states “transformational leadership focuses on improving organizational qualities, dimensions, and effectiveness; and transformative educational leadership begins by challenging inappropriate uses of power and privilege. . .that create or perpetuate inequity and injustice” (p. 564). Shields (2014) identifies eight tenets of transformative leadership:

- (1) the mandate to effect deep and equitable change; (2) the need to deconstruct and reconstruct knowledge frameworks that perpetuate inequity and injustice; (3) a focus on emancipation, democracy, equity and justice; (4) the need to address the inequitable distribution of power; (5) an emphasis on both the private and public good; (6) an emphasis on interdependence, interconnectedness, and global awareness; (7) the necessity of balancing critique with promise; and (8) the call to exhibit moral courage (p. 333).

Ogawa and Bossert (1995) conceptualize leadership as an organizational quality that flows through networks of roles. Using the eight tenets of this transformative leadership framework we will examine if and how school principals and their leadership teams, through formal and emergent roles, address issues of equity and social justice brought to the forefront by the compound crisis. According to Shields, transformative leaders strike a balance between critique and promise, where in an educational setting “critique lays the groundwork for the promise of schooling that is more inclusive, democratic, and equitable for more students” (Shields, 2010, p. 569).

METHODS

For the research design, researchers selected a qualitative case study, the methodologies of which facilitate deep exploration of the complexities of the participants’ experiences and capture the essential meaning of the experience (Stake, 1995). Such a design lends itself well to the study of individual principals and their personal lived experiences while leading schools in times of crisis, and it enables researchers to develop rich descriptions of participants’ leadership actions, personal experiences, and perspectives of the experiences of their students, students’ families, and faculty. This study examined the participants’ experiences that spanned from March to June 2020 during the onset of the pandemic. The study was also bounded by public schools located in the southeastern seaboard of Florida. Interviews were the sole source of data collection

for this study which is a limitation. Observations were not feasible given the conditions of the pandemic at that time. The interviews, however, did offer a rare opportunity to capture the voices of school leaders during this historic moment. Document review will be added in the next stage of this longitudinal study.

Sample

We used a purposeful sample of nine principals. Participants were recruited using maximum variation sampling of principals known to the researchers to be leaders among their peers and within their districts. Participants represent 4 different districts in South Florida. Principals (1, 5, 7, and 8) are from district (1); Principals (2, 4, and 9) from district (2), principal (3) is from district (3) and principal (6) is from district (4) (See **Table 1**). Researchers sought balance in gender, race and ethnicity, and grade level, among participating principals. Of participants were five females and four males, and two were Black, two were Hispanic, and five were white. Two lead elementary schools, four lead middle schools, one leads a grades 6-12 secondary school, and two lead high schools (See **Table 1**).

It should be noted that these schools had an advantage in that their principals have had demonstrated success as leaders. Principals were selected as participants because of their experience as mentors and coaches in educational leadership development programs. Yet they came from a variety of school levels and populations.

Data Collection

A team of two researchers conducted nine individual interviews using a structured protocol (**Supplementary Appendix 1**), which was developed for a national study of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on school leaders and schools. The interview protocol included several probing questions for each primary question to be used as needed. Questions were designed to elicit rich descriptive data of participants’ experiences as well as their perceptions of how they and their schools and communities were coping. Interviews, which averaged 70-min, were conducted via video conference using Zoom and were audio-recorded. Audio files were electronically transcribed and then researchers manually checked transcripts for accuracy. There were 183 pages of transcripts. Finally, transcripts were sent to participants for member checking. To promote confidentiality, researchers assigned a code number to each participant and school district, and the names of individuals and schools were replaced with a number in brackets.

Data Analysis

Analysis treated each participating principal as an individual case, and then cross-case analysis was used to uncover common patterns and themes. Each of the four members of the research team read and analyzed the nine transcripts. Researchers executed a full thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) including an initial stage of open coding using words and phrases to capture the meaning of the coded text (Saldaña, 2015). This step was followed by a distillation of the code list and re-coding to create a master code list. The master code

TABLE 1 | Demographic information of participating principals.

Participant code no.	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Grade level	School district code	Leadership role(s)
1	Female	Black	6-12	1	Principal
2	Male	White	9-12	2	Principal, Adjunct Instructor
3	Male	White	6-8	3	Principal, Adjunct Instructor
4	Male	Hispanic	6-8	2	Principal, Adjunct Instructor
5	Male	Hispanic	6-8	1	Principal, President of District 1 Principals Association
6	Female	White	K-5	4	Principal, Adjunct Instructor
7	Female	White	K-5	1	Principal
8	Female	Black	6-8	1	Principal
9	Female	White	9-12	2	Principal, Adjunct Instructor

list included fourteen codes plus sub-codes. We decided, also, to include as *a priori* codes, equity and the nine key attributes of crisis leadership (Smith and Riley, 2012), thereby expanding the master code list for the second cycle of analysis. Next, researchers reached consensus around five emergent thematic buckets, and they assigned quotations from coded excerpts to each bucket. Finally, findings were generated based upon the themes that were most prevalent and salient in the data (See **Table 2**).

An audit trail utilizing memos and emails documented the research process and increased the dependability of findings. To enhance the validity of the study, researcher triangulation was used throughout all stages of data analysis. Trustworthiness was also strengthened through the researchers discussing their biases and assumptions, along with an explicit effort to look for disconfirming evidence. We relied on verbatim quotes and descriptions of leaders' unique contexts, to provide authentic and trustworthy findings. Transferability of findings will be established by how well they fit or can be adapted to similar and different contexts, in other words, case-to-case transfer (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

FINDINGS

It all just was sudden. "Okay, you guys are not going back to school." Teachers gathered their stuff and out they went. And I was in classrooms, fishing fish out of tanks and giving them away to people to care for and all the live things that are in a school. . . just getting everything out so nothing died (Principal 7).

It was like being thrown 35 baseball bats at one time and which one do you grab because no one was saying, this is what we're going to do (Principal 9).

The leaders' quotes above mark the moment when their world abruptly changed and help to situate these participants in the unique time period of the study. We present three findings that emerged from our analysis of the interviews; and offer representative quotes and examples. Traversing three levels, the participants drew upon their individual reservoirs of shared leader qualities, they tapped into their schools' strengths, and they made inter-school connections. Together, these three strands

represent how the principals engaged in their thinking and practice during the initial phase of the compound crisis.

Drawing on a Reservoir of Leader Qualities and Capacities

First, although they serve different communities, for the nine principals, four qualities and capacities emerged as essential to their leadership throughout the initial phase of the compound crisis. This includes being a personalized and pragmatic communicator; leading with flexibility, creativity and care; bending rules and shifting priorities; and showing resilience under pressure.

Personalized and Pragmatic Communicator

Leading through the compound crisis while switching to online learning, went hand in hand with communicating, for these principals. Each principal emphasized the importance of making a personal connection while providing practical information about what was happening, and why. Capturing the leaders' perspective, "Communication was paramount" (Principal 6). They all exhibited strengths as communicators.

When communicating with teachers and communities, principals aimed to comfort people and stay connected. As one principal shared, she was "keeping the pieces together, keeping everyone calm, keeping everyone feeling a sense. . .we'll get through this together" (Principal 8) Another said, "the most important piece really was keeping everybody together"(Principal 7). The mantra heard in the public sector about surviving COVID-19, "we are all in this together," was echoed by the principals when leading their schools.

For these principals, transparency was "huge" (Principal 2). If something was not going well or things were changing yet again, that needed to be shared. Principal 8 continued, "My most important role was to keep them informed, I really wanted to do that if something came down the pike, I wanted to share it and I did, and, sometimes you can't share everything, but they hear it anyway. . ." (Principal 8).

The principals took a hands-on approach and made themselves accessible. Representing this view:

I really wanted to be on call all the time to assist teachers and students and parents. . .my goal is always to respond

TABLE 2 | Data analysis.

Open code list	Master code list
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● communication (+/–) (structural frame) ● technology (+/–) (distribution, application) ● inequity (examples given, actions) ● decision-making (top-down, teams, who, how, same as before or different) ● leadership team (change/not change from before, redistribute leadership, distributive mgt) ● leader as cheerleader, rally the troops, motivate ● Recognition of people (awards, praise, respect) ● emotional leader (empathy, keep people calm, together, perspective on what's realistic vs impossible, address fears, hysteria, loss) (human resource frame) ● leader as negotiator (political frame) ● flexibility/adaptation—need for ● academics— <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ grades ○ attendance ○ move curriculum to online supervision of teachers <p>A priori Codes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Communication skills ● Procedural intelligence ● Synthesizing skills ● Optimism/tenacity ● Flexibility ● Intuition ● Empathy/respect ● Creativity/lateral thinking ● Decisive decision-making ● Equity 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Leader Communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ (+/–) challenges ○ Skills ○ same as before pandemic or different (2) Technology <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ (+/–) challenges ○ Laptop distribution, safety ○ E-Platform, application (3) Academics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ move curriculum to online ○ student grades ○ student attendance ○ supervision of teachers ○ standards (4) Equity/inequity (examples given, actions, subgroups) (5) Leader as negotiator (union contract) (6) Decision-making & planning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ decisive ○ top-down ○ teams ○ who, how ○ same as before pandemic or different (7) Leadership team <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ change/no change from before ○ emergent leaders ○ redistribute leadership, distributive mgt (8) Leader as cheerleader <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Optimism, hope ○ Tenacity ○ Recognition of people (awards, celebrations, praise, respect) (9) Flexibility/adaptation—need for, enacted (curriculum, rules, traditions/norms) (10) Emotional Leader <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ empathy/respect ○ intuition ○ address fears, hysteria, loss, overwhelmed, uncertainty ○ understand competing demands (homework) ○ leader feelings/emotions ○ leader self-care (11) Creativity/lateral thinking (12) Synthesizing skills (13) Procedural/practical intelligence (14) Role groups: teachers, parents, students (their perspectives or perspectives of them through lens of principal)

Categories	Themes	Findings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Communication ● Heightened awareness of systemic inequities (technology) ● Creative use of resources (includes emergent leadership, redistribution of roles, flexibility, adaptability, rule bound vs rule defiant) ● Personal and professional capital (of the principal) ● Supervision of virtual learning and teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Personalized and pragmatic communicator ● Leading with flexibility, creativity and care ● Bending rules and shifting priorities ● Resilience under pressure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Coping and self-care ○ Adaptation-learning ● School context <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ School community ○ School designation ○ Title 1 vs. non-Title 1 status ● In-house expertise <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Logistic and operational expertise ○ Curriculum and instruction expertise ○ Expertise gained from previous PD 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Drawing on a reservoir of leader qualities and capacities (2) Tapping into school strength (3) Interschool connections

immediately. . .after the pandemic, the communication absolutely increased and I was fine with it. I understood that this was a different situation (Principal 1).

This could become a burden, as another principal noted, “Many of my needy parents have my cell phone, which turned out not to be a good idea” (Principal 5).

Keeping communication channels open and positive was vital for them. As principal shared,

Oftentimes, what I would do is, even after I knew that the AP had made contact, I would follow back up with the parents, 'and I trust that your situation has been resolved yada, yada, yada,' just to keep that communication between me and the parent positive and ongoing, so that they could remember when this was over, that the principal was very responsive to their concerns (Principal 8).

Principal (6) who was monitoring attendance every day, as did the others, said,

I was personally calling families whose kids had been absent for three consecutive days. And if their answer to me was, we've got five kids and only one laptop, then I was putting a laptop in the car and driving it out to them. We really tried to keep contact with parents to find out what the barriers were and if it was something that we could remove the barrier, then we did. . . I probably went to 20 homes a day (Principal 6).

These principals took actions that matched the messages of support that they were delivering, enhancing their credibility.

Informal conversations during the school day were no longer possible and new ways of communicating were needed. One principal responded this way,

It was not a passing by in a hallway, in the cafeteria, it was a very purposeful phone call, "How you doing, how are things going? I noticed that you were reluctant in the meeting to share this. What's going on?" We had personal conversation along with, "how is your mother doing?" It became personal...individualized (Principal 5).

Adept at using multiple forms of communication, principals capitalized on twenty-first century technology to expand their reach. They utilized communication protocols already in place. For example, "We have a system where I send text messages, emails and voice messages, every Friday. I would do it [in] Spanish, English, and on special occasions, I would have my guidance counselor who is Creole do it in Creole" (Principal 5). Leaders also innovated with new forms: "I went to trying to learn how to make videos on my own and how to put them up on Instagram, because that was one format our kids were accessing" (Principal 2). Similarly, another principal said,

I used video more than ever. Because I felt like they had to see my face, they had to hear the principal. And that varied from my sermons about social distancing to giving simple instructions. . . Every couple of days, post a quick video from the cafeteria or from the gym, just to give the kids little reminders of what they were missing (Principal 4).

Principals needed to be skillful in timing and doses when communicating. For example, Principal (8) said, "I tried to give them a little piece of what they might hear until such a time that I could give them more information, but I didn't want them to... To hear it from their friends" (Principal 8).

Another principal elaborated, how he did it,

. . . in a staggered way that would be helpful for people to plan but not overburden them with too many meetings and conversations. But then when there was a need for everyone to hear a consistent message, or to talk as a whole group, we had those conversations

as well. And that was really pretty important to the people at my school, having those layers of information coming and an opportunity for everyone to chime in (Principal 3).

Mastering communication that was personal and pragmatic was imperative for these principals.

Leading With Flexibility, Creativity, and Care

Facing the unexpected, the nine leaders shared a mindset open to possibility. Not one expressed denial, rather they displayed a "can do" spirit. They were all flexible, creative and caring. Principal 5 alerted teachers,

The first thing we did was to let the staff know that it was going to be a new normal and that we needed to reach out in ways [different] than we were ever used to for the ESE, the ELL kids (Principal 5).

The principals were flexible in many ways. As Principal (2) said, flexibility, "That's the key because whatever we are talking about right now, can change with the next email or the next phone call that you get" (Principal 2). They sought novel ways to address needs, especially use of personnel. For example, a principal "even gave laptops to the classroom assistants and support facilitators [though they are] not teachers, they support the students with disabilities" (Principal 1). Similarly, another principal said,

Even our paraprofessionals, we issued them laptops, and where they would normally go in and support students within the classroom. They would set up their own Teams' meetings, just them and the student or two that they were working with separately from the teacher, and review skills and help them with things online (Principal 7).

Yet another principal offered a different idea: "I might pair one of my cafeteria workers with a second-grade teacher and it was like, they became like a teacher's aide" (Principal 6).

As the crisis persisted, principals got creative. Principal 5, for example, said he was not interested in "the quantitative data of percentage of kids passing exams" but wanted teachers to provide more qualitative data "in terms of who is engaged, who is doing the work or needing extra assistance." He continued, "And we were able to even put together an extended opportunity [virtual] camp with three different teams to make sure we reached out to the kids that were not engaging."

Caring came in countless forms. They celebrated teachers in myriad ways to demonstrate their support and to motivate them during a difficult time. Principals described showing appreciation in small ways, such as "shout outs" (Principal 6) to full blown virtual events broadcast from home. For example,

I felt myself needing to be an even louder cheerleader than I typically am. I tried to very much be the positive leader and every little success I could find to celebrate, went on a mass phone call and email home too. We did a virtual Teacher Appreciation Week. One of my APs had just gotten her kitchen remodeled, so it was like breakfast with Miss Lego and she broadcasted live from her kitchen (Principal 4).

A variation on this theme became common practice for the leaders: "At every meeting, I made sure that I celebrated them

and that they celebrated each other, and we ended the meeting with what I call pick me ups, basically, listen, thank you for doing this” (Principal 5). The creative, flexible and caring qualities of the leaders helped them to cope with the ambiguity and complex demands of the crisis.

Bending Rules and Shifting Priorities

The compound crisis caused these principals to bend rules and shift their established priorities and work responsibilities. Moving instruction online became a top priority in tandem with communicating and staying connected with the community. Principals identified, specifically, tensions between academic expectations and the new social realities of people’s lives.

The time period was fittingly described by a principal as “the wild, wild West. As far as all of that [district policies and guidelines for assignments, grading, attendance] goes, it’s you make it up on your own” (Principal 2). Thus, it is not surprising that principals reported taking a stance like this:

First week, don’t take attendance and we’re not getting any grades. We just need to get started. And I said, “We’ve never done this before, so nobody could expect us to be experts in this. If they don’t like it tough shit, this is the way we’re doing it.” (Principal 4).

Consistent with this principal, another shared,

I had to do a little lobbying on that front to get it going. . .in the past something like that would have been absolutely, positively forbidden. It was really interesting to see how things that were impossible, can’t do it, not allowed, no way ever in the world, were suddenly getting done without a lot of fanfare (Principal 3).

All the principals experienced tensions related to addressing academic *and* social needs with either maintaining or relaxing requirements and rigor. This example captures the dilemma of meeting standards or letting go. Principal 3 explained,

My teachers are largely overachievers, which is a great problem to have. And so, I had to spend a lot of time trying to talk them into a reasonable expectation for student performance, student deliverables, grades, because they were wanting to carry on with their traditional expectations. I remember saying on more than one occasion, “ Cut your expectations in half in terms of what’s being delivered to you as proof, and then cut it in half again” (Principal 3).

In contradiction, he also said,

They were required to teach to standards. They were required to grade as appropriate. The students were required to take assessments. I mean, we tried to make it as “normalish” as possible. There was a misconception that everybody was just gonna pass. So, we . . .had to get over that hump (Principal 3).

This underscores the competing priorities leaders faced. One principal framed the issue as “giving grace” (Principal 1) and reminded us that this is new territory for everyone, reinforcing why they were bending rules and redefining priorities.

Resilience Under Pressure

The nine principals’ resilience was revealed when trying to contain the crisis and survive during the first phase of the

pandemic. This included coping and self-care. Resilience was manifested in *also* being able to see the possibilities for their school and community going forward. These leaders were learning from the crisis and sowing the seeds for adaptive growth.

Coping and self-care

In addition to facilitating support for teachers and staff, principals had to tend to their own well-being. Some leaders noted how their background and experience contributed to a positive mindset. We share two examples. Principal (4) said,

This is not brand-new learning because throughout my career life, whether it’s been hurricanes or 9/11 in New York, this is really more a reminder of the impact that schools have on society. . .I’ve been blessed. I don’t know if it was my Cuban upbringing or what it was, just to be the eternal optimist and no matter what it is, I can see good (Principal 4).

Another principal disclosed, “Having gone through COVID-19, having, myself personally, I am definitely of the mindset that families need choices, and I’m excited about virtual. It’s just not the best for our kids” (Principal 6). Despite her personal battle with the disease, she did not show anger or bitterness, rather she was able to see the positive in the situation even when it was far from perfect.

Some discovered spaces to care for themselves that did not exist before. Distinguishing this compound crisis, principals did not see an end in sight. There was talk of quarantine fatigue at that time and even though the principals made statements like, “But you really didn’t have a start and a stop” (Principal 7), they were managing. One principal shared,

Because I’m not just cramming meals in my face and certainly, I don’t eat as much fast food just because I’m home and I can prepare food. It just became a matter of, “Okay, this time I shut it down.” I had some power in that. I can schedule meetings when I want them, and so I can shut it down, take a walk, and stuff like that (Principal 4).

Although another principal (Principal 5) lamented, “There was no beginning or end, and I would be on the phone at 10 pm as well as I would be on the phone 7:30 in the morning,” he was able to carve out space for himself. He said, “I actually went back to my exercising, my jogging. I lost some weight. I picked up my saxophone...I did more reading, thank God I don’t have to do doctoral level reading and writing anymore” (Principal 5). Consistent with these colleagues and despite her own challenges, Principal 6 said,

I’m being completely honest, the school that I work in is so difficult. Going virtual, while hard, was, actually, a little bit of a reprieve for me. I normally work from 6:30 in the morning to 8:00 at night in my school building. So, it actually was easier for me. . . every single night he [husband] and I went for an hour walk, something we’ve never done before, because I’m never home in time to do that (Principal 6).

Beyond exercise and diet, some principals said that their religion and spirituality helped them to cope with the crisis. Some kept journals that helped them to reflect on the experience. A principal reflected on what she had learned about herself:

The lesson learned, it's more I knew this conceptually. . . even when you're filled with fear, you have to be fearless and lead or use that fear to motivate you to do things in the best, most mindful way. For our kids, and it just reminds me it goes beyond the 1600 kids that I serve at my school. It's their families, it's everybody who wants to go back to work (Principal 4).

These resilient leaders uncovered strengths that they already possessed plus found new opportunities for self-care and growth.

Adaptation-learning

The principals reflected on the crisis and were learning from their experience, as it was happening. They envisioned ways that they could parlay the suffering and struggles into something positive for their schools in the future. This would help them to adapt and make changes going forward. We share examples.

One principal experienced a rude awakening to the gaps in the education system. He said, I feel that the corona virus thing, what it did was what a good rainstorm does for leaky ceilings, which is it tells you where your holes are. I know where the leaks are. And I know where it could rain as much as it could rain and would just find a way to stay dry. . . [There] needs to be a lot more training on the use of technology, that has to definitely take a different role. . . training that goes from family engagement. . . to how teachers relate to students integrating the technology, so all of those things were discovered as we make mistakes along the way (Principal 5).

Another principal envisioned practical changes such as, how meetings would be conducted in the future, and said,

I've already thought, why would I have a faculty meeting with 120 people all rushed to one building when we can do it on Google Meets and they seem to enjoy department meetings that way. I just think there's certain things that we will no longer do the way that we did it when we do go back that I think are good. I think some good things have come out of this (Principal 9).

One principal believed that the virtual classroom may have humanized teachers in the eyes of students and that could help obviate behavioral problems. In her words,

I really think that some of our behavioral issues, believe it or not, might actually decrease when we go back, because our students have seen their teachers in a different light. They've seen them in their living room. They've seen them when their dog ran across the screen and I actually think it's going to make our teachers more human in our kids' minds. I'm interested to see how that plays out (Principal 6).

Capturing the spirit of these leaders, a principal imparted that he foresaw a "silver lining" (Principal 3) in belief that they would all come out of this more resilient.

Tapping Into School Strength

This is really more a reminder of the impact that schools have on society. And during times of catastrophe, often people will look at two institutions, places of faith and schools for normalcy, and right now most of the places of faith are closed. And so, they're really leaning on us (Principal 4).

School principal (4)'s quote above demonstrates school leaders' perceptions regarding schools' strengths and abilities to support students, families and communities during times of crises. In the following section, we discuss how leaders tapped into the strength of their individual schools. For the nine principals, they viewed the unique school context and in-house expertise as impactful to their leadership during the initial phase of the compound crisis.

School Context

Two school-specific contextual factors emerged as relevant to the participating school principals' leadership, during the initial phase of the compound crisis. These factors included school community and school designation.

School Community

Participating leaders viewed their school's community as an integral factor that informed how they communicated, made decisions, lead, and were accepted or challenged by their constituents. This quote from Principal (6), who has been the principal for her school for multiple years, reflects the importance of capitalizing on existing community connections. She stated, "I've learned that having a strong school community at the outset is important because when you have a strong community at your school with faculty and with students, in the traditional world, it carries over to the virtual." (Principal 6).

This factor of community strength not only manifested itself with established integration but through the opportunity to build community. Principal (3) shared a contrasting experience and offered a different but affirming perception regarding the importance of having a cohesive school community, he elaborated:

. . . it was, perhaps, a little bit more of a challenge because I was an unknown entity to the whole staff, you know? And so was our AP for curriculum, who came in at that time. So, they got two new administrators, and had COVID, and it was definitely a busy year for the school. A silver lining to all of this, when we start to get back to whatever normal, *there's a resilience that's been developed that we all - kind of - worked to build together*. Perhaps we'll find ourselves as a really cohesive school community, more so than we would have." (Principal 3).

CJ further described his community of teachers as "largely overachievers, which is a great problem to have." This community of overachieving teachers wanted to maintain the traditional expectations for student performance, deliverables, grades and attendance.

As Principal (4) stated earlier, communities lean on schools for more than education, a need that was amplified due to the COVID 19 pandemic. School principals have a heightened level of awareness of their communities' needs, as demonstrated in Principal (5) statement:

The other fact was that we serve breakfast, we serve lunch, and for the kids, I say in the afterschool program doing homework, because they don't have access to technology, we serve them dinner. The other component was the simple fact that in our community, many of them having documentation issues, they were going to remain in the shadows of a disease that was

spreading and preys on them silently, and a lot of them didn't have access to that. So, a confirmation of all these issues to me is how closing the schools will be closing a sustenance and a support that goes a lot further than the academics, particularly for the community that I now serve (Principal 5).

As schools routinely tended to their communities' needs pre-COVID, their leaders, faculty and staff developed collective capacity that allowed them to address the emergent, novel pandemic-related community needs. Principal (5) elaborated,

Our meal program never closed, and we were serving upwards of 150 meals a day, for families coming in to get the meals, and they do it to this day. Families go on Tuesdays and they get meals for the rest of the week. . . We were, of course, one of the sites that distributed computers and we distributed computers to I'd say 650, or about 97 families. So, I gotta say the staff stepped up...to make sure we reached out to the kids that were not engaging (Principal 5).

School designation

Schools with different designations, had different strengths. Whether an Art magnet school, Title-I or Non-Title-I school, each designation informed practice and accordingly, impacted school strength and framed COVID-related challenges, and the way in which the school community responded differently. For example, Principal (9) said that because hers was an Art magnet school, they were "chosen to be first to model graduation [during COVID]." She stated that as a school they were "pretty high tech" and added:

... because the way my school's created, I had to always do mass testing in the gym, so I had to have at least 450 laptops at all times ready to go, and then probably a couple 100 more for other areas of the school for testing because we don't really have computer labs at my school so, we were prepared for that, and we had probably well over 2000 laptops on my campus.

In addition, being an Art magnet school presented unique challenges during the time of COVID. Principal (9) shared:

...how do we teach the arts? Because they're so used to being in groups of 80 and 90 singing and dancing and performing and acting, that all of a sudden now they're not. They're home alone. And so that was another big challenge that we had.

Accordingly, the teachers collectively decided to teach online every day, and Principal (9) was meeting with her faculty every day, which became exceedingly difficult as time went by. This quote reflects how they perceived their situation as different from other schools:

So, what we found out was a lot of high schools in the district, you may or may not notice, a lot of high schools in the district just chose other options that people were just flying solo. For example, one school just decided to have classes for 30 min each. One school decided there'd be no school on Fridays. That would just be a day off. I mean there were just crazy things that were going on while we were in the middle of this non-stop, full speed ahead, we're teaching.

Title-I vs. non-title I status

Among the nine participating principals, six lead Title-I schools while three lead Non-Title-I schools. All nine principals faced challenges to ensure that their students had the necessary resources to transition into online/virtual learning. However, the magnitude of the challenge varied based on their school's Title-I designation. The following two quotes, the first by Principal (6) of a Title-I school and the second by Principal (3) of a Non-Title-I school, capture the difference in their experiences distributing laptops:

I serve a school that has a hundred percent free lunch, um, 96% minority. . .we actually did home visits. I probably went to 20 homes a day during, you know, and my admin team did as well because, um, we knew that students needed to be getting the education and we wanted to be able to remove any barriers that parents had (Principal 6).

we have a student who is lower SES and receives special education services. And he needed a laptop. They had no way to get the laptop. . . I drove to his house and dropped off his laptop... It's been my experience that in other schools, were there were larger numbers of students with needs, there are more people that are typically able to or need to go out and, kind of, be in the community providing support. . .the inequity is that some schools have a lot more of those needs than others. And that can result in problems for families if the resources run thin (Principal 3).

As eloquently stated in Principal (3)'s quote, schools tap into their strengths to provide support to their students. Whether it is a onetime trip by the principal to this student who needed a laptop, or it is 20 trips a day by the entire administrative team to hundreds of students, schools try to do what is needed. The huge gap between the needs of different schools has always created systemic inequity, which was exaggerated and further exposed by the COVID 19 crisis.

Inhouse Expertise

I can't make all the decisions on my own. I can't see all the angles. It would be digging out one eye to leave out the opinions of everybody else. They see things I don't see, they have experiences I don't have. And so, in order to make a process work, really, everybody that is in that group needs to have some voice (Principal 7).

The above quote reflects the participating principals' appreciation of the expertise within their schools and the importance of utilizing the different available experiences. Logistic and operational expertise, curricular and instructional expertise, and expertise gained from previous professional development (PD) emerged as inhouse expertise, which principals tap into and which contributes to the school strength.

Logistic and operational expertise

The following quote represents an example of logistic expertise that supported information technology (IT) and facilitated the move to online learning:

We gave out about 400 laptops and we of course, had to have a tracking system. And people from the IT department were here to

change what was set, change the setting in the laptops because the laptops were set to only receive Wi-Fi from the school building. So, there was a lot of moving parts with that. . . Logistics, laptop dissemination, all of that was our AP for logistics and facilities, and sports, and whatever else. And so, he handled all that kind of stuff. And then I was leading with big picture in mind and, kind of, steering the ship while they were doing a lot of boots on the groundwork (Principal 3).

Principals also mentioned that they adapted existing procedures and processes to facilitate novel, COVID 19 related tasks as evident in Principal (4) statement:

The same system we used to check out library books, is the system we used to distribute the laptops. The district collected laptops back from graduating seniors. Everyone else who borrowed one held on to it, because number one we've got summer learning and understandably, in a lot of schools, summer school is larger than it's ever been, and it has to be virtual. Plus, chances are, we're going to start the school year off in some type of [online] environment. And so why collect them and then just give them back out, the kids just held on to them.

Curriculum and instruction expertise

Principals spoke about many facets of curriculum expertise that their faculty and administrators had, such as knowledge of Google classroom. Principal (3) shared, "The AP for curriculum and digital resources, she's a Google queen so questions about that went to her." He added, "we had a couple really, solid teachers on staff that stepped up to help set up Google Classrooms . . . figure out how to get assignments, and track student progress, or taking attendance using our internal, student data warehouse." Principal (8) referred to curriculum experts as "in-house resident experts" and said, "I reached out. . . and began working with them to create lessons and just some basic usage of [online platform], and the district was really good with putting a whole lot of things out." Principal (7) focused on using Canvas and stated:

Thank God I have wonderful curriculum people. Right. And the first thing I did when we knew we were going to Canvas was I got them administrator access to Canvas. And so, my AP, myself and my intermediate coach, and my primary coach all could go in, see what was posted in the course for work and see what apps they had included (Principal 7).

Principals also recognized the importance of curriculum expertise relevant to the most vulnerable students, such as ESE and ELL students. The following quote by Principal (9) reflects this:

I had the best what I would consider an ESE coordinator and she really managed it all. She worked with my guidance department. We were having what we called at my school, when we were there at the real building, we had what we called Caring Counts meetings where I met every day at 2:45, we have about 15 of my staff, APs, counselors and everybody to discuss what kids we were worried about. . . and we continued those meetings on a weekly basis, instead of a daily basis during COVID shut down, and so she was part of that and I have to give her full credit for handling all of my ESE kids' concerns. I really did not get that involved with it at all. She's great (Principal 9).

Expertise gained from previous PD

All principals mentioned that previous PD was a means for placing their faculty and school "ahead of the game" when the time came to move to online learning. Special mention of the Trailblazers program, which was offered by the district could be seen in Principals (2, 9 & 4)'s following three quotes:

Not a couple of years ago, our district, started trying to provide a cart, a Chromebook cart and training for a limited number of teachers on every campus. And they called them trailblazers. And those people were, and after getting Google certified, they were provided with a cart of, you know, 30 to 35 Chromebooks and did so under the understanding that you guys are probably going to be the go to people. This was well before we had any idea that we would need them so much, but you'll be the go-to people for really trying to increase technology use on your campus. In this case, as soon as we got ready, we reached out to those trailblazers and said, we need you guys to be, resources for the other teachers who are going to struggle. And we have about 19 trailblazers, I think on campus (Principal 2).

My school had a lot of what we call trailblazers, in which were a lot of technology sufficient people. They knew what to do so I was fairly lucky because they helped those teachers that did not know what to do (Principal 9).

We did have a Tech Trailblazer Initiative, and so those teachers became my go-to(s) in terms of helping to build capacity out. To a large extent, those teacher leaders had a more significant impact at that time than the assistant principals did. The assistant principals -were really more like enforcers, just log on and make sure everybody has a classroom (Principal 4).

Some principals had school specific PD, which also focused on the integration of IT into instruction. They too, benefited from having inhouse experts, who helped the school transition into online leaning. Principal (8) was one of those principals and she concluded:

But because I had already started offering [online platform] as a training, I had a team together, so that just worked out well for me. I was somewhat ahead of the game because we were just recently offering that, and I had those in-house experts already at my fingertips, so one of the things that I was able to do is we did 10-min, what we called it. . . 10-min tech talks. . . t-e-c-h talks. once a week. . . It was really cool; it was like Ted Talk (Principal 8).

Inter-School Connections

"Even when the district made decisions, it would trickle down to the school-based leader for implementation" (Principal 8).

The quote above sets the stage for our third and final finding, where principals utilized their inter-school connections to help manage the first phase of the compound crisis. This happened through a utilization of the existing formal cadre of principals as well as through personal existing to principal connections.

Principal (1) talked about their group's cadre director facilitating principals' connection and collaboration, she shared:

My director, she, we had constant communication with her frequently throughout the day. There were always updates through text messages. We have a text group called group meet

where the director contacts us [principals] directly. She could send emails and she does send emails, but that was our way of getting information rapidly out (Principal 1).

When asked about principals getting together to talk and come to a common set of understandings, Principal (8) added:

...in the inner constant contact with our cadre directors...the high schools have two cadre directors, and so we're all in a group conversation, we were all having our own team meetings, and so we made a collective decision on a couple of senior activities, for example, that we would all have, a senior night (Principal 8).

Principal (7) provided an additional example and stated:

My cadre director chose three persons from her cadre and they had Teams meetings to a preset set of questions to try to brainstorm and discuss. And she took that feedback back and then she had an all principal's conversation with everybody.

In addition to these formal connections that were facilitated through cadre structure, some principals used their personal connections to collaborate, gather information or seek the expertise of colleague principals. Principal (4) offers the following two examples:

...pretty much uneven, some schools had more devices than others and some schools needed more devices than others...I knew I had to...It was kind of a win-win, but one of my feeder-schools, the most impoverished feeder elementary school was going to run out of devices. And so, I donated some of mine to them knowing that those were my family's as well because I had younger siblings there, older siblings at my school. So, principals had to work together to figure that stuff out...some of us got the ball rolling unofficially just principal to principal relationships... So, we just banded together to make sure we got them [laptops] out (Principal 4).

...two examples, attendance and grading were very muddy. Nobody knew, how do I know how to mark a kid present or absent? And then the whole notion of how do I give a grade? And so, I personally figured out, consult with the experts who do this all the time. I reached out to Florida Virtual School; learn how they do things (Principal 4).

Principals used both formal and informal connections to navigate through the initial phase of the compound crisis in order to respond to the needs of their schools and communities.

DISCUSSION

The majority of educational leadership theories reinforce the homogenized nature of an agreed upon model of good leadership: A mold to which everyone is expected to fit, and in which what the leader does (often scripted, linear and compliance-oriented) is "more important than who they are" (Lumby and Morrison, 2010; Liang and Peters-Hawkins, 2017, p. 6). Consistent with the findings of Bishop et al. (2015), our study demonstrates that leadership in the initial phase of a compound crisis has certain essential elements.

As opposed to the standard operating procedures of school leadership centered on instructional leadership and the routine expectations that have been established for school leaders within the accountability systems, the crisis has demonstrated that there are other leadership knowledge, skills, and dispositions that come into play (Mutch, 2015). Especially for the nine cases in this study, these principals all have in common that their context- the state and districts in which they work - is marked by having one of the most stringent accountability systems. These systems evaluate their school, their students, and their work through student performance on standardized tests strictly tied to state-wide standards. This compound crisis has revealed that it takes much more than instructional leadership focused on test performance to meet the needs of the school and community. These principals moved quickly from accountability-based instructional leadership to community leadership.

Importantly, the crisis leadership functions that emerged through this research are those that have been overshadowed in the past by policies and practice that placed them on the back burner to the detriment of the health of the school and community. In many ways, the compound crisis has brought to the forefront leadership that has always been there but neglected. This style of leadership is truly necessary to develop the kind of school and community that is needed in this post-modern age of chaos, complexity, and challenges.

We use a threefold approach to frame and make sense of the findings of this study. We started with two bodies of literature guiding the study's framework: crisis leadership in education (Smith and Riley, 2012) and transformative leadership (Shields, 2010, 2014). However, when interpreting the data, a third frame emerged as appropriate to capture the essence of the findings: Social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990) and its subset personal capital.

Bourdieu (1986) conception of social capital is centered on the idea that personal and social capital is developed and accrued when the individual pulls together both current and potential resources that come from their network of organizational and interpersonal relationships. These resources, based on relationships with other individuals, are used to achieve a particular goal. Coleman (1990) conception emphasized how these actions are also aligned with the social context within which they are performed. Both seminal authors agree that investment in interpersonal relationship results in social capital. Glanville and Bienenstock (2009) posit that "there are three components - network structure, trust and reciprocity, and resources - common to definitions of social capital" (p. 1508). As we discovered, these three components were all threaded throughout our findings.

This third frame of personal and social capital captures an important aspect of what comprised effective leadership during the compound crisis. Our analysis brings together the three strong frames of crisis leadership, transformative leadership, and leadership heavily dependent on social capital. We remained open to what the data offered and welcomed the emergent perspective of personal and social capital as complementary and symbiotic to the two initial

frames and believe that integrating all three deepened our understanding.

Discussion of Findings

First Finding

Drawing on a Reservoir of Leader Qualities and Capacities focuses on principals' social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990) and personal capacity. This first finding encompassed four themes: (1) Personalized and pragmatic communicator, (2) leading with flexibility, creativity and care, (3) bending rules and shifting priorities, and (4) resilience under pressure, all of which were aligned with elements of crisis and transformative leadership to varying extents. In the following section we discuss these linkages.

The first theme of *personalized and pragmatic communicator* aligns with many of the elements of crisis leadership (Smith and Riley, 2012); however, two key attributes seemed the most relevant, specifically communication and synthesizing skills. In addition, this theme represents an emphasis on interdependence and interconnectedness, which is one of the eight tenets of transformative leadership (Shields, 2014).

The second theme of *leading with flexibility, creativity and care* aligns with many of the elements of crisis leadership (Smith and Riley, 2012); however, three key attributes seemed the most relevant, specifically flexibility, empathy/respect and creativity/lateral thinking. In addition, this theme represents a focus on equity and justice, and an emphasis on both the private and public good, which are two of the eight tenets of transformative leadership (Shields, 2014).

The third theme of *bending rules and shifting priorities* aligns with many of the elements of crisis leadership (Smith and Riley, 2012); however, three key attributes were most relevant, specifically flexibility, procedural intelligence and decisive decision making. In addition, this theme represents the need to deconstruct and reconstruct knowledge frameworks, focus on equity and justice, an emphasis on both the private and public good, and the call to exhibit moral courage all of which are tenets of transformative leadership (Shields, 2014).

The fourth theme of *resilience under pressure* aligns with multiple elements of crisis leadership (Smith and Riley, 2012); however, one key attribute was the most relevant, specifically optimism/tenacity. In addition, this theme represents the necessity of balancing critique with promise, and the call to exhibit moral courage, which are two tenets of transformative leadership (Shields, 2014).

Second Finding

Tapping into School Strength focuses on social capital, bringing in the facets of trust and reciprocity, and resources. This second finding encompassed two themes: (1) School community, and (2) in-house expertise, both of which were aligned with elements of crisis and transformative leadership to varying extents. However, four key attributes seemed the most relevant to both themes, specifically procedural intelligence, flexibility, empathy/respect, and creativity/lateral thinking. In addition, this finding represents an emphasis on interdependence and

interconnectedness, which is one of the eight tenets of transformative leadership (Shields, 2014).

Third Finding

Inter-school Connections exemplify the utilization of social capital. This third finding, centered on the social capital aspect of network structure, also aligned with elements of crisis and transformative leadership to varying extents. However, four key attributes were the most relevant to both themes, specifically communication skills, procedural intelligence, flexibility, and creativity/lateral thinking. In addition, this finding represents an emphasis on both the private and public good, and the interdependence and interconnectedness among schools, which are two of the eight tenets of transformative leadership (Shields, 2014).

Across all of these findings, the natural pull – trying to go back to the structure and routine in the face of the opposite circumstance – was a dilemma. While a sense of urgency existed, unlike transformational urgency to move to a new structure and system, this crisis moved the leaders to a new “temporary” vision to lead through chaos towards an unknown “return to normal.” Issues that would bring back the “normal” of instructional leadership tasks—like classroom observations, the value of grading, the meaning and impact of attendance, assessment of student learning—all became items of consideration and compromise.

It took this sudden and unexpected crisis for people to realize that instant change needed to happen, and in this case the urgency and immediacy of enactment was crucial. This involved these principals in a process of sensemaking that allowed them to understand and then take action. Weick et al. (2005) posit that leaders, faced with a crisis, need to create solutions and do so through a combination of sensemaking and action. “The basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs” (Weick, 1993, p. 635). Our findings demonstrate that in the efforts at creating order, these principals had to make sense of their situation within the context of the crisis and its implications for the entire school community, and then act on everything from how to manage and motivate their staff to how to distribute food and laptops to their schools' families.

Importantly, sensemaking involves an on-going process that requires the leader to continually engage in understanding the evolving novel situations and figuring out how to respond to them. For example, when the principals realized that their families needed more than one laptop per household, or more than a meal for just the student, they quickly understood and responded to these needs despite it being contrary to ‘normal’ procedural operations. This demonstrates how organizations, and especially these schools which were front and center of crisis response, needed to be responsive? Amenable? and at liberty to engage in flexible and creative action.

Faraj and Xiao (2006), when discussing fast-response organizations, identify two types of coordination practices. One is expertise coordination practices and the other is dialogic coordination practices. Importantly, expertise coordination practices include reliance on protocols while

dialogic coordination includes protocol breaking. Both are time-critical answers to respond to these kinds of events. Interestingly, our findings demonstrated that these principals engaged in both of these practices and were able to succeed in navigating through this crucial time period. Beyond these practices, our findings around the use of social capital agrees with Gittell (2002) demonstration that the outcomes of the aforementioned coordination practices were significantly mediated by their intensive relationship-dependent coordination exercised through social capital.

Discussion of Implications

Seeing how principals and schools demonstrated and utilized different, unique, and context-specific strengths, we must question the prevailing tendency to approach schools and education with a one-size fits all mentality. This narrow perspective favors conformity above all and diminishes flexibility, creativity, and the ability to change and adapt. It leads to a series of interrogatives that are applicable to research and educational leadership preparation, policy, and practices moving forward.

To begin, there are multiple and important areas of further research that are needed as we wade into these turbulent tides of compound crisis. We have seen principals utilize personalized and pragmatic communications to strengthen the interconnectedness between principals, teachers, schools, and communities. Interdependence emerged as a survival necessity for our participating principals, however, future research around the upcoming phases of this compound crisis is needed to explore whether these practices will persist, become intentional and systemic, and further extend beyond local communities in the next phase(s).

The first phase of the compound crisis pushed principals to prioritize care, safety, and the wellbeing of their students, teachers, and communities above accountability measures and systemic institutional constraints. It has become clear that we cannot tolerate policies that place social and emotional support for the well-being of the school leader, faculty and staff as optional or not considered a part of the education mission. Its absence as a cornerstone for effective leadership can no longer be ignored. Moving forward, how will schools maintain their hard-earned clarity and new focus on the human aspect of the educational enterprise? How will schools reconcile the false tensions between social/relational and academic goals? Answering these questions through additional research will inform practice and policy as we move into a “new normal” – whatever that may be.

Technological capacity and competence come to the forefront due to this compound crisis, which immediately brought digital environmental readiness as a priority and focus. Regardless of the socio-economic status of the student population, it is obvious that those involved in formal and informal instruction need to expand the user-skills at all levels of the school – from administrator to teacher to student to parent.

More than anything, this first phase proved telling in terms of exposing systemic and institutional inequity. If there is a silver lining to a pandemic that debilitated public education, and the

wretched recession that the nation was thrown into, it would be the emergence of a generalized understanding of societal and systemic racism and injustices and a heightened sense of urgency for school leaders to confront these ills embedded in society and schools.

So, how could we have prepared principals to be ready to confront this compound crisis? No textbook offers directives of what to do. This is a disruptive event that cannot be planned for. Increasingly in this current environment school leaders are facing compound crises that in the former times of relative simplicity and stability did not exist. School shootings, increased natural disasters caused by human-induced global climate change (e.g., wildfires in California, hurricanes hitting the Gulf of Mexico states, and floods in the Midwest), social unrest in response to racial injustices, and severe economic recessions (we are undergoing the second economic recession in 12 years that the country has not experienced since the 1930s) create constant compound crises that directly affect school leadership. Moreover, these crises have, in these complex times, been punctuated by what Baudrillard (1994) calls “hyper-reality” and tied to political and social manipulation which has not previously been experienced on social and political levels. This study was actually located in four districts that were directly affected by one of the most recent and impactful high school student massacres. Educational leadership programs and district professional learning needs to gain focus on this important area of readiness for leaders.

As Winston Churchill famously said, “Never let a good crisis go to waste.” As it becomes obvious that going back to old ways is no longer an option, a call to action for equity is the next logical step for system consideration, as was echoed by our participating principals. This requires school leaders to exhibit moral courage to confront frameworks that perpetuate inequity and injustice. In addition to equity, the call to action is for principals and schools to be prepared for the unknown, the unpredictable, the next phases of the crisis whatever those may be. This includes leaders adopting the qualities and capacities identified, growing their school cultures, and establishing strong relationships within and outside their schools; they must collaborate and take care of each other. To do so may seem like an uncontested, conscientious, and ongoing endeavor for school leaders, however, this has become more urgent and central due to the compound crisis and the undeniable consequences of the compound crisis.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board, University of

Pennsylvania. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

DR-G was involved in the development of the research protocol, conducting interviews, data analysis, and write-up. PM-O conducted extensive data analysis and write-up. MB conducted extensive data analysis and write-up. MS was involved in conducting interviews, data analysis, and write-up. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

REFERENCES

- Baron, S., Harris, K., and Elliott, D. (2005). Crisis management and services marketing. *J. Serv. Mark.* 19, 336–345. doi: 10.1108/08876040510609943
- Baudrillard, J. (1994). *The Illusion of the End*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 263.
- Bishop, W. E., Fifolt, M., Peters, G. B., Keith, G. D., and Collins, L. (2015). Perceptions and experiences of K-12 educational leaders in response to the 27 April 2011 tornadoes. *Sch. Leadersh. Manag.* 35, 215–235. doi: 10.1080/13632434.2015.1041487
- Boin, A. (2005). Disaster research and future crises: broadening the research agenda. *Int. J. Mass Emerg. Disasters* 23:199.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). “The forms of capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. Richardson (Westport, CT: Greenwood), 241–258.
- Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology* 3, 77–101. doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp0630a
- Coleman, K. M. (1990). Fatal charades: Roman executions staged as mythological enactments. *J. Roman Stud.* 80, 44–73. doi: 10.2307/300280
- Coombs, W. T. (2007). Protecting organization reputations during a crisis: the development and application of situational crisis communication theory. *Corp. Reputation Rev.* 10, 163–176. doi: 10.1057/palgrave.crr.1550049
- Faraj, S., and Xiao, Y. (2006). Coordination in fast-response organizations. *Manag. Sci.* 52, 1155–1169. doi: 10.1287/mnsc.1060.0526
- Gainey, B. S. (2009). Crisis management's new role in educational settings. *Clear. House J. Educ. Strategies, Issues Ideas* 82, 267–274. doi: 10.3200/tchs.82.6.267-274
- Gittell, J. H. (2002). Relationships between service providers and their impact on customers. *J. Serv. Res.* 4, 299–311. doi: 10.1177/1094670502004004007
- Glanville, J. L., and Bienenstock, E. J. (2009). A typology for understanding the connections among different forms of social capital. *Am. Behav. Sci.* 52, 1507–1530. doi: 10.1177/0002764209331524
- Hallinger, P. (2003). *Reshaping the Landscape of School Leadership Development: A Global Perspective*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.
- Liang, J. G., and Peters-Hawkins, A. L. (2017). I am more than what i look alike” Asian American women in public school administration. *Educ. Adm. Q.* 53, 40–69. doi: 10.1177/0013161x16652219
- Lumby, J., and Morrison, M. (2010). Leadership and diversity: theory and research. *Sch. Leadersh. Manag.* 30, 3–17. doi: 10.1080/13632430903509717
- Mayer, B. W., Moss, J., and Dale, K. (2008). Disaster and preparedness: lessons from Hurricane Rita. *J. Contingencies Crisis Manag.* 16, 14–23. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-5973.2008.00531.x

FUNDING

This article is being submitted by invitation, with the proviso that no fees will be charged to the authors for this special COVID-19 issue.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/educ.2021.617875/full#supplementary-material>

- Miles, M. B., and Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mutch, C. (2015). Leadership in times of crisis: dispositional, relational and contextual factors influencing school principals' actions. *Int. J. Disaster Risk Reduc.* 14, 186–194. doi: 10.1016/j.ijdrr.2015.06.005
- Ogawa, R. T., and Bossert, S. T. (1995). Leadership as an organizational quality. *Educ. Adm. Q.* 31, 224–243.
- Saldaña, J. (2015). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Shields, C. M. (2010). Transformative leadership: working for equity in diverse contexts. *Educ. Adm. Q.* 46, 558–589. doi: 10.1177/0013161x10375609
- Shields, C. M. (2014). “Leadership for social justice education: a critical transformative approach,” in *International Handbook of Educational Leadership and Social (in) Justice*, eds M. S. Carolyn and I. Bogotch (Dordrecht: Springer), 323–339. doi: 10.1007/978-94-007-6555-9_19
- Smith, L., and Riley, D. (2012). School leadership in times of crisis. *Sch. Leadersh. Manag.* 32, 57–71. doi: 10.1080/13632434.2011.614941
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The Art of Case Study Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Supovitz, J. (2020). School Leader Covid-19 Interview Protocol. Unpublished manuscript.
- Weick, K. E. (1993). The collapse of sensemaking in organizations: the Mann Gulch disaster. *Adm. Sci. Q.* 38, 628–652. doi: 10.2307/2393339
- Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M., and Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organ. Sci.* 16, 409–421.
- Weiner, E. J. (2003). Secretary Paulo Freire and the democratization of power: toward a theory of transformative leadership. *Educ. Philos. Theory* 35, 89–106. doi: 10.1111/1469-5812.00007
- Whitla, M. (2003). *Crisis Management and the School Community*. Camberwell, VIC: ACER Press, 186.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Copyright © 2021 Reyes-Guerra, Maslin-Ostrowski, Barakat and Stefanovic. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.